LUMINA FOUNDATION

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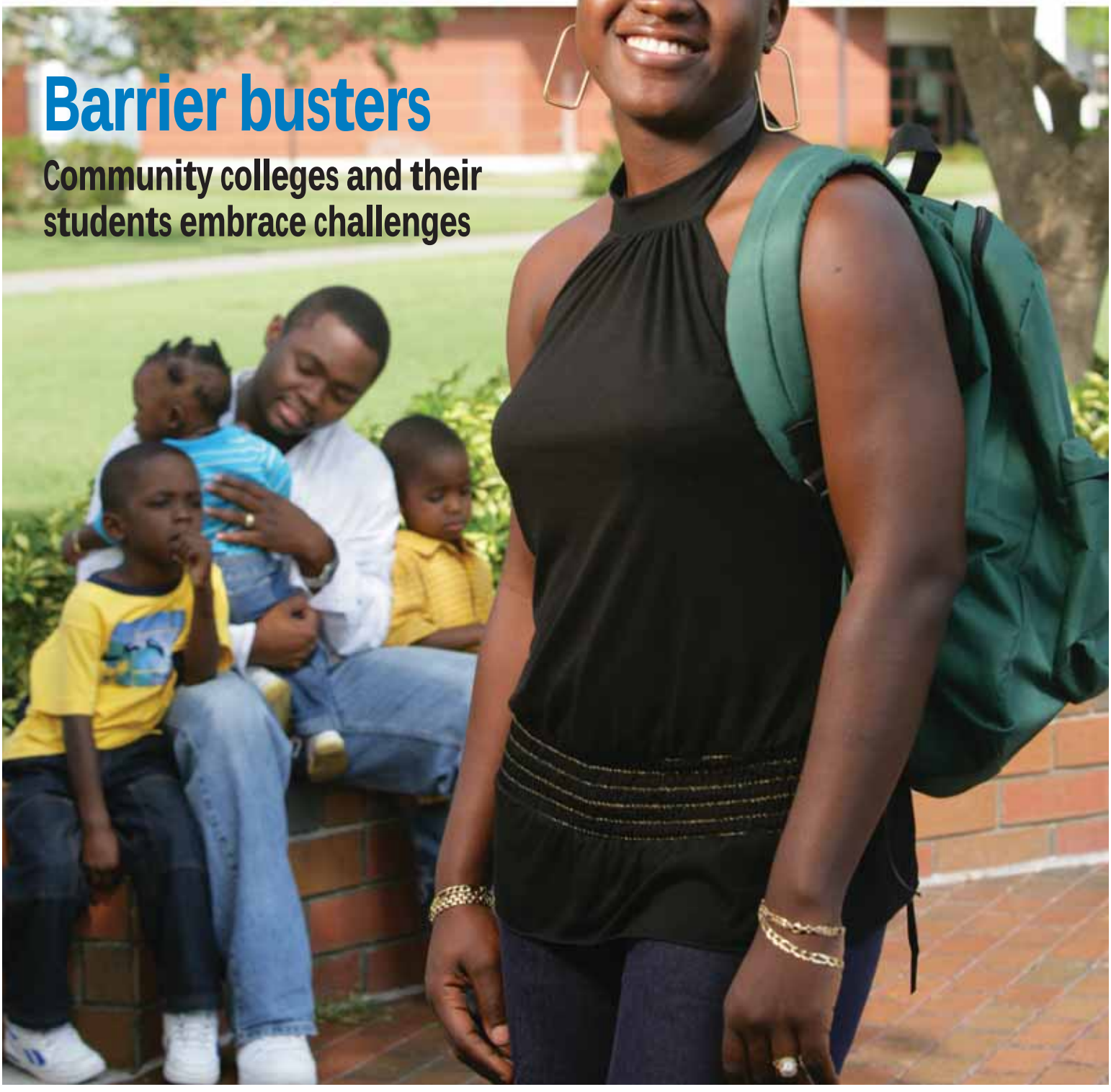
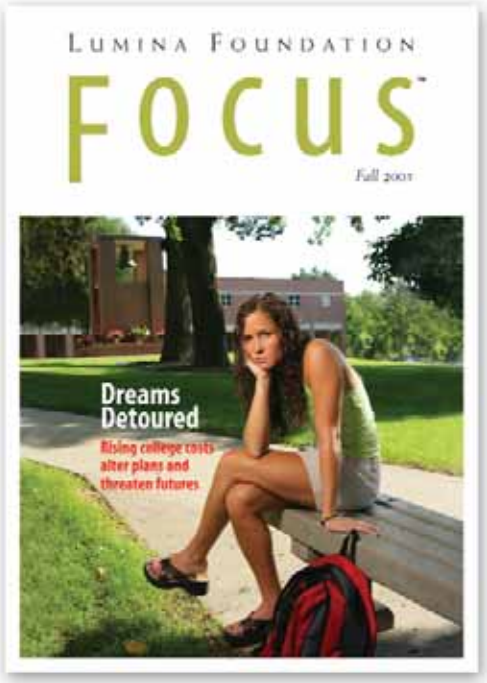
Winter 2006



Barrier busters

Community colleges and their students embrace challenges



We want to hear from you

In this issue of *Lumina Foundation Focus,* as in all of our communication efforts, we strive for accuracy, fairness and completeness. We want to hear – and to share – the whole story. After all, part of our job as a foundation is to foster constructive dialogue, to build a full and shared understanding of the issues that affect students' access to and success in postsecondary education.

To that end, this issue features a few letters that comment on our previous issue, titled "Dreams Detoured," which offered a detailed look at the complex issue of rising college costs. When items in that publication prompted criticism from some readers, we invited them to share their viewpoints in writing. The letters printed here reflect those opinions, along with a few other unsolicited reactions from our readers.

We invite your reaction to this issue as well. Please write or e-mail to the addresses below. We look forward to hearing your comments and will share them as space allows.

Thank you,

David S. Powell
Director of Publications
Lumina Foundation for Education

Please send letters (400 words, maximum) to:
"Lumina Foundation Focus"
Letters
P.O. Box 1806
Indianapolis, IN 46206-1806

Or e-mail (with "Lumina Foundation Focus letter" in the subject line) to:
dpowell@luminafoundation.or

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.

On the cover: Rebecca Mathis and her husband Obed, both students at Broward Community College in Davie, Fla., personify the trend toward multi-tasking on community college campuses. While raising their three children (from left: R'Montay, 5; Mah'laki, 7 months, and Eli'jah, 3), the Mathises also work as they prepare themselves for careers as registered nurses.

L E T T E R S

Ellsworth chancellor offers his view on 'Dreams Detoured'

The cover of the Fall 2005 issue of *Lumina Foundation Focus* shows an unhappy young woman named Ashley Stockdale sitting on a bench at a beautiful Midwestern college campus. A lovely sight marred only by the tragedy and horror that this campus belongs to a community college which, according to the magazine's lead article, is somewhat less than higher education. Ellsworth Community College is the college in question, a beloved and historic college in existence for more than 100 years.

The article, "Dreams Detoured," describes Ashley as one of the wounded in a metaphorical war of rising college cost. Ashley's Purple Heart was earned by attending Ellsworth Community College instead of her preferred destination, the University of Iowa. This is the impression one would draw from the article, and it could not be further from the truth.

Neither the story's author nor any member of the Lumina staff spoke to a single administrator, staff or faculty member before writing this story for *Focus*. This is deeply troubling as clearly someone representing *Focus* took the time to come to Iowa Falls, interview Ashley and her mother, and photograph both of them and our college. This missed opportunity creates the appearance of a slanted story, ratified by the posed shot on the cover.

What was missed because of the shallow reporting? Ellsworth provides a true college campus and college atmosphere, one that any student attending a small liberal arts college would recognize. Ellsworth has several hundred students living in campus housing and nearby apartments where hundreds more live. (We all laughed at the line in the article that Ashley needed a car for her commute to the college; the apartments are walking distance from the campus.) We have a student life center, wellness center and flourishing music and theater programs. In other words, it is a college.

Moreover, Ellsworth is academically superior in many areas to the state university Ashley was unable to afford. Just one example is our Biosciences department. For over a decade, at least one student (sometimes several) has been accepted directly from Ellsworth into the College of Veterinary Medicine at Iowa State University. Annually, Ellsworth is the first choice for area high school valedictorians and salutatorians. Our professors expect students to perform at a high level in the classroom. Every course Ashley successfully completes will transfer to the University of Iowa. The notion that a community college is a "junior" college is simply outmoded and uninformed.

The focus of the *Focus* article was alleged to be the high cost of higher education. Lost in the article about Ashley, in fact mentioned in a whisper, was the fact that she received a terrific scholarship to Ellsworth. The generosity and breadth of financial aid available at Ellsworth is one of the reasons Ellsworth attracts high-performing, academically gifted students. More students in Iowa now choose to complete their first two years of college at community colleges because of affordability combined with academic excellence. After two years at a community college, Ashley (and many students like her) will transfer to a state university or small private college with less debt and a better chance of graduating on time than her peers that began at the university.

While her desires to attend the University of Iowa were not met and she subsequently suffered disappointment over attending a local community college, Ashley's postsecondary aspirations may have been terminated – not merely wounded – if not for Ellsworth Community College. Then she truly would have been a casualty of the cost of higher education.

In fairness to *Focus*, the article on Page 5 of the issue ("Community colleges, a vital and affordable option, also feel the pinch") at least provided some counterpoint to the stereotype of community colleges as an unfortunate alternative to four-year institutions. As stated by George Boggs in that article: "We have to stop that kind of thinking, help each other out and realize that this is an educational pipeline. It's not going to work unless we all work together."

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to paint a more complete picture of Ellsworth Community College.

Tim Wynes, J.D.
Chancellor of the Iowa Valley
Community College District
Marshalltown, Iowa

Latino students a critical factor in the college cost equation

Lumina Foundation deserves kudos for taking on the issue of college costs and for deploying its resources to build a constituency willing to meet the challenge of making college affordable. The last issue of *Lumina Foundation Focus* was devoted to the topic, as was the summit, College Costs: Making Opportunity Affordable held last November in Washington, D.C. Both brought attention to the subject, but both failed to address a critical issue: how college costs and available financial aid affect Latino students.

While the 2000 census initially caught many by surprise in announcing the growth of the Latino community, by now most people are well acquainted with the data. The Latino community is young and is quickly becoming a significant proportion of our society. Last year almost 25 percent of all children born in America were Latino. Simultaneous with the growth of the Latino community are chronic lower academic achievement levels within the Latino community, particularly in postsecondary education. This creates intense workforce needs as baby boomers start retiring. Already states such as Texas and California are linking long-term economic projections and sustainability with the educational levels of their Latino communities. Accelerating Latino educational achievement in higher education is a challenge that requires much more immediate attention from policymakers, practitioners, funders and other stakeholders.

Binding these two important strands – growth in the number of Latino students and their reaction to college costs and perceptions of affordability – is key to meeting the goal of greater student access and success in higher education. Our research has already exposed some distinctive patterns in how Latino students pursue higher education and has brought new questions to light about the impact of financial aid. For example, almost 60 percent of Latino students choose community colleges when beginning their studies, even while expressing interest in earning a bachelor's degree. Could this be because Latino students do not find college affordable at four-year institutions? In our report, *How Latino Students Pay for College* (available at www.EdExcelencia.org), we found that Latino applications to most financial-aid programs have increased since 1996. Yet, Latino students receive the lowest average financial-aid award of any racial or ethnic group. Understanding why is critical to this effort.

No national campaign to make opportunity affordable can hope to have real impact without overt recognition of the demographics of today's and *tomorrow's* college students. We look forward to working together in the future to make our collective investment in this important effort most effective.

Sarita E. Brown
President, *Excelencia* in Education
Washington, D.C.

Homework for trustees

I wanted to note my appreciation to you for the Fall 2005 *Focus* publication. The subject, "Dreams Detoured," was timely and certainly well written to appeal to academics and non-academics.

I am preparing my trustees for an important planning meeting and have been sending them materials to read to help them prepare for our discussions. Your publication is one that I have sent to them.

You asked in your cover letter if the recipient felt that the magazine was interesting and worthwhile. The answer is an unqualified yes.

Douglas E. Zemke
President and CEO, Millikin University
Decatur, Ill.

An item worth sharing

Many thanks for the latest issue of *Lumina Foundation Focus* magazine, which we received from you in September. It explores the problems of the rising costs of higher education and is a topic of interest for all those involved in the field. I will be circulating this publication with key people here on campus.

Please continue to keep me on your mailing list for future editions.

Joseph N. Hankin
President, Westchester Community College
Valhalla, N.Y.

'Thought-provoking issue'

I read with great interest the Fall 2005 issue of *Lumina Foundation* Focus magazine. At Eckerd College, we share the Foundation's concerns about the rising cost of higher education, and we strive to keep costs reasonable while giving our students the very highest educational value possible.

Of particular interest in your Fall 2005 issue were the vignettes about institutions that have tried innovative programs to aid students in their quest for higher education. Such ideas are valuable as both public and private colleges and universities look for ways to offer assistance while keeping the quality of their educational offerings high.

I came away from my reading hoping that, where there are students with a burning desire for higher education, there are faculty and administrators who will try to meet every student's needs. Their education benefits us all.

Thank you for a very thought-provoking issue.

Donald R. Eastman III
President, Eckerd College
St. Petersburg, Fla.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

This issue of *Lumina Foundation Focus* magazine explores a sector of American higher education that is vital and vibrant, yet continues to be misunderstood by many: the nation's community colleges. In "Barrier busters," noted education journalist Steve Giegerich takes a close look at two-year institutions, citing their important contributions and exploring in detail the challenges confronting these colleges – and the millions of students they serve.

You'll read the story of Rebecca Mathis, a young mother of three who, along with her Haitian-born husband, is studying to be a registered nurse. You'll learn about Sergio Silva, a native of Mexico who couldn't speak a word of English when he arrived in Texas as a teenager. Now, just five years later, he is being encouraged by his instructors to pursue a career in scientific research. You'll read about Elaine Murphy and Jason Ingles, a mother and son in Virginia's coal country, who are attending college together to build better lives.

These real-life stories – supported by information and insights from noted researchers, educators and experts across the nation – put community colleges in the spotlight. And that is right where the nation's two-year institutions belong in any discussion about the future of American higher education. These colleges educate nearly half of the nation's undergraduates, including high proportions of underserved students.

At Lumina Foundation, we are committed to increasing student access and success in education beyond high school. Clearly, community colleges play a vital role in that effort – a role that promises to grow in importance in coming years.

That's why Lumina Foundation has made a long-term and very substantial commitment to an important national initiative: Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count. This issue of *Lumina Foundation Focus* includes a wealth of information about Achieving the Dream (Pages 8-10), as well as a brief listing of other efforts to assist the nation's two-year institutions (Page 7).

This issue of the magazine also features readers' reactions to the previous issue, captured in the letters on the preceding pages. Such feedback is vital to us at the Foundation, and I welcome your reaction to this issue as well – just as I welcome your help in the important work of enhancing college access and success.

Martha D. Lamkin
President and CEO
Lumina Foundation for Education

INSIDE

BARRIER BUSTERS

Two-year institutions help students achieve their dreams

By Steve Giegerich

There wasn't much talk about college during Rebecca Mathis' formative years in south Florida. She grew up in a single-parent household, the daughter of a Haitian immigrant who pointed Rebecca toward life as a traditional wife – one whose success would be measured by her abilities to cook, clean and care for her husband and family.

Rebecca took that path straight out of high school. She married at 17, and by the time she turned 21 she was the mother of two. Last year, Rebecca and her husband, Obed, welcomed a third child into the family. Fortunately, even as she moved quickly from high school student to wife and mother, Rebecca never lost touch with another message from her childhood. "My mother always told me that, when it seems that all the doors are shut for you, there's always one door open," she recalled. "You just need to walk through it."

In January 2004, Rebecca found that open door – at the admissions office on the central campus of Broward Community College in Davie, Fla. By walking through that door and enrolling in a community college, Rebecca joined a varied and growing group. She became one of the 11.6 million students attending one of the nation's nearly 1,200 two-year institutions. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), these 11.6 million students represent 46 percent of all U.S. undergraduates and 45 percent of first-time freshmen.

Study time is rarely solitary time for Rebecca Mathis, here catching up on homework while tending to 7-month-old Mah'laki and Eli'jah, 3.

Clearly, in terms of carrying the enrollment load, the nation's two-year institutions (particularly its 979 public two-years) are doing yeoman's work. This is especially true among students in groups that are typically underserved in higher education, including low-income students, first-generation students and students of color. Community colleges serve 47 percent of the nation's black undergraduates, 56 percent of Latinos and 57 percent of Native Americans.

For Rebecca and millions of other underserved students, community colleges provide a precious opportunity. Without the accessibility, low cost and flexibility of Broward's class schedule, Rebecca wouldn't be a college student, and she might never reach her dream of being a registered nurse. In her words: "I basically wouldn't get anywhere."

In Rebecca's case, Broward is a family affair. She and Obed, 26, are both studying to be registered nurses – as is her 57-year-old mother, Juliette Mentor, a licensed practical nurse. To attend Broward, Rebecca and Obed juggle family and work. When one is in class or on the job, the other is home minding the kids. After receiving their associate's degrees, both plan to transfer to a four-year institution to complete their education.

Kay McClenney, director of CCSSE

Because they took an indirect route from high school to college, Obed and Rebecca are classified as "nontraditional" students (those older than age 22). Obed works 40 hours a week as a technician in a hospital psychiatric ward; Rebecca works 20 hours a week in a work-study program on the Broward campus. An average student through much of high school, Rebecca took a required prep (or developmental) class at Broward to get up to speed in algebra, a core subject. Broward required Obed, who arrived in Florida from Haiti at the age of 15, to take three prep classes – reading, writing and math – before he could begin earning credits toward his degree. When Rebecca receives her diploma, she will be the first in her family to graduate from college.

The Mathises' demographic profile – nonwhite, older, first-generation, employed, parents – belies the commonly held image of a "college student." Their lives have very little in common with that of a typical 18- to 22-year-old full-time student at a four-year residential campus. Yet, more and more often, community college students such as Rebecca and Obed Mathis reflect the realities of American higher education.

"There are so many competing issues in their lives," said Kay McClenney, director of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) at the University of Texas-Austin. "These students are really heroes; they are people who often have to choose between buying books and paying their rent."

Working to widen the window of opportunity

As more and more students turn to community colleges to help them transform their lives, these two-year schools are seeking to transform themselves. At least two forces are driving this change: First is the widespread belief – and a founding

Community college students … by the numbers

- Forty-six percent are 25 or older, and 32 percent are at least 30 years old. The average age is 29.
- Fifty-eight percent are women.
- Twenty-nine percent have annual household incomes less than $20,000.
- Eighty-five percent balance studies with full-time or part-time work. More than half (54 percent) have full-time jobs.
- Thirty percent of those who work full time also attend classes full time (12 or more credit hours). Among students 30-39 years old, the rate climbs to 41 percent.
- Minority students constitute 30 percent of community college enrollments nationally, with Latino students representing the fastest-growing racial/ethnic population.

Source: The American Association of Community Colleges, based on material in the National Profile of Community Colleges: Trends & Statistics, Phillippe & Patton, 2000.

Community college movement has plenty of allies

Community colleges traditionally have had a lower public profile than the nation's four-year colleges and universities, but that seems to be changing. President George W. Bush has spoken publicly about the importance of two-year schools to the nation's economic future, and community-development organizations and policy-makers also have touted their contributions.

The rising stock of two-year schools also is exemplified by the growing number of national organizations and initiatives that seek to assist community colleges and their students. Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count is just one example of such efforts. Here are a few others, along with Web site addresses that offer more information:

- **American Association of Community Colleges:** AACC, based in Washington, D.C., is the main membership organization for the nation's nearly 1,200 two-year institutions. (www.aacc.nche.edu)
- **Bridges to Opportunity:** This project, funded by the Ford Foundation, works in six states to implement state- and system-level policy changes that serve to increase the access and success of low-income students in community colleges. (www.sbctc.ctc.edu/Education/docs/FordBridgesProject/NationalProjectDescription.pdf)
- **Community College Affinity Partnership:** CCAP is a group of private foundations and national and state organizations that work together to coordinate their efforts to aid community colleges.
- **Community College Survey of Student Engagement:** CCSSE was established in 2001 as a project of the Community College Leadership Program at the University of Texas at Austin. The survey, adapted from a similar tool used on four-year campuses, assesses community colleges' effectiveness in actively engaging their students. (www.ccsse.org)
- **League for Innovation in the Community College:** Founded in 1968, this membership organization for community colleges includes more than 800 two-year institutions in 16 countries. (www.league.org)
- **National Articulation and Transfer Network:** NATN, a coalition of more than 200 large urban high schools, community colleges and four-year institutions, is a non-profit organization helping students of color identify and seize opportunities for educational advancement at two- and four-year colleges. (www.natn.org)
- **Opening Doors:** In this initiative, experts from New York-based MDRC are working with community colleges in several states to design and implement new types of financial aid, student services and classroom innovations to increase the success rates of low-income students. (www.mdrc.org/project_31_2.html)

principle of the community college movement – that a college education should be accessible to all Americans who seek it. Second is the increasingly urgent message that a high school diploma, once considered the standard for economic success, is no longer sufficient to compete in the highly competitive, global job market.

With the cost of an education at four-year residential institutions skyrocketing, community colleges also have become an increasingly popular option for students who want to meet basic course requirements at lower prices before moving on to a four-year institution. Finally, with their emphasis on community, public two-year schools continue to serve workers who want to upgrade the job skills that keep local economies viable.

The multiple missions of community colleges are, policy-makers agree, both the bane and the blessing of the system. Almost universally acclaimed by the communities they serve, two-year schools offer a range of services that can sometimes leave the institutions grasping for definition and identity. That uncertainty, in turn, can feed a common misperception that community colleges are the second-class citizens of American higher education.

"We don't always rank as the college of choice, even among the faculty," said Kimberly McKay, outreach coordinator for student services and development at South Texas College in McAllen, Texas.

Lori Baker, dean of student services at Virginia Western Community College in Roanoke, believes that sentiment is evolving. She draws an analogy between an economy motel and a luxury hotel: "The community college doesn't have all the amenities that four-year colleges have. We don't have valets or bellhops, and … we certainly don't put chocolates under the pillow. But at the end of the day, when you stay at a hotel, there's only one thing you really want, and that's a good night's sleep. I think the community college system provides what we're all truly trying to provide – an education that will help students meet their goals."

Still, there's always room for improvement, and the nation's community colleges are embracing that spirit and working to transform the culture of two-year higher education. Some attribute the changes

(continued on Page 11)

Achieving the Dream initiative works on many fronts to bolster students' success

If your mission is to expand access and success in postsecondary education, why focus on community colleges – the sector of higher education typically overlooked by the media and often misunderstood by the public? Simple; because that's where the students are – especially the students who face the most barriers to success: those in historically underserved populations.

According to figures from the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), the nation's nearly 1,200 community colleges account for 46 percent of all undergraduate enrollment –11.6 million students. This total includes high concentrations of low-income students, students of color and students who are the first in their families to attend college. All of these facts make it abundantly clear why Lumina Foundation for Education has made Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count a multiyear priority.

Achieving the Dream began in 2004 with Lumina funding and is now at work on 35 community college campuses in seven states. It is a partnership initiative involving 10 national organizations, including two other grant-making organizations: KnowledgeWorks Foundation and the Nellie Mae Education Foundation. It also involves dozens of campus leaders, practitioners and researchers; community and business representatives; and education policy-makers. Its overall aim is to improve educational outcomes for at-risk students at two-year institutions.

Carol Lincoln of MDC

College access may form the core of Lumina's mission, said Leah Meyer Austin, the Foundation's senior vice president for research and programs, but helping students to persist and succeed once they enroll is inextricably linked. And the students Lumina is most intent on helping – underserved, ethnically diverse and nontraditional – are the chief reason community college enrollment is swelling.

"It was a natural because so many of these students, for a variety of reasons, begin their education in community colleges," said Austin. Even so, when the Foundation first floated the idea that would become Achieving the Dream, "a lot of people thought we were nuts," Austin added.

Lumina took the first step toward dispelling that notion in 2003 when it convened a symposium to discuss how community colleges might be the focus of efforts to improve student access and success. All seemed to agree that improvements are needed. Growing numbers of students are arriving at the door of higher education with lower incomes and lower levels of academic preparedness; too few are staying in school, succeeding and graduating; and community colleges are the point of entry for millions of such students.

Carol Lincoln, a senior staff associate with

Five major strands of Achieving the Dream's work

- **Promote and sustain institutional change:** Achieving the Dream will help community colleges build a "culture of evidence" and an unwavering commitment to improving success rates for underserved students. Colleges will strengthen their capacity to assess student outcomes, set goals for improvement and track changes. They will systematically analyze data, develop effective strategies for improving student success, cultivate support for the strategies, and institutionalize new policies and practices that work.
- **Develop policy:** Achieving the Dream will work at three levels to foster policies that support community college student success: state, national and in regional accreditation agencies.
- **Engage the public:** To improve outcomes for students at Achieving the Dream colleges and beyond, the initiative must inform and mobilize many people – including community college administrators, faculty, staff, trustees and students; state and national policy-makers and opinion leaders; local leaders in Achieving the Dream communities; funding organizations, and employers.
- **Build knowledge:** With its focus on data-driven decision making, Achieving the Dream will be in a unique position to build and share knowledge about student outcomes and the factors that affect student success. By evaluating the work and sharing the lessons it affords, the initiative will enhance the knowledge of community college leaders, policy-makers, higher education researchers, funding organizations and others.
- **Enhance partners' capacity:** In addition to prompting change in colleges, policies, public will and knowledge, Achieving the Dream expects to bring about change in its own partner organizations. Through participation in the initiative, partner organizations are expected to enhance their capacity and commitment to work individually and collectively to advance the initiative's goals.

Source: Achieving the Dream's 'Integrated Action Plan'

ACHIEVING THE DREAM℠
COMMUNITY COLLEGES COUNT

MDC, the North Carolina nonprofit organization that serves as the managing partner for Achieving the Dream, offered a thoughtful assessment of the situation. "Community colleges were created as places where anyone can get started on higher education, and they do a good job of providing opportunity. But they're not doing a good enough job of moving students all the way to credentials and degrees." Lincoln said that two-year colleges must improve instruction and curriculum and bolster support services such as tutoring and counseling so they can "make good on the commitment to help every student succeed."

The best place to start, according to the initiative's partner organizations, was to adopt a data-driven model to foster improvement. Community colleges have long used data to monitor student and academic trends, but rarely as part of a systemic effort to enhance student success.

"We haven't been oblivious (to data); we've taken a lot of steps in the past to create early-warning markers and to emphasize advising," said Terrance Suarez, president of Mountain Empire Community College in Big Stone Gap, Va. "But sometimes you lose track of what becomes of those steps over time. Now we have to take a systematic, long-range approach."

Terrance Suarez of Mountain Empire Community College

Commitment to the long-range view is one critical component of Achieving the Dream. Another component is a commitment to the seemingly incongruous combination of cooperation and autonomy. This combination applies not only to the 35 colleges now participating (Page 10), but also to the 10 organizations that form the Achieving the Dream partnership (see list at right).

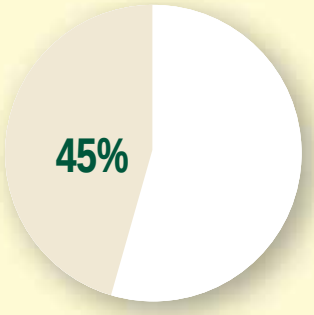
By nature and by habit, community colleges are independent institutions that serve regional constituents rather than state and national ones. Achieving the Dream embraces this independence. "We don't say to colleges: 'Here are five criteria to examine; start from here,'" Austin said. "We ask them to look at their own data and to disaggregate the data and to use that analysis to determine which direction the initiative should take (on their campus). That's been a philosophical underpinning from the beginning. People and institutions own their own goals."

Still, as colleges incorporate Achieving the Dream into their institutional cultures, questions remain about whether the factions within each school will truly take ownership of the initiative or simply view it as the "flavor of the month," another well-intended but short-lived reform effort.

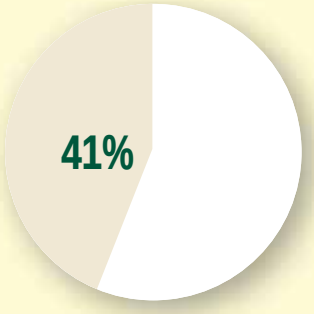
So far, faculty members at Broward Community College in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and other Achieving the Dream schools seem to have embraced the initiative's aims. Debbie Nycz, president of Broward's faculty senate, suggests there is one way to get everyone on board. "There will be a trickle-up effect when the faculty starts seeing more students who can read, do math and navigate the system better," she predicted.

Austin cautions that the scope of the initiative is not limited to a single slice of the community college population. Nor is it limited to on-campus efforts. In addition to the more visible "in-the-trenches" efforts among faculty and students, there are facets of vitally important work taking place in other areas. First, organizations involved in the initiative work actively with elected officials and education policy-makers to improve higher education

Seeking improvement in attainment rates at two-year institutions



Nationally, of community college students who seek an associate's degree or higher, 45 percent earn an associate's or bachelor's degree or transfer to a four-year institution within six years.



Nationally, of students enrolled in a certificate program (study oriented toward a particular job or industry), 41 percent achieve that goal, earn a degree or transfer to a four-year institution within six years.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, NCES (2001). Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study 1996-2001 (BPS:96/01). Analysis by Community College Research Center.

Achieving the Dream's partner organizations

- American Association of Community Colleges
- Community College Leadership Program, University of Texas-Austin
- Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University
- Jobs for the Future
- KnowledgeWorks Foundation
- Lumina Foundation for Education
- MDC
- MDRC
- Nellie Mae Education Foundation
- Public Agenda

policy in Achieving the Dream states. Second, the colleges work to engage their communities, reaching out to local businesses, government agencies, K-12 school systems and civic groups to form a working partnership for change.

An early step in this outreach effort began in late 2005 and will continue in the first quarter of 2006: a series of "community dialogues" in four states in which Achieving the Dream is at work. These structured community conversations help raise public awareness about the salient – and, yes, sometimes negative – characteristics of the local two-year institutions. Equally important, the dialogues provide a forum for members of the community to offer ideas that can help the colleges confront their challenges and make the changes needed to improve.

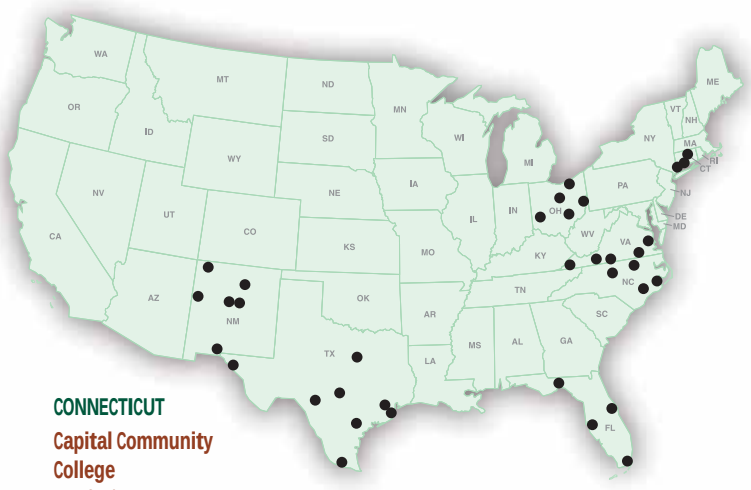
"The colleges will be well served by thinking broadly about bringing in lots of stakeholders with lots of ideas to address these issues," said Will Friedman, senior vice president and director of public engagement at Public Agenda, a New York-based nonprofit and one of the initiative's partner organizations. Friedman, who leads the community dialogue effort, emphasized that its ultimate goal is to build a group of stakeholders who share a strong incentive to increase student success and a commitment to work together to achieve that goal.

Working together – on many fronts and in myriad ways – is perhaps the defining aspect of Achieving the Dream. It is an initiative as wide-ranging and multifaceted as the colleges it assists – and as diverse as the students being served by those colleges.

"There are students who go to community colleges to meet the needs of their employer with a 30-hour certificate," Austin pointed out. "If that's their dream, we want to see them achieve that as well."

For more about Achieving the Dream, visit **www.achievingthedream.org.**

2006 ACHIEVING THE DREAM COLLEGES



CONNECTICUT

Capital Community College
Hartford

Housatonic Community College
Bridgeport

Norwalk Community College
Norwalk

FLORIDA

Broward Community College
Fort Lauderdale

Hillsborough Community College
Tampa

Tallahassee Community College
Tallahassee

Valencia Community College
Orlando

NEW MEXICO

Albuquerque Technical Vocational Institute
Albuquerque

New Mexico State University-Dona Ana
Las Cruces

San Juan College
Farmington

Santa Fe Community College
Santa Fe

Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute
Albuquerque

University of New Mexico-Gallup
Gallup

NORTH CAROLINA

Durham Technical Community College
Durham

Guilford Technical Community College
Jamestown

Martin Community College
Williamston

Wayne Community College
Goldsboro

OHIO

Cuyahoga Community College
Cleveland

Jefferson Community College
Steubenville

North Central State College
Mansfield

Sinclair Community College
Dayton

Zane State College
Zanesville

TEXAS

Alamo Community College District
San Antonio
(Northwest Vista College, Palo Alto College, San Antonio College, St. Philip's College)

Brookhaven College
Dallas

Coastal Bend College
Beeville

El Paso Community College District
El Paso

Galveston College
Galveston

Houston Community College System
Houston

South Texas College
McAllen

Southwest Texas Junior College
Uvalde

VIRGINIA

Danville Community College
Danville

Mountain Empire Community College
Big Stone Gap

Patrick Henry Community College
Martinsville

Paul D. Camp Community College
Franklin

Tidewater Community College
Norfolk

Rene Pantoja (right) tutors fellow students Debbie Gonzalez (center) and Edith Olivares in the Student Success Center at South Texas College in McAllen, Texas.

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to natural progression, the transition to a new generation of leaders and faculty from those who have guided community colleges since their widespread inception in the 1960s and 1970s.

Community colleges have always filled at least two basic niches: preparing transfer students for four-year institutions and meeting the workforce-development needs of the communities they serve. What has changed, according to Thomas Bailey, director of the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University, is a shift in institutions' focus from inputs (enrollment rates) to outcomes (rates of attainment or success).

This emphasis on accountability is making community colleges take a hard and honest look at how well they serve the students they enroll. Perhaps the students they're looking at most closely are those who drop out after one semester or less. To meet the challenge of getting more students through the first year and beyond, community colleges are turning to a familiar but often-underused tool: student-outcomes data.

"There is a sense that accountability is something they need to confront," said Richard Kazis, director of Jobs for the Future, a Boston-based advocacy organization for economic and educational development. "In the past, it was not unusual for community colleges to say: 'We have so many different kinds of students coming in for so many different things, so it's very difficult to say what our retention rates mean or what our graduation rates mean.' There is now a sense that they can no longer say that. … They now understand that data about student outcomes helps them improve what they're doing. It helps them understand where they are weak and where they have value and where they need to improve."

It's not that community colleges have operated in a data vacuum. The numbers were always there; but these days, community colleges are crunching them in ways they've never done before. This data-driven trend is part of the general movement toward greater accountability in education that is perhaps most evident in the federal No Child Left Behind law. The trend also is being spurred by efforts such as Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count, a national initiative that aims to improve success rates among community college students, particularly those in underserved, at-risk populations. (See Pages 8-10 for more on Achieving the Dream.) The initiative, which began in 2004 with funding from Lumina Foundation for Education, now includes 10 partner organizations, including two additional funding organizations, KnowledgeWorks Foundation and the Nellie Mae Education Foundation. Achieving the Dream is at work in seven states, on the campuses of 35 community colleges.

One of those colleges is South Texas College (STC), one of the new kids on the community college block. Located in McAllen, barely 10 minutes from the Mexican border, the school opened in 1993. Registration lines wound around the block that first year, when STC served 1,000 students. Today, more than 17,000 students attend STC – a school that, along with the area's low labor costs, has been a driving force behind the growth in light industry in Hidalgo and Starr counties.

Building 'a culture of evidence based on data'

In turn, the driving force behind STC is Shirley A. Reed, the school's first and only president. Tough and plain-spoken, Reed is an educational leader who's never shy about pushing the state legislature for larger appropriations or urging greater productivity from faculty and staff.

Reed's playbook has always contained volumes of data reflecting the make-up, character and academic level of STC students. The research also provided vivid evidence of the school's Achilles heel: 25 percent of the school's at-risk students departed between the first and second semesters, and fully half of them never made it to a second year of classes.

As much as Reed was driven by the numbers, she struggled to convince the faculty to embrace the relationship between data and classroom performance. The faculty always pointed to anecdotal evidence from their classrooms – unprepared students who needed to be held more accountable for their performance – to trump the data. Eventually, the two sides came together.

First, the president agreed that the faculty's instincts about conduct were often correct. Students were indeed registering late, unwilling or unable to adapt adequate study habits and delaying important decisions, notably failing to line up the financial aid that would guarantee them funding for their second year at STC. "The more we looked at the factors," said Reed. "The more it was clear we were accommodating bad behavior."

But then Reed urged faculty members to look to the causes of that behavior. Faculty bought in to the idea, and STC is now much more systematic in using research data to better understand and address the challenges that so many students face. "We came to the conclusion that we needed to build a culture of evidence based on data, not just what we thought made sense," said Reed.

The root of the low retention rate was a lack of readiness: The STC entrance exam indicated that 83 percent of incoming freshmen were unprepared for college-level courses. Sixty-seven percent of them required remediation in English, reading or math. Arriving at college unprepared for class work is one obvious barrier to college success. And STC and other community colleges have identified other such barriers – other factors that magnify academic shortcomings and put students at risk of dropping out. They include:

- Being the first member of the family to attend college.
- Being the product of a K-12 system that failed to develop students' potential.
- Holding down a job, in most cases full time.
- Being a parent, often a single parent.
- Being a part-time student and dropping out periodically due to the demands of time or lack of resources.

Identifying these challenges was the first step; then came the hard part.

"They are all different challenges," pointed out Frank Renz, executive director of the New Mexico Association of Community Colleges. "That makes it difficult for the community colleges – especially in the student services offices. (These offices) could use a cookbook on how to support these students because they differ so much from one individual to another and one population to another."

For the colleges that have joined Achieving

South Texas College President Shirley A. Reed insists that data drive improvement efforts on her campus.

the Dream, that means taking the education of at-risk students in an entirely different direction. Some call it a holistic approach – education in the context of life. STC and others prefer to call it case management. Whatever it is called, it's the acknowledgment that the classroom is usually just one part of an intricate web that constitutes life for these students – a web complicated by financial distress, family obligations and other social and economic factors.

Fully appreciating these circumstances helped lift the curtain on a truth that many in community colleges seemed to overlook: Nontraditional students, who attend community colleges in huge numbers, often confront barriers that many four-year students simply don't face.

"It was the elephant in the middle of the room," said Eileen Holden, vice president for academic affairs at Broward, another Achieving the Dream college. "Everybody knew it was there, but nobody wanted to talk about it because then we'd have to do something about it. We never looked at the problem through the lens of the tremendous amount of courage it takes for people who test into three prep (remedial) classes to stay here."

"It's my job to give these kids a second chance," says Leslie Sherman, who teaches a "success course" on the Broward Community College campus in Coconut Creek, Fla.

The steps colleges have taken to move at-risk students from registration to graduation aren't exactly radical. But they're close. "Nobody ever crunched the numbers before," said Michael Cook, coordinator of the first-year program at still another Achieving the Dream institution, Mountain Empire Community College (MECC), in Big Stone Gap, Va. "We've tried other things in the past, like early-warning systems. But they just didn't work. I don't think they were intrusive enough."

At South Texas College (STC), intrusiveness begins the moment the school has a student's placement exam in hand. The test includes an addendum that alerts counselors and administrators to the risk factors at play – work, family, poverty and high-school achievement levels. Once at-risk students are identified, the school tracks their progress on campus, monitoring them for potential danger signs such as irregular attendance, slipping test scores, a tendency to switch majors, and other clues that failure or dropout may be imminent. This is where the Student Success Center (SSC) enters the picture. Located in a state-of-the-art facility four times larger than the building it replaced, the center is, in effect, a safety net designed to catch at-risk students in free fall. It's a net supported by a computer program that combines risk factors, faculty input and classroom performance. When a red flag goes up, the success center springs into action.

Patrick Murray, the center's director, punched up the record of a student who came to the SSC's attention after enrolling in the same basic math class five times. "We at first thought the student had a learning problem," Murray explained. "Then we realized, after looking at the data, that he was just putting off the hard work in his classes because of math anxiety. He was *in* classes, but he wasn't trying to *pass* the classes."

Once a problem is identified, the center's Structured Learning Assistance program takes over, offering intensive one-on-one peer and professional staff tutoring undertaken with a single purpose: to keep the student in school.

Student success has become a mantra on many two-year campuses. It is the watchword that motivates staff and faculty, and it's used to inspire students who once were allowed to quietly fade away.

Success is at the center of the eight sections of the course that Leslie Sherman teaches at Broward's North Campus in Coconut Creek, Fla. Sherman's classes combine practical skills (time management, prioritizing), life skills (including how to balance a checkbook) and basic pedagogy. She also requires each student to learn 50 new words by the end of the semester. "Half of these kids have never written a report before," she said. "They can read the words, but they don't have any idea of how to put them together in a sentence." By semester's end, if all goes according to plan, the students will have learned what they must do to succeed in college.

As befits a "success course" teacher, Sherman

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Mother and son share the path to success

Bursting with pride, Jason Ingles' mother managed to control her emotions throughout her son's high school commencement three years ago. The composure shattered as they embraced afterward.

"Just think, Mom," Jason whispered. "We're going to college together."

"I hadn't shed a tear at that point," Elaine Murphy recalled, "but that's when I started to cry."

Murphy had been on a college campus once in her life before enrolling at Mountain Empire Community College (MECC) in Big Stone Gap, Va. That was in the mid-1980s when, pregnant with Jason, she walked across a stage at a Baltimore-area community college to receive her high school diploma. (Jason likes to tease his mother that he graduated from high school twice.)

Following graduation, Murphy married, got technical training as a dental assistant, gave birth to two more children, moved to southwestern Virginia and then divorced. It was then, shortly after the turn of the new century, that she decided to alter her life.

"I knew it was time to change the road I was traveling, and I knew that the only way I could do it would be to go back to school," Murphy said. "To get anywhere you need to get up and start moving. You just can't sit there."

So Murphy got up. She quit her full-time job at a dentist's office, signed up to be a substitute teacher (certain districts in Virginia require only a high school diploma), and began classes at MECC. Her ultimate goal: a bachelor's degree and a job as a high school math teacher.

The only one of seven siblings to complete high school, Murphy was always drawn to education. When her children were toddlers, she couldn't wait for them to start school; and when they did, Murphy was an enthusiastic classroom volunteer. Even so, it was intimidating for her to return to school as a mother of three in her mid-30s. "I had it in my mind that everybody here would be 19 or 20 years old, and I would be the oldest person in the class," Murphy recalled. Sometimes that was the case. Arriving late on the first night of a pre-calculus class, Murphy entered and the room fell silent. Embarrassed, she quickly assured her classmates that she wasn't the tardy teacher.

Unlike the home in which she was raised, Murphy made education a top priority for her children – so much so that Jason attended seven straight years without an absence. As his senior year approached, Jason – who had developed an affinity for computer science – was bombarded with advice from well-meaning acquaintances pushing him toward the University of Virginia, Radford University, the College of William and Mary and other four-year schools. No one mentioned the institution that was educating Jason's mother.

"There's this mentality that when you say 'MECC' people will look down their noses at it," he said. "But unless they attend a community college, they just don't see the importance it has."

Bright, affable and self-assured, Jason had no qualms acknowledging his strengths and weaknesses as a student educated in a rural district 40 miles from Big Stone Gap. "If I'd gone to (a four-year college), I would have had a lot of catching up to do," he admitted. Also, MECC offered the opportunity for a low-cost education while allowing him to stay closer to home and family.

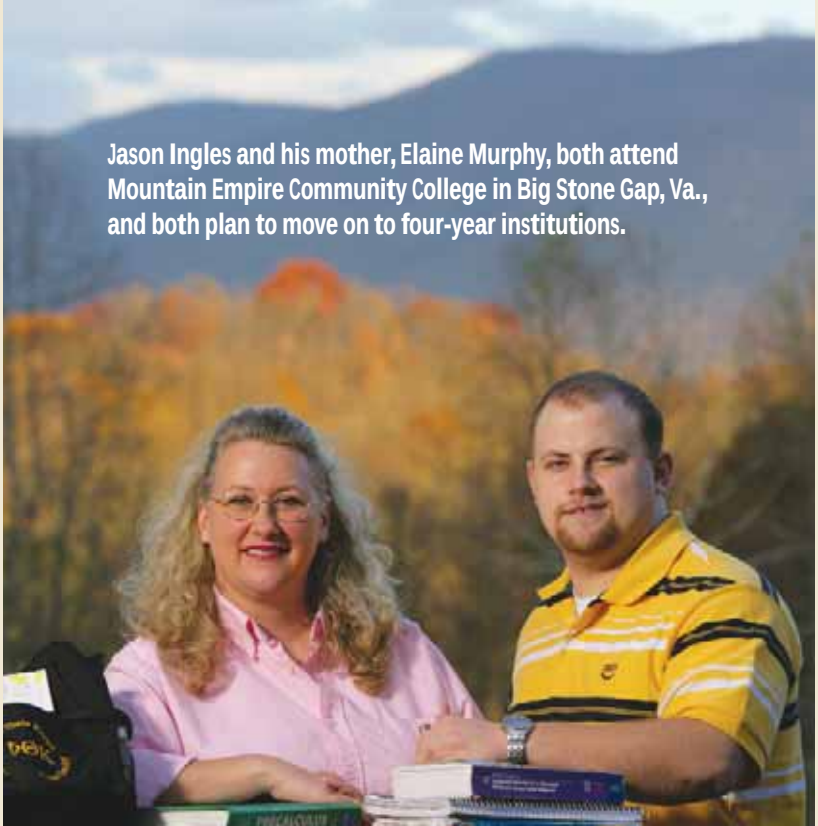
Jason, a student leader and peer mentor, shares his mother's intention to transfer to a four-year school after earning his MECC degree. According to figures from the National Articulation and Transfer Network (NATN), 71 percent of community college students enter higher education with transfer as their stated goal; but less than 25 percent actually follow through. In many cases, these low rates of success can be traced, at least in part, to four-year institutions' reluctance to accept transfer credits, said Philip R. Day Jr., chancellor of City College of San Francisco and the president of NATN, which is working to improve intrastate articulation and transfer agreements nationwide.

One focal point of progress is in Virginia, where a statewide articulation agreement went into effect last year, and where outgoing Gov. Mark Warner has established a reputation as a strong supporter of "early college high schools," in which students can earn college credit while working on their high school graduation requirements. New transfer policies also are being considered in several other states, in part to accommodate the increasing numbers of students who view community college as the first step in a four-year program rather than a two-year ticket to the workforce.

"I can understand why we have a problem here because the (two-years) weren't designed to do what they do now," said Monica Osei, an associate for academic affairs with Virginia's State Council of Higher Education. "If you had designed a system from the beginning that would have served as a feeder for the four-years, then it would have been different. . . . The four-years could have said: 'Your English classes need to look like this; your math courses need to look like this, and your science classes need to look like this.' So what would have happened is the four-years would have helped set curriculum, and they all would have been on the same page from the beginning. But that's not what happened."

Still, Elaine Murphy doesn't let the apparent inefficiencies of the system get to her. Even though she had to return to MECC after receiving her associate's degree to pick up a few extra classes she needed to transfer to the University of Virginia's Wise County campus, Murphy is patient and philosophical:

"The best thing is that it sends a message to my kids: "If Mom can do it, then I can,'" she said.



Jason Ingles and his mother, Elaine Murphy, both attend Mountain Empire Community College in Big Stone Gap, Va., and both plan to move on to four-year institutions.

College leader's past sharpens his focus on students' futures

"Offer a new 'Strategies for Success' course as part of the learning community. . . . Faculty for this class will also serve as 'success coaches.'"

—Achieving the Dream implementation strategies, Broward Community College

The concept of a success coach, at least in the formal sense, was unheard of in 1967, when a stranger took a seat next to Larry Calderon in a Southern California coffee shop and began peppering the college freshman with questions about his academic future. At the time, Calderon didn't have many answers. His priorities in high school had started with football and ended with track.

Although most of his peers went straight from high school into the military or the local job pool, higher education had lurked on the periphery during Calderon's boyhood. His mother, a high school dropout who packed oranges at a processing plant near the family's home in rural Southern California, wanted more for her son. His father, an Italian immigrant who came to the United States out of Mexico, had taken some college classes. "In my family there was talk that you should consider college, but it was not something you heard every day or something that was expected," Calderon recalled.

Still, Calderon gave it at least a half-hearted try. He enrolled at Ventura College, a two-year institution near his home, and signed up for classes that fit a lifestyle revolving around his girlfriend, working out in the gym and keeping his car waxed and polished.

His expectations were still low when, 12 weeks into his first semester, the stranger in the coffee shop asked Calderon what he planned to do after finishing his general education program at Ventura. Calderon was honest: He didn't have a clue.

The stranger introduced himself as a recruiter for the University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB). Calderon was surprised — and intimidated. In the rare moments when he had pondered his future, he saw himself at one of the four-year schools in the Cal State system. After all, back then the U-Cal schools were for the smart kids. The recruiter asked permission to see the teenager's transcript. "When he found me a week later, I was embarrassed," recalled Calderon. "I had a 1.5 GPA, and I had dropped out of more courses than I had stayed in — and this was in the first 12 weeks of the semester."

Undeterred, the recruiter pulled out a worksheet and showed Calderon the steps necessary to transfer to UCSB. Two weeks later, Calderon returned home one afternoon to find his mother nearly in tears. She held a letter announcing that, if he met the requirements outlined by the recruiter, her son would be admitted to UCSB.

Calderon called the recruiter, who told the astounded teen: "I told you I'd do my job, now you have to do your job. I'll meet you every two to three weeks to see how you're doing and make sure you're OK."

Listening to Calderon recount this decades-old story, co-worker Ted Wright finally spoke up. "A success coach," he said. "You had a success coach."

Calderon smiled. "You know, I guess I did. I never thought of that before."

The coaching certainly worked. Today, Calderon isn't merely a UCSB graduate; he has master's and doctoral degrees in education from the University of Southern California. He's also the president — and Wright's boss — at Broward Community College in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. In that role, Calderon has earned a reputation as an energetic innovator who leads by personal example and a leader who has made student success an institution-wide priority. Perhaps the most prominent example of that is his college's commitment to Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count, a national effort aimed at improving the success rates of students at two-year institutions.

Ted Wright's presence on campus is part of that commitment. Wright serves as a special assistant to Calderon, working as the Achieving the Dream coordinator to supervise a program that matches at-risk students with faculty and staff mentors. You could call him the head coach among Broward's staff of student success coaches.

And, as Calderon's life shows, a little coaching can make a big difference. It also shows that benefits often work both ways: Before taking the reins at Broward in February 2004, Calderon served nine years as president at Ventura, the community college that had accepted him as an unfocused freshman back in the '60s.

Broward Community College President Larry Calderon does a little "coaching" of his own with students on the college's downtown campus in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

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works with boundless energy and patience. The assignment on a late November day required each student to deliver a short presentation, complete with background material, to describe his or her academic major and career goals. One student explained how a love for children pushed her toward being a social worker; a prospective psychologist discussed a penchant for helping others; a would-be FBI agent detailed the steps necessary to achieve her career goal. In the questions she asked and the gentle advice she offered, Sherman treated each student with the deference of a Harvard dean consulting with a doctoral candidate. Finally, a young woman stepped to the front of the class. Her objective: to become an elementary school teacher.

"What do teachers do every day?" Sherman asked.

The student hesitated. "Go to work?" she half-answered.

Sherman didn't flinch; she didn't grimace. She pushed forward. "And what do they *do* at work?" she pressed. A student in the back of the room snickered.

"Um, they teach kids."

"Exactly!" Sherman exclaimed with unbridled enthusiasm.

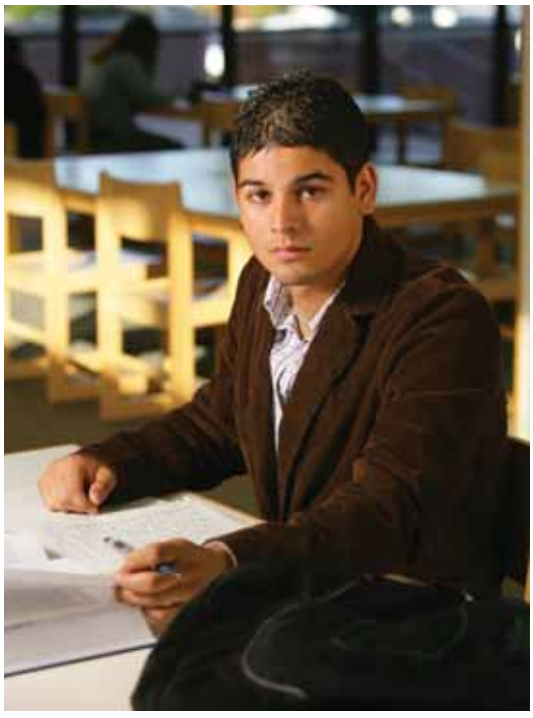
The young woman smiled. She'd aced Ms. Sherman's test, such as it was. With a bounce in her step, the student returned to her seat.

"Is it frustrating?" Sherman asked rhetorically after class. "Of course it is. But I can't let that come out. It's my job to give these kids a second chance in life. So many of them have never had praise – ever. Nobody ever said to them: 'I believe in you.'"

One story speaks volumes about the personal relationships Sherman builds with her students. One day in late October, she received a call from a young woman in her success class. The student's 2-year-old son had died 10 minutes earlier, losing a long battle with kidney disease. Leslie Sherman was the first person she called.

Changing student behaviors to boost student success

Of course, education as case management isn't always marked by life-and-death drama, but as Luis Gudino's story shows, it's often life-altering. As South Texas College (STC) students go, Luis is fairly typical. He took two developmental classes before he could embark on his declared field of study and enter STC's radiology program. As he began his third semester, one major obstacle stood in the way: a biology exam. Doing well on the term's first biology exam would allow him to keep up the 3.0 grade point average he'd worked so hard to sustain. The consequences of falling short were twofold. For Luis, the biggest concern was the most immediate: If he lost his 3.0 GPA, he would also lose the "good student" discount rate on his car insurance. Priority No. 2: Admission to STC's radiology program also required that he maintain that GPA.



Luis Gudino admits that poor study habits have hampered his progress in South Texas College's radiology program. Still, he's determined to succeed – and STC's "success course" will help him.

During his first year, Luis took STC's version of the success course, picking up many of the same learning strategies imparted by Leslie Sherman at Broward, including the difference between college and high school. "You're more independent, and you have to find your own way through," he said. Luis understood what that entailed. Yet, despite the fact that he was not employed, Luis set aside too little time each day for studying, insisting that he could only retain the material for a short time. "I can study an entire week, and it doesn't do me any good," he explained. "I have to study the day before and the night before (tests). The day before, I have to cram it all in."

That pattern backfired last fall when Max Abbassi, the department chair and Luis' biology professor, demanded that students gradually absorb the nuances of cell and bone structures in advance of the semester's first exam. A week before the test – an exam for which, as usual,

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Hurricanes add to colleges' challenges and to leaders' resolve

For community college systems in hurricane country, contingency is more than merely a topic for discussion in a management class. For example, the eight campuses and learning centers that constitute Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College (MGCCC) have had evacuation and post-storm protocols in place since Hurricane Camille roared out of the Gulf of Mexico in 1969. Last fall, though, Katrina blew even the best-laid plans to bits. "You can't really plan to recover from the worst national disaster in the country's history," said MGCCC President Willis H. Lott.

True. But in the aftermath of Katrina, Rita and Wilma, two-year colleges in the Gulf Coast region demonstrated their resiliency and their commitment to community colleges' core mission.

Mother Nature slapped Broward Community College in Fort Lauderdale twice – Katrina in late August and Hurricane Wilma in October. Katrina delivered a glancing blow, canceling classes for four days. Wilma socked the school with a knockout punch. Faced with a massive blackout, Broward closed its doors for two full weeks. At a school where nearly 40 percent of students rely on mass transportation, tree-blocked streets created havoc.

In Mississippi and Louisiana, it was Katrina that landed the knockout blow. Two days passed before MGCCC's Lott was able to navigate the ravaged streets in and around Gulfport to check the condition of the college's four campuses and four off-site learning centers. When the numbers were crunched, damage to facilities was estimated at $15 million, according to published reports. When the college reopened two weeks later, its professors, administrators and support personnel – many of whom lost their own homes in the storm – discovered an even more devastating loss: 25 percent of the 10,500 students enrolled in Mississippi's largest community college were unable to return.

The reasons, though magnified by the hurricane, parallel the economic and social dilemmas facing community college students across the country. "A lot of them lost everything," said Lott. "Many had to relocate; a lot of them had to go back to work full time to earn enough money to come back to college. Others quit to help their families recover. All of them were doing what had to be done."

The college did the same. Embracing the priorities of a community on the rebound from disaster, MGCCC rolled out a short-term class that combined basic electrical, plumbing and construction skills into one curriculum that also stressed the work ethic and on-the-job teamwork. "The industry," Lott said, "has been very, very pleased with it."

Come fall, Lott expects that 20 percent of the students forced from their education by Katrina will return to classes. He hopes for an even higher percentage.

Optimism also reigns at the Louisiana Community and Technical College (LCTC) system – though repairing the wounds from Katrina is just one of the challenges being faced there. After Katrina passed, 47 percent of what had been a record enrollment failed to return to class; in addition, the hurricane displaced 1,500 faculty and staff. All told, the storm shut down operations at three community college campuses and two technical schools until January.

Also, the system had barely begun digging out from a natural disaster when it was slapped by a financial one: Strapped for cash, the state slashed $17 million from the system's budget. Hoping to find a silver lining in Katrina's clouds, LCTC President Walter Bumphus is using the cutback as a chance to streamline and improve the state's two-year system – a system forged in 1999 to encompass the state's 10 community colleges and 42 technical schools.

Bumphus acknowledges that this streamlining may mean fewer campuses will be operating in the New Orleans area in the storm's wake.

He also said LCTC officials are looking for ways to enhance the system by bolstering workforce development, tweaking the academic areas, making better use of research data, and increasing overall efficiency.

"We hope to come back with better programs and use this as an opportunity to put together some of the best practices we have identified," Bumphus said.

Emergency funds help students weather storms

Among the many relief efforts put in place in the aftermath of the Gulf Coast hurricanes, one is designed specifically to help the region's community college students stay on track.

The $2 million effort – funded by Lumina Foundation for Education and administered by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) and Scholarship America – provides emergency stipends of up to $1,000 to low-income students in Louisiana and Mississippi.

AACC and Scholarship America will work through the colleges' financial aid offices to distribute the stipends to low-income students who have been affected by the hurricanes. The awards may be used for tuition, fees, books, room and board, or other education-related expenses.

Though the individual grants are small, a timely grant can make a huge difference to these students, according to research released by MDRC last fall. Most of them live near the colleges they attend, so their home lives, jobs and education were likely all interrupted by the hurricanes.

Also, many of these students faced significant financial challenges well before the hurricanes hit. For instance, if they attend part time, they are ineligible for federal grants and loans designed to aid traditional students. Any small emergency (car trouble, a problem with child care, an unexpected household expense) can play havoc with their school schedules – hence the value of stopgap, emergency funds.

Other programs that provide this type of temporary assistance (including the Lumina Foundation-funded Dreamkeepers Emergency Financial Aid program administered through Scholarship America and the American Indian College Fund) are helping keep at-risk students on track when unforeseen setbacks occur.

That's one reason AACC President George Boggs is excited about the potential of the hurricane-relief fund. He says it offers "new hope for thousands of students whose learning opportunities and futures might otherwise have been permanently disrupted."

he had failed to crack a book – Luis decided he wasn't willing to risk his GPA, his insurance discount and his admission into the radiology tech program. He dropped the class.

Two years earlier, Luis would have left the class and drifted away unnoticed. Today, STC has a different protocol: Before a student leaves, he or she must first deliver a face-to-face explanation to the instructor.

Luis was one of four test-phobic students Abbassi met prior to the first exam. Appealing to their pride, he urged each one not to give up. The appeal failed, as Luis refused to reverse his decision to drop the course. But the system may yet succeed: Luis plans to enroll again – this time incorporating the lessons that Abbassi has taught. "I want to be up for the challenge of it," Luis said. "I want to do better, like the professor said, with my time management."

Although STC's safety net caught Luis Gudino, no one can accurately say how many community college students like Andy Smith continue to fall through the cracks. Andy graduated from high school last June filled with high hopes and ambition. Determined to become an FBI agent, he had plotted a path that had him studying criminal justice for two years at Mountain Empire Community College in Virginia, attending two more years at the University of Tennessee, and then enrolling in the FBI Academy. Less than two months into that plan, Andy walked out of MECC and never returned. He didn't stay long enough to take even a single college-level exam.

The reason was simple: money. A new, higher-paying job with a telecommunications company offered him the promise of keeping up with a cell phone bill, car payments and credit card debt. MECC made no effort to keep Andy enrolled.

Andy's story is one that no college president wants to hear, particularly one at a college that is initiating programs to retain at-risk students. "We need a support system for that individual," said MECC President Terrance Suarez. "I think of that as a college failure. Why weren't we in a position to intervene and counsel that person and try to make sure that he stayed? We could have made some kind of adjustment for him. Perhaps he could have taken one or two classes and stayed in school. … It's not all our responsibility. But if we could have presented this young man with an alternative, he may not have left."

Hank Dunn, director of student services at Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio, a leader in implementing strategies to keep students engaged and in school, believes Suarez was being too hard on himself and his school. Sometimes, Dunn pointed out, students simply drop out and there's nothing that can stop them.

"I wish we could say that couldn't happen here – but it can," Dunn said. "If you withdraw or try to withdraw from school, we do have a withdrawal mechanism: Is it financial help? A job? Child care? Transportation issues? Before we let you walk out the door, we do try to help you. But what we've found is that 70 percent of the reasons students want to leave we have no control over."

Creating communities of commuter students

As they step up efforts to keep students like Luis Gudino and Andy Smith enrolled, two-year institutions also are renewing their commitment to engage students who are on track. In some ways, the "community" in community college can be misleading. Unlike residential, four-year institutions, community colleges don't typically offer the camaraderie of residence halls, intercollegiate sports, fraternities, sororities and other non-academic amenities that create a more expansive learning environment. Community college students are typically (and necessarily) more involved with real life than with campus life – and many see this difference as a plus. "At community colleges, students see education as a

Andy Smith dropped out six weeks after starting classes at Mountain Empire Community College – abandoning, at least temporarily, his plan to transfer to the University of Tennessee and become an FBI agent.

Sergio Silva, in class at South Texas College with Alexandra Hinojosa and English instructor Ashlee Brand, is on track to receive his associate's degree in 2007 and plans to pursue a four-year degree in computer science. Just five years ago, he spoke no English.

privilege," said Robert Cabello, vice president of student affairs at Broward.

Nichelle Campbell, a 25-year-old single mother and second-year Broward student, echoes Cabello. Prior to becoming a student herself, Nichelle held a clerical position at the University of Miami in Coral Gables. She now views higher education from two different perspectives.

"We have a lot of parents here who think: 'If I'm paying for this class, then I have to finish this class,'" she said.

More than 80 percent of students in two-year colleges, Nichelle included, have a full- or part-time job, according to the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). Work and family obligations are the main reasons many community college students head straight to the parking lot after class.

In 2004, CCSSE data showed that only 16 percent of community college students were involved in extracurricular campus activities. The 2005 survey found that 45 percent of two-year students worked with classmates on in-class projects, but only 21 percent interacted outside the classroom. Colleges are working to increase those rates of peer interaction – sometimes in unconventional ways.

One of those ways is playing out in Ashlee Brand and Bonnie Gunn's "hybrid" classroom at South Texas College. In a combination bordering on incongruous, STC has melded two courses: English 1301 and Biology 1408. Brand handles the former, Gunn the latter. In their class, the goal is to create an active learning community, one in which students teach each other, and where the passive receipt of information via lecture is the exception, not the rule. Learning communities are touted by experts such as Vincent Tinto of Syracuse University as a key strategy in today's colleges.

"When the faculty collaborates, the students really pick it up," said Brand, a college English instructor who began her own academic journey at a community college in upstate New York. "I was just like these students," Brand recalled, except that her first exposure to a learning community came much later. "Why wait until grad school to give this type of opportunity?" she asked.

Why indeed – as the students in the Brand-Gunn classroom proved one recent bright Texas morning. Jayney Garcia and Alexandra Hinojosa sat on one side of a table, opposite Sergio Silva and another student. The lines were clearly delineated. Sergio and his partner with their skill in the sciences matched with Jayney's and Alexandra's appreciation for the written word.

"The interaction is the best thing about learning communities," said Sergio. "If you just focus on the science, then you close your eyes to the other perspectives. You put the two minds together, and you come up with more ideas."

After graduating from high school, Alexandra tried to learn biology the conventional way – lecture, lab and study – at a four-year university near her home. It didn't work. Three years after she

dropped out of that institution, Alexandra enrolled at STC to take advantage of the lower cost, smaller class sizes and better access to faculty. The English/biology learning community turned out to be a bonus not only for Alexandra, but for the class as a whole: Brand said the cumulative grades in both English and biology have increased between 20 percent and 30 percent compared to when she and Gunn taught the classes separately.

"This is great because, if we don't understand something, we can always ask another student," said Alexandra. More often than not, the student being asked is Sergio, a young man considered exceptional by both classmates and instructors. "He's the brains here," said Alexandra. "I think maybe he can teach some of this better than the teachers can."

Sergio couldn't speak a word of English in 2001, when he left his family in Mexico to move into his grandparents' home an hour west of McAllen. On his first day of school in his new country, his classmates rose for the pledge of allegiance. Without a clue as to what they were doing or saying, Sergio followed suit. "I knew something was going on, so I figured I'd better stand up," he said.

By his second year he'd mastered the language. ("When I found out he'd just learned to speak English two years before he started college, I almost fell over," recalled Brand.) A year later, Sergio graduated 13th in his class of 325 students. Had he known about Advanced Placement courses, Sergio believes he would have ranked even higher. With all of these achievements came a growing awareness of the value of a college education.

Supported by a grandfather laboring in the farms for $5.20 an hour, Sergio saw community college as his only option after high school – and a very welcome one. It puzzles Sergio that some people look down their noses at a two-year institution. "I don't look at STC as an obstacle; I look at it as a steppingstone to a four-year school," said Sergio, who has his eye on either the University of Texas at Austin or Texas A&M in College Station.

Wherever he transfers after receiving his associate's degree in 2007, Sergio plans to continue pursuing a degree in computer science. Brand and Gunn have bigger plans. "Sergio has the brain of a researcher," said Brand. "We're trying to show him all the options in his life." Sergio finds the teachers' inducements amusing. "They're trying to brainwash me," he joked.

The relationship between instructors such as Ashlee Brand and Bonnie Gunn and students like Sergio Silva is not unusal. Spend enough time on a community college campus – anywhere – and it is often difficult to determine who does more to inspire whom. In many ways, reciprocity is the soul of the two-year system – and that spirit extends beyond student-teacher relationships. More and more colleges are building links to local businesses, manufacturers, civic groups and governmental leaders.

Forging and strengthening college-community links

Mountain Empire Community College in Virginia is a place where community ties have always been strong. "The traditional university has a statewide responsibility, but we have a defined service region," said MECC President Terrance Suarez. In many ways that region – and the direction of the college itself – are defined by one word: coal. Area employment has long been tied to the mines tucked into the breathtaking Appalachian hills that gave Mountain Empire its name, though service industry and technology jobs are becoming more prevalent.

After working hours, there isn't much to do in Lee, Scott, Wise and Dickenson counties, the rural outposts that MECC serves. In fact, most folks are likely to view Big Stone Gap as the kind of place that inspires dreams of escape. The nearest shopping mall is 45 minutes away, and, according to Andy Smith, local conversations often focus on the frequent, fatal car wrecks on the region's mountain roads.

Few people understand the area's coal-fired history better than Wendell Fowler, a professor of mining, maintenance and manufacturing at MECC. A former miner who earned master's and doctoral degrees while recovering from a crippling mine injury, Fowler is the faculty point man between MECC and the mining companies. "A lot of places would've fired a guy like me when the mines went down," said Fowler, referring to the 1990s, when demand for coal dropped and mining jobs in southwest Virginia dwindled. Instead, MECC provided a sabbatical so Fowler could switch his area of expertise to construction. Three years ago, when the mining companies slowly started to return, Fowler reinvented himself and the mining program. There was little choice.

The days when the coal companies would pluck "red hats" (laborers) off the streets of Big Stone Gap and send them into the mines with minimal training are over.

Handling high-tech equipment is all in a day's work for Wendell Fowler, a professor of mining, maintenance and manufacturing at Mountain Empire Community College.

Today's coal miners use their brains, not just their backs, said Valerie Lee, a recruiter for the Cumberland River Coal Co. Lee, who staffed a booth at a recent MECC job fair, emphasized that high-tech equipment requires miners to be technology-savvy and well-trained. "If that piece of equipment goes down," she said, pointing to the computerized image of a multiton earthmover, "they need to hook up a laptop, diagnose the problem and fix it. And you learn that in college."

No one knows that better than Fowler, whose teaching, now more than ever, parallels an industry that has retooled itself around the latest technology. Today's miner must have skills in math, computers, circuitry, motor control and programmable object control (robotics). "We still mine coal underground, but it's not with a pick and axe," Fowler explained. "It's all automated now."

So, too, is Fowler's classroom, a lab filled with students punching ominous-looking red buttons that control various high-tech gadgets and tools of the mining trade – all donated by the coal industry.

Before students get to the gadgetry, though, Fowler turns their concentration to an even more important aspect of modern mining – and perhaps of any industry. "The first thing we teach is problem-solving," he said.

'We empower people. That's what we do here.'

The father of two, miner Jeff Day spends as many as six days a week rebuilding underground machinery and the little spare time that he has in MECC's non-credit mining apprentice program. It is something he has to do for himself and his family.

Without the mining program, Day said, "I'd be making a lot less money, and I wouldn't be moving up."

Last fall, 70 students were enrolled in Fowler's classes, the vast majority of them – like Day –

After her work shift at Broward Community College's Student Life Center, Nichelle Campbell reconnects with 4-year-old daughter Destiny. Campbell, a single mother, takes advantage of the college's child-care services while she works and attends classes.

for no credit. Though disappointed that only two of his students are working toward degrees, Fowler isn't motivated solely by the number of students who emerge with diplomas.

"We empower people," he said. "That's what we do here. We get people with low self-esteem, and we prove to them that they can go to college and that they can make something of themselves."

The proof for many students begins with dual enrollment, programs that allow them to take college-level classes in high school. The problem is that such programs too rarely include the students who might be expected to benefit the most, those in low-income, at-risk populations. "So far, it's the middle- and upper-class kids who take advantage of (dual enrollment)," said Thomas Bailey of the Community College Research Center. "They see it as a way to get a head start so they can get through the basic education classes and start taking applied academics earlier."

That is starting to change at schools such as South Texas College. By offering its dual-enrollment classes in the high schools themselves, STC hopes to attract students who might not be on a college track and therefore are disinclined to take a course at an STC campus. In addition, dual-enrollment math and English students are not assessed tuition or fees.

"We meet them more than halfway," said Nicholas Gonzalez, director of high school programs and services for STC. Moreover, the college offers dual enrollment to students who have no intention of pursuing a degree. High school students participating in STC's career tech program get training that can prepare them for employment as emergency medical technicians or in precision manufacturing, computer-aided design, automotive and air-conditioning maintenance.

Encouraged by the success and popularity of career tech, STC instituted an academic-track "medical science academy" that gives students the opportunity to earn an associate's degree in biology while still in high school. STC is considering adding a similar program in engineering.

Living in the real world, working toward a dream

Nichelle Campbell, a second-year student at Broward Community College in Florida, is a walking checklist of the at-risk community college student. The first in her family to attend college, Nichelle has a child and a full-time job. She was raised on the premise that "making a living and paying the bills" is a person's top priority. As a result, she said, she got through high school "by the skin of my teeth" and went right to work. She didn't take her first college course until she was 21. Pregnant, she quit school after one semester. Three years later, Nichelle returned, only to learn that she would need two semesters of developmental math before she could earn a single math credit that counted toward her GPA. On paper, Nichelle Campbell is a prime candidate for failure.

Fortunately, she isn't living her life on paper. She's living in the real world, and she's learning at a college that is doing all it can to keep her on the path to success – a path she has defined for herself quite clearly. Now 25, Nichelle will earn her associate's degree in criminal justice from Broward this year. She and her 4-year-old daughter, Destiny, will then head to Florida State University in Tallahassee or to New York City's John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Three years from now, bachelor's degree in hand, she will be an agent with the U.S. Border Patrol. Nichelle outlines her future with unwavering certainty.

There are tens of thousands of potential Nichelle Campbells out there – success stories just waiting to be written in every corner of the nation. Community colleges are helping to write these stories in myriad ways: through learning communities, innovations in dual enrollment, community outreach and intrusive strategies that seek to address each student's unique needs. They are finding new ways to use data to foster student success – all with a single, overarching goal in mind: to help more students achieve their dreams.

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