LUMINA FOUNDATION

FOCUS™

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Student aid ... remade

Committed colleges take a wraparound approach to ensure student success

INSIDE

On the cover: Thaddeus L. Price Jr., the self-described "success coach" at Morgan State University and himself a Morgan State graduate, gives a supportive hug to Erica Knox, a 19-year-old junior at the Baltimore university.

Editor's note: The stories in this issue of Focus were reported and written by Doug Richardson, a journalist and communications professional with decades of experience. He was the Indiana Statehouse bureau chief for The Associated Press in the late 1980s and early '90s and later served as director of communications for the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy. He also led policy and communications efforts for the Democratic Governors Association and has worked for several public affairs, law and lobbying firms. He now owns DirectionPR, a public relations and communications firm in Washington, D.C.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

If you're like most Americans, when you hear the term "college student," a picture comes to mind: A young person — late teens or early 20s — walking across a leaf-strewn quad with a backpack slung across one shoulder. It's an evocative image — iconic, even.

It's also wrong.

In fact, not even a third of today's American undergraduates fit the traditional mold of a full-time student seeking a bachelor's degree on a residential campus. Nearly two of every five college students (37 percent) are 25 or older; a similar percentage (38 percent) attend part time, and an even greater proportion (43 percent) attend institutions that don't grant bachelor's degrees.

Don't misunderstand. The changing image of today's student is a positive sign. It shows that higher education is more inclusive than in the past, more accessible to all types of people who ***aren't*** the children of the nation's elite.

That's good — not just socially and ethically, but in practical, economic terms. The fact is, we simply cannot prosper as a nation without a broad swath of well-educated, highly skilled people. And that means millions more individuals — from all demographic groups — need to earn degrees and other high-quality credentials beyond high school.

Americans understand this, and the numbers prove it. A recent survey from the New America think tank shows that nearly 80 percent of respondents see value in attending college. It's easy to see why. According to the New York Federal Reserve, college graduates earn, on average, 80 percent more than those who don't attend, and they're less likely to experience unemployment. Economists at the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce estimate that a bachelor's degree is worth $2.8 million, on average, over a person's lifetime.

But there's a different set of numbers out there — disturbing data points that cloud the positive picture of higher education. Simply put: Rising college costs are making it increasingly difficult, often impossible, for many Americans to realize the benefits that flow from earning a degree or certificate.

For decades, increases in college tuition have vastly outpaced inflation. In the past 35 years, as median household income increased 32 percentage points above the inflation rate, tuition rates have exploded, exceeding the rate of inflation by five times.

When it comes to college enrollment, money matters — a lot. Ninth-graders from high-income families in 2009 were 1.6 times more likely than their low-income peers to have enrolled in some form of education beyond high school by 2016. And among those who ***are*** enrolled, daily financial pressures — issues with child care, transportation, housing and food insecurity, for example — can quickly derail even the most dedicated student.

In short, more and more students need help to gain access to college and to stay on the path that leads to a credential. Traditional financial aid such as grants and loans can offset some of the cost. But huge numbers of today's students — many of them older adults with children, jobs, and other responsibilities — have needs that outstrip such aid. For these students to succeed, colleges and universities must commit to a more holistic approach. They must provide wraparound services, a network of supports designed to meet students' individual, real-life needs.

The good news: Providing such a support network isn't just a pipe dream. Many colleges and universities across the country are doing it and doing it well. They're working in ways that align with the principles laid out in Beyond Financial Aid, a recently updated report that serves as a blueprint for institutions and systems dedicated to ensuring the success of students from low-income families.

This issue of Focus magazine takes you to a few of those committed campuses and shares real-life stories of the students they've helped. In the process, you'll also meet the dedicated educators who are driving the effort.

For example, at Morgan State University in Baltimore, you'll meet Assistant Vice President Tiffany Mfume, who says: "Nothing is as important as the work we are doing to change the lives of the students we serve."

At Georgia Gwinnett College near Atlanta, you'll hear from Chief of Staff Dan Nolan, one of several ex-military officers in the college's leadership ranks. "When bad things happen (to students), we'll rally very quickly," Nolan says. "It's in our nature: How can we serve? How can we help?"

And in north Texas, you'll meet Amarillo College President Russell Lowery-Hart, who has made it his mission — and the college's — to tackle student poverty head-on, one student at a time. "We have to understand why students make the decisions they make," Lowery-Hart insists. "The most powerful thing we can do … is to uncover the why. If you uncover the why, you'll figure out the what."

Along with these stories in the print version of the magazine, there's a wealth of additional information on our website, www.luminafoundation.org. There, Focus offers several extra features, including videos, audio clips, and links to related material — including the Beyond Financial Aid document itself.

All the information in this issue of Focus has a central aim: to paint a more accurate picture of today's students, particularly the growing number of those who face financial need. As a nation, we must get to know these students much better so we can help them reach their education goals. They need us.

More to the point: We, as a nation, need ***them***. They are our future — a vast, largely untapped reservoir of talent. Institutions that follow the principles laid out in Beyond Financial Aid are leading the way in developing that talent. We at Lumina are proud to share their stories — and their mission.

Jamie P. Merisotis
President and CEO
Lumina Foundation

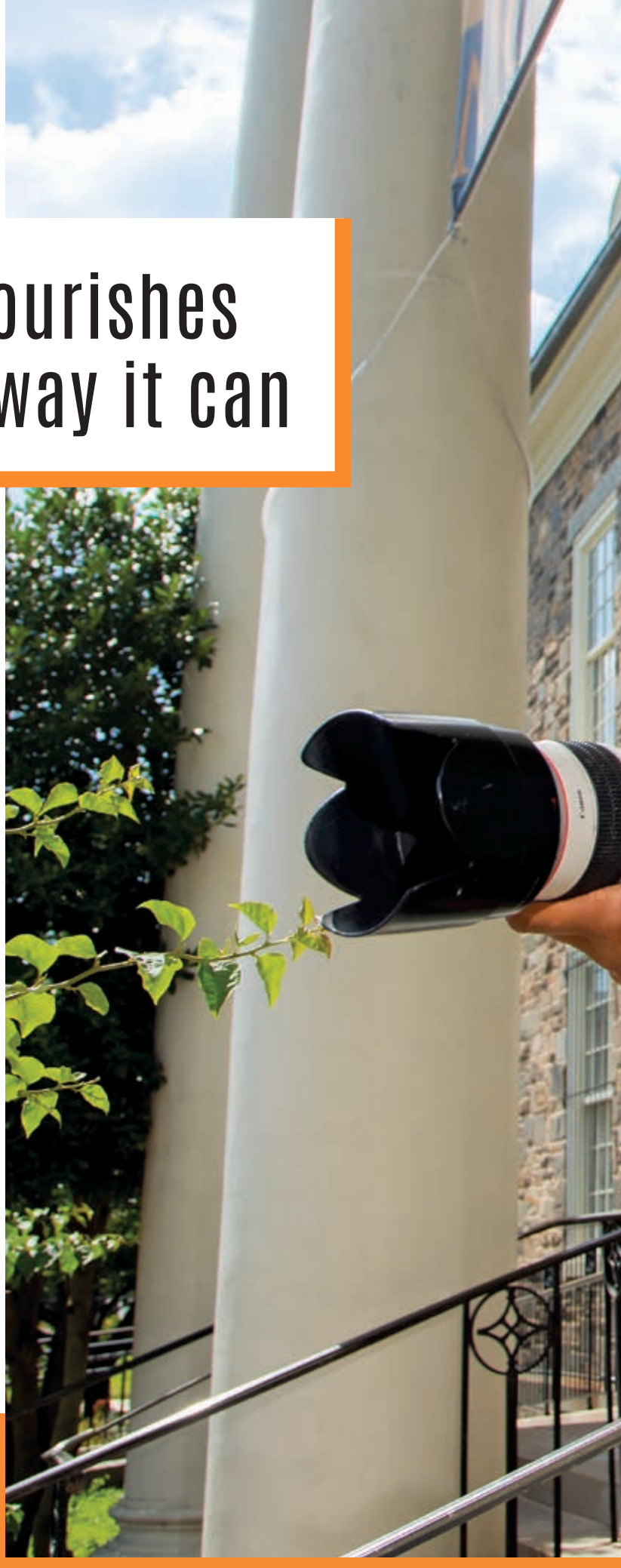
Morgan State nourishes students every way it can

BALTIMORE — Deja Jones was hungry.

In December 2017, midway through her second year at Morgan State University, she had run out of money and almost out of food.

"I was flat broke. My roommate was flat broke," she recalls. "We had to ration maybe a pack of noodles every day, maybe a peanut butter and jelly sandwich once a day — not twice a day, not three times a day. Once a day."

As she entered a second week on that diet, Jones noticed changes in her energy level and her interest in classes.



Deja Jones, a 20-year-old from Atlanta who's now in her third year at Morgan State, faced serious food insecurity issues last year while living off campus. "I'm a prideful person," she says, "so it was hard for me to reach out." But she did – and immediately found herself caught in a supportive safety net.


Canon
EOS


MALIBU BEACH
California

Jones, here flanked by high-spirited friends Tamarra Francis (far left) and Mackenzie Jackson, is back on campus this year, thanks to a housing grant from the university. "I have a whole new outlook on life," says Jones, who's studying screenwriting and animation with a focus on TV and film production.

"I was literally fainting," said Jones, a 20-year-old from Atlanta who had moved off campus to try to cut her expenses. "It was a struggle just to get up and go to class. I did not want to go to class. I lost my ambition because I was not nutritionally sound."

Finally, she decided she had to ask for help.

"I'm a prideful person, so it was hard for me to reach out, but I decided that it was either me reaching out or me not being here," she said.

Jones belongs to a volunteer organization called the National Council of Negro Women. She decided to go to the organization's online group chat and let members know she was hungry.

"I was immediately flooded with direct messages. 'We can help you,'" she said. "They said, 'Deja, you didn't have to wait this long.'"

Her sisters in the organization reminded her that the group maintained a food pantry she could use. Other members donated $60 that first day to help her buy food.

"All of a sudden, I wasn't hungry anymore," Jones said. "If it hadn't been for that chapter on campus, I don't know what I would have done for food for the rest of the month."

Now preparing for her third year at Morgan State, Jones is studying screenwriting and animation, with a focus on television and film production. She's moved back on campus with the help of a housing grant from Morgan State — a grant she might have received during her second year had she been aware of it and applied for it on time. Jones didn't make that same mistake twice, and she made sure that her new room-and-board arrangement includes a meal plan.

She also plans to shoot documentary footage of other Baltimore residents who face obstacles such as food insecurity and uncertainty about housing.

Jones says help from others kept her in school. "After that, my energy was regained," she said. "Not only was my energy regained, but I have a whole new outlook on life.

"They reached out to me, reassured me, and I really needed to hear that," she said. "And now we have a food pantry that is open to all students on campus so that no one else has to go hungry."

Meet basic needs first

Tiffany Beth Mfume hears stories like Deja Jones' all the time. As Morgan State's assistant vice president for student success and retention, it's Mfume's job to understand — and help students overcome — the barriers that can impede academic progress. That's why she's a driving force behind a campus initiative that connects students to an array of services that address these barriers.

"Our goal is to see our students graduate from the institution being well prepared for graduate school, for entrepreneurship, for study abroad and for jobs," Mfume said. "But they can't do that if they don't have their basic needs met: food, shelter, clothing, child care, legal services, car services, and transportation.

"We have found there are many factors that have nothing to do with what's going on in the classroom, but

impact what's going on in the classroom," she said.

In short, Morgan State recognizes — along with a growing number of colleges and universities across the nation — that today's students often need extra help. Many of these students face obstacles — financial, social, and personal — that traditional forms of assistance simply can't address. And so, these schools are taking a holistic, "wraparound" approach to boost student success.

As explained in the title of a recent report aimed at college and university support staff, these committed institutions are going Beyond Financial Aid. (See sidebar below.)

At Morgan State, the principles outlined in Beyond Financial Aid are now official policy. They've been incorporated into the university's "50 by 25" campaign, the effort launched in March 2016 that seeks to increase Morgan State's graduation rate to 50 percent by the year 2025.

To start, the university formed a committee to perform what Mfume calls a "scavenger hunt" to identify services already on campus (including the food bank that helped Deja Jones) and those offered by the City of Baltimore, Maryland state government, Baltimore County, nearby neighborhoods, and the federal government.

"We had been doing this work unofficially, in a piece-meal way, but this will allow us to do more," Mfume said.

To inform students and the Morgan State community of the effort and the services available, a new website launched this summer. A printed document explaining the program will soon be widely distributed on the northeast Baltimore campus.

Mfume believes the Beyond Financial Aid effort can have a huge impact at Morgan State, a historically black institution founded in 1867.

With 6,440 undergraduates and 1,300 graduate students, Morgan State is prime territory for such a program. Nearly 40 percent of its undergraduates are the first in their families to attend college; 80 percent are African-American, and 61 percent are eligible for federal Pell Grant assistance, meaning they are from families that make no more than $50,000 a year. Two-thirds of its entering students require developmental or remedial classes.

"We are not planning our Beyond Financial Aid initiative for a subpopulation of students," said Mfume, a Morgan State graduate. "This ***is*** our population. We are planning this for the majority of our students."

Like many in academia, Mfume serves on a variety of committees that help the university function, including those that plan graduation ceremonies and approve publications. But she says the Beyond Financial Aid committee is different.

"The members of this committee are passionate about the work," she said. "Nothing is as important as the work we are doing to change the lives of the students we serve. On this committee, we can see right in front of us the needs of our students and how what we're planning is going to have a direct impact on their ability to be successful."

'Everyone embraced me'

Erica Knox had just launched her campaign for Miss Junior, a position in student government, when she learned last March that her mother had died.

She returned home to Brooklyn to join her family in grieving and to begin facing questions about her future: Could she remain at Morgan State? Could she afford to? Or should she transfer to a school in New York, so she could pay lower, in-state tuition?

When she returned to Baltimore later that spring, she was welcomed with open arms by another family, her Morgan State family.

"Everyone was trying to keep things together so I could stay in school," said Knox, 19. "People at Morgan will try to move mountains for me."

First, she needed money. The Morgan State University Foundation came up with a $3,000 grant.

She needed housing and a job. After others covered for her during her two-week bereavement absence, she

What is 'Beyond Financial Aid'?

It's a guidebook that colleges, universities, and higher education systems can use to improve, coordinate, and organize their efforts to assist students from low-income families. The aim is to provide access to additional resources — beyond scholarships, grants and loans — to offset the "cost of living" expenses that often delay or derail these students.

The guidebook's approach is rooted in five core strategies — five basic steps that all types of institutions can take to help low-income students overcome financial barriers, stay on track, and complete their programs:

Strategy 1: Know your low-income students.
Strategy 2: Review internal processes and organize student supports.
Strategy 3: Build internal and external partnerships.
Strategy 4: Optimize students' use of services.
Strategy 5: Create and foster a culture of support.

Tiffany Mfume, an assistant vice president at Morgan State, chats on campus with Keyon Grayson, who serves as a peer mentor. Mfume is the main force behind a university-wide effort that connects students to a web of support services. "We are not planning our Beyond Financial Aid initiative for a subpopulation of students," she says. "This *is* our population."

was able to continue working as a desk assistant in a residence hall — a job that also included housing. "That job has kept me in school," Knox said. "That's $4,000."

But most of all, she needed emotional support. Morgan State provided that, too.

"When mom passed, I needed more than finances. It was a mental health thing," she said. "I was running a campaign, but everything was confusing. I was suppressing a lot of grief."

Although initially reluctant, Knox decided to visit the university counseling center. She went to counseling and admitted: "It was a relief." She also made use of the center's relaxation room, she said, "when the days had just gone on too long."

"Every time something would happen, every time an obstacle would occur in my way, there was an office — maybe the Morgan State foundation, the alumni foundation, faculty, staff, the Office of Residence Life and Housing, the Student Success and Retention office — each and every one embraced me and has allowed me to see that I should stay here," Knox said.

Now, she is committed to staying at Morgan State. She won her election as Miss Junior, so she'll have a busy year in student government. She is majoring in strategic communication.

"In times of need, when I faced obstacles on this journey, they literally allowed me to feel like I should keep fighting each and every day to stay at Morgan," Knox said.

"Morgan students and Morgan faculty and the Morgan family as a whole really cares," she said. "They really care outside the finances, outside the academics. They care about my mental health. They care about the things that keep me going every day to attend Morgan State.

"It was really amazing the way they supported me."

'How do we find a way?'

Thaddeus L. Price Jr. is often the first responder when a student needs help. His formal title is Academic Improvement Mandate Program Coordinator, but he prefers a simpler one: "success coach."

"I always tell students: 'I am your partner in success,'"

Thaddeus L. Price Jr., here with junior Erica Knox, is officially known as coordinator of the Academic Improvement Mandate program at Morgan State. But he calls himself a "success coach," and he's constantly in touch with students to keep them on track.

Price said. "If you give 100 (percent), I'm going to give 100 with you. I'm going to run with you. I can't do it ***for*** you, but I can be there.

"I'm your success coach," he tells students. "I'm the one telling you that you can do this. You're gonna do this. I've got your back. We are going to make it happen."

For the last several months, Price has worked to develop the university's Beyond Financial Aid website. It informs students about a variety of services — things such as child care, transportation, food, and housing. It helps connect students with service providers in what Price calls "a judge-free space."

"On the website, you can find the resources you need, and no one will know," he said.

But Price, in daily contact with a wide range of students, knows what students often need most: help with the challenges of everyday life.

"The number one reason our students start performing poorly is usually a matter of need," he said. "For example, deciding whether to come to school or provide food on the table or pay the rent."

A Morgan State graduate himself, Price said his own experience as an undergraduate in the 1990s showed him that the university community has a big heart. When he was in college, his family home in the Baltimore County suburbs burned down. It was the only time he saw his father, a Vietnam veteran, cry.

But the university community rallied behind the family. Price said his professors sent cards, found clothing for the family, and got them in touch with the Red Cross. Some Morgan staff even gave money.

Now, through the Beyond Financial Aid program, Morgan State has a way of showing that empathy and compassion in a structured, organized way, Price said.

"Our challenge is: 'How do we find resources? How do we find a way?'" Price said. "And if we can't find a way, we've got to make a way. If we can't make a way, then we've got to ***become*** the way.

"But it is our duty, our responsibility, to make sure our students are given every opportunity." ■

Full disclosure: Morgan State's president, David Wilson, is a member of Lumina Foundation's board of directors.


AMARILLO COLLEGE
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Amarillo College accepts 'No Excuses' in pursuing its anti-poverty mission

AMARILLO, Texas — They call the student Maria. There's no surname on her transcript, no grades to report her progress, no record that she's actually enrolled. But to the people at Amarillo College, she's very real. She is the student of today.

"We have fallen in love with a student we call Maria," explains Amarillo's president, Russell D. Lowery-Hart. "She's the typical student at Amarillo College.

Incoming students at Amarillo College listen intently as President Russell Lowery-Hart delivers an orientation talk. Lowery-Hart has made it a college-wide mission to address issues that are rooted in poverty — what he calls the "life barriers that were keeping students from being successful."

She's obviously female. She's first-generation; 71 percent of our students are first generation. She goes to school part time; 60 percent of our students go to class 12 (credit) hours a year. She's working two part-time jobs. She's the mother of at least 1.2 kids, and she's 28 years old.

"And she's smart and she's ambitious and she's capable — and all we have to do is remove a few key barriers in order for her to live up to her potential."

Starting nearly a decade ago and accelerating the effort since Lowery-Hart became president in 2014, Amarillo College has embraced a transformative program to blunt the dire effects of poverty on student success. Called the No Excuses Poverty Initiative, the program has brought a cultural change and sharply improved completion rates to Amarillo, a north Texas institution with just over 10,000 students.

"When I looked at our success rates, I was embarrassed," Lowery-Hart said. "So, I asked our students what was keeping them from being successful in the classroom. As a recovering faculty member, I expected academic answers.

"But what I heard changed who I am — professionally and personally — because all of the issues in the classroom had nothing to do with the classroom," he said. "They were all life barriers that were keeping students from being successful: child care, health care, food, housing, utility payments. The things we take for granted are actually keeping students from being successful in classrooms across the country."

Lowery-Hart said that, initially, "we thought, like a lot people: 'This isn't our mission. The community is supposed to solve those problems.' But we're the community's college. We had to see our mission in addressing these issues, even if that meant gluing the resources in the community together in a coherent program. We knew we had to do something.

"A majority of higher ed is set up for the students from the '80s," he said. "But our communities depend on us educating the students we have, not the students we wish we had."

'They really helped me'

Delores McMurry was a student in the 1980s, attending a private business school. It didn't work out, and the school has since closed. So she went to work, often holding down two and sometimes three jobs as she raised three daughters and a son. He died five years ago.

McMurry grew frustrated at one job at a distribution center when people she trained were promoted but she wasn't.

"Everybody they were promoting over me had a degree," she said. "They said they didn't promote me because I didn't have a degree."

To change that, and to try to serve as a role model to her children and grandchildren, McMurry decided to return to school, enrolling at Amarillo College in 2015. It hasn't been easy. She still has to work, by days in a variety of jobs and by night serving as a hostess at a bingo hall.

Now 51 years old, she earned a certificate in business last December and has just two classes remaining to

Delores McMurry, 51, works with Amarillo College Success Center Instructor Michelle Atkins (left). McMurry, who works several jobs and raised four children, has often benefited from the college's support services.

complete her associate degree in business, which she expects to receive in December 2018.

But McMurry admits she couldn't have come this far without special help from the college. Three times, she needed help with a month's rent; Amarillo College provided it. She was having trouble paying for textbooks; the college arranged for her to take books out on loan. She also took advantage of Amarillo's counseling and tutoring programs. And when her grades were so good that she was asked to join Phi Beta Kappa, the college helped with the cost of that, too.

"The people I've interacted with here are wonderful," McMurry said. "The times I thought I was going to lose my mind, that's when I ran into Jordan (Herrera) and the rest of her crew, and they actually helped pull me through. They really helped me through some days when I really thought I could not be here."

Jordan Herrera, Amarillo's director of social services and a master's level social worker, runs the college's Advocacy and Resource Center. The center, which opened in 2016,

Jordan Herrara, a master's level social worker, operates the college's Advocacy and Resource Center, which opened in 2016. The center includes a food pantry and a clothes closet, and Herrera and her team also find ways to help students with rent, utility bills, child-care expenses, transportation, and legal services.

is housed in a building right in the middle of the Amarillo College campus just southwest of downtown Amarillo, a Panhandle city with a population just under 200,000.

"All of our services are available to help students when they are experiencing life barriers," Herrera said. "We are able to assist beyond tuition, books, and fees."

Herrera can walk out of her office and into a food pantry in an adjoining room. There's also a clothes closet, with suits and business clothes for students who are going to job interviews, and more casual clothing for everyday wear. Toiletries are also available, and soon supplies for babies will be offered.

Herrera and her team also find ways to help students with rent, utility bills, child-care expenses, transportation, and legal services. The school has dental and legal clinics, where students train while also assisting fellow students. A car repair clinic will open soon.

The Amarillo College Foundation now contributes $60,000 to support the center's programs, and local businesses have partnered with the center to help with

things such as bulk purchases for the food bank.

Herrera said the center served 5 percent of the student population in 2016. By the fall of 2017, the number had risen to 18 percent.

"If you treat the students with dignity and respect, they are comfortable coming in to ask for help," she said.

'I was at a crossroads'

Michael London knew he needed help. He just wasn't sure he could ask.

The son of a fiercely independent father who immigrated from Trinidad and Tobago, London remembered his father's advice: "You don't need help from nobody. Do it on your own."

"I didn't grow up asking for help," London said. "My dad has been on his own since he was 14, living in a whole other country. He never would ask for help. We don't do that. It's not in our culture."

A Brooklyn, N.Y., native who moved to Texas to work at his father's auto body shop, London followed that go-it-alone path for many years. And often, it didn't go well.

He says he was involved in gang fights, ran with the wrong crowd, dealt drugs, was shot, and served time in prison — not once, but three times — for possession of stolen property and parole violations.

After being released from prison the last time, in 2009, London decided a change in scene might be good. He moved to the Amarillo area.

"I had tried everything else, so I thought: 'Let's do a geographical change,'" he said.

He got a job at a food-processing plant about 40 minutes outside Amarillo, and soon met a woman who drove a bus ferrying workers to the city. He and the woman, Nicole Evans, the mother of three children, have been together ever since. They were married in 2014.

"She was encouraging me to do something different," London said, so he decided to go back to school. He had earned his GED while serving his last term in prison and enrolled at Amarillo College in 2016. Initially, London worked for a company that helped pay for his college. When he lost that job, he faced a dilemma: school or work. He chose to continue his education.

"I was at a crossroads: either work or go to school," London recalled. "I said 'I'm going to school,' but I was scared. It was like: 'How am I going to pay my bills?'"

Michael London, here working with instructor Reem Witherspoon in the Mathematics Outreach Center, grew up in Brooklyn under tough circumstances. After a youth marked by gang activity and prison time, London, now 45, has purpose and direction. And with help from Amarillo College, he's on his way – having earned an associate degree in business entrepreneurship.

London, who is considering further studies at West Texas A&M University, hopes someday to own his own transportation company. Much of his incentive is evident in this photo's background: Nicole, London's wife since 2014, and DaKaysha Jones, one of Nicole's three children.

Nursing students Edward Peña and Laura Torres, here with their 8-month-old daughter, Ximena, are both on track to complete their programs and become registered nurses in December. Peña insists that wouldn't have happened without the financial help the couple received from Amarillo College.

That's when Amarillo College's resource center helped out, the first of several times. First, he needed help with a utility bill. Later, he received assistance with groceries, books, and toiletries.

"It was hard for me to ask, but it wasn't about me anymore," London said. "I had a family. I had to push pride aside.

"The people at Amarillo made me feel comfortable. They were helping me because they wanted me to finish."

He earned his associate degree in business entrepreneurship in May and plans to take a course to get a commercial driver's license this fall. He's also considering enrolling at West Texas A&M University for further business studies.

London now has a business operating an event venue for parties and receptions, but his longer-term goal is to own his own transportation company.

In short, London has turned his life around. He's 45 years old, he has a degree, he has plans for the future, and he recently learned that he and Nicole are expecting a child in March.

He often uses the term "process" to describe his long, circuitous route to earning a college degree. And he knows the process isn't over.

"I still carry around with me today a sign that says 'still under construction,'" he said. "Until I leave this planet Earth, I will be under construction," he said. "It's a continuous thing every day, being worked on, making a difference — not only for myself, but possibly someone else."

'This is what we can do'

Edward Peña has followed a more traditional path to college. He went directly from high school to college, thanks in part to a scholarship provided by Dumas (Texas) High School to a graduate who enrolls at Amarillo College. The scholarship paid for Peña's spring and fall classes for two years, but it didn't cover the summer courses he wanted to take. He paid for those.

A nursing student, Peña met his fiancée, Laura Torres, in a study group during their first year of college. Both were good students, moving on schedule through the first two stages of the nursing program. However, as they progressed to the more intensive third level of the program, they needed to move from Dumas to Amarillo to eliminate the time-consuming commute of 40 miles each way.

That's when they sought help from Amarillo College. Peña talked to a counselor, who then got in touch with Jordan Herrera. She worked with Catholic Charities in Amarillo to find affordable housing for the couple.

"Then, it was literally the same day that she (Herrera) sent me an email saying, 'This is what we can do,'" Peña recalled. "Jordan helped me right away. They were able to pay the first month's rent or the deposit, whichever was more helpful for us — which was the first month's rent. It was pretty quickly that everything fell into place."

Without that housing assistance, Peña said, he likely would have dropped out of school. As with many

low-income students, a single financial obstacle can derail an entire college career.

"Being the man of the house, I have to provide for my family, so I would probably have had to stop the program," Peña said. "I probably would have had to drop out of nursing school and just start working until Laura finished the program."

The couple faced new financial challenges after the birth of their daughter, Ximena, in December 2017.

Herrera found ways to help the couple overcome those obstacles, too. She helped them apply for federal Carl Perkins grants — one to assist with Torres' transportation costs, and another to help Peña defray child-care expenses. The school's student support services department also has helped by providing services such as free printing of classroom resource material, Peña said.

Now, both Peña and Torres are on track to complete the registered nursing program in December 2018. They hope then to take some summer pre-med courses with a goal of attending medical school. None of that would have been possible without that initial rent payment, Peña said.

"That first month's rent helped us tremendously," he said. "It helped us have a roof over our heads, and that helped us keep going to finish faster and to accomplish our goals.

"The people here were helping us, and once we are done, we really want to help other people succeed," Peña said.

'Uncover the why'

President Lowery-Hart believes Amarillo College has come a long way in understanding the steep challenges that students often face.

"For me, the most powerful thing we can do at Amarillo College — and any higher education entity — is to uncover the why. If you uncover the why, you'll figure out the what," he said.

"We have to understand why students make the decisions they make, face the barriers they face and why they are or are not successful. Once we understood why they weren't successful, we could build the what: which was systemic social service interventions with wraparound support."

Now, four years into the project, there's strong evidence it's working, he said.

"When we first started these conversations, our completion rates were in the teens," he said. "Now, our three-year completion rates are 45 percent. We can celebrate those, but our goal is to be at 70 percent by 2020.

"People thought we were crazy stating that goal, but no one thought we'd be at 45 percent," he said. "When you love the students you have rather than the students you wish you had, and when you build your college around their needs, you can actually ensure that they complete what they've started. We're doing that at Amarillo College." ■

Edward Peña is nearing the end of his clinical training as a nurse, but that doesn't mean his academic journey is over. Both he and his fiancée, Laura Torres, hope to take summer pre-medical courses with an eye toward enrolling in medical school.


Patient:
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Colleges' student-focused cultures start at the top –

They come from starkly different backgrounds — one a military officer, the other a career academic — but they've reached the same conclusion: Attacking poverty is the right strategy to help students succeed.

Presidents Stanley C. Preczewski (pruh-CHEFF-ski) of Georgia Gwinnett College and Russell Lowery-Hart of Amarillo College both have implemented innovative programs to assist students in ways that go far beyond traditional financial aid. Their schools address housing and transportation issues, child care and food insecurity, unpaid utility bills and book rentals — in short, any financial issue that might throw a student off course on the way to earning a degree.

"Our experience in the military shows us that the great equalizer around the world is, in fact, education," said Preczewski, a retired Army colonel, engineer and former faculty member at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. "Here, the stakes are: 'Are you going to be able to come out of poverty in America?'"

Lowery-Hart said his and other colleges that serve high numbers of first-generation and low-income students must come to terms "with saying the P-word ('poverty') out loud."

"There are different kinds of poverty, but the most debilitating is generational poverty," said Lowery-Hart, a former speech and communications teacher who has worked for years as a college administrator. "Because generational poverty teaches students to wait for things to happen to you. It teaches powerlessness. Generational poverty kills hope.

President Stanley Preczewski's "Check Baggage Here" sign is a nod to the student-centered approach that requires Georgia Gwinnett's instructors to be fully accessible. "When faculty say, 'Do I need to make myself this available?' — well, I say: 'You only have a job because of the students.'"

"So we can't just have a system to solve these problems," he said. "We have to love students through those systems that solve these problems. We have to give them hope."

Georgia Gwinnett is in the early stages of launching its Grizzlies Helping Grizzlies program — an effort that offers students a safety net of services and eventually will include a predictive model that can point to students' future needs.

The college developed the program after a survey showed that about 60 percent of its students had endured at least one of the following: housing insecurity, food insecurity, or homelessness.

At Amarillo College, the No Excuses Poverty Initiative has been seeking for a decade to ease stresses caused by student poverty and thus improve students' chances for success. That's no small task in the Panhandle city of Amarillo, where 14.5 percent of the nearly 200,000 residents live below the poverty line.

At both schools, meeting students' special needs has become a central tenet of the college culture.

"We set out to build a culture of selfless service to others," said Preczewski, who has been at Georgia Gwinnett since its founding in 2006 and became president in 2014. "It's about students who graduate. It's about students who have no role models back home. ***We*** need to be those role models."

After becoming president of Amarillo College in 2014, Lowery-Hart commissioned a survey to learn what his students wanted in

a college. To his surprise, they wanted a school built on good customer service and strong relationships between students and college personnel.

So Lowery-Hart studied the practices of companies such as Zappos and the Texas-based Happy State Bank, both known for strong customer service. The image of an ivory tower — with aloof administrators, professors and staff — went out the window.

Both presidents give out their cell phone numbers to everyone — students, parents, and staff. Preczewski also requires instructors to list their cell numbers on each course syllabus.

"Some (faculty) didn't like that on the first day," Preczewski acknowledged. "But I said: 'If I can give it out to 28,000 people, you can give it out to 24.'"

To each year's orientation session for new instructors, Preczewski brings a sign that reads: "Check Baggage Here," a reference to his college's tradition-busting approach. Founded just a dozen years ago, Georgia Gwinnett has a unique structure with no academic departments, a lean staffing profile, and high expectations for relationship-building with students.

"When faculty say, 'Do I need to make myself this available?' — well, I say: 'You only have a job because of the students,'" said Preczewski, known all over campus by his nickname, "Stas."

At Amarillo, which was founded in 1929 and now has 10,000 students, the college had "to systematically rebuild a culture around service and love," Lowery-Hart said. And, as president, he faced that rebuilding challenge during a time of severe funding cuts from Texas state government. "In order to get the educational goals, you've got to love the students there. That's not a word that higher ed is used to embracing, but it is a word that defines Amarillo College."

Amarillo College President Russell Lowery-Hart wants his campus to offer far more than education. "Generational poverty kills hope," he says. "So we can't just have a system to solve these problems. We have to love students through those systems that solve these problems. We have to give them hope."

At each school, there are signs of success. Georgia Gwinnett has grown rapidly to 13,000 students and, according to Preczewski, is now "the most ethnically and racially diverse college, public or private, in the entire South."

In 2014, Preczewski was invited to tell Georgia Gwinnett's story at the White House College Opportunity Day of Action.

At Amarillo College, the completion rate has risen from the teens to 45 percent during Lowery-Hart's tenure. Lowery-Hart has been asked to testify before the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, and he's been featured in a lengthy article in The Atlantic. In June, more than 30 institutions from 14 states were represented at a conference Lowery-Hart and Amarillo hosted to explain the No Excuses program.

People are paying attention because, like Preczewski, they realize what's really at stake in the fight to pull Americans out of poverty.

"This isn't about conservative or liberal, Democrat or Republican," adds Lowery-Hart. "This is about the economic future of our community and our country. Until we can address poverty as the underlying barrier to education attainment, we're never going to unleash the economic power that exists in our citizens."

From the very first, Georgia Gwinnett has put students first

LAWRENCEVILLE, Ga. — The college experience was all new to Homero Gonzalez and his family when he stepped onto the campus of Georgia Gwinnett College in 2007. It was all new to the college, too.

The first in his family to attend college, Gonzalez was also in the first freshman class to enroll at Georgia Gwinnett, which had opened its doors by admitting upperclassmen a year earlier. That first freshman class was small — 300 total — at a school that had big plans but no accreditation.

Homero Gonzalez (center) strolls along the Georgia Gwinnett College campus with his younger brothers, Arnoldo (left) and Esteban, who both graduated from the college. Homero, a member of the college's first freshman class in 2007, graduated in 2011 and went on to become an Emmy-winning producer with Telemundo.

Jessica Damian, an associate professor of English, talks with Homero Gonzalez, with whom she shares a special bond. The two first met when Gonzalez was a teenager visiting the campus with his Mexican-born parents. Damian, originally from El Salvador, spoke to the family in Spanish, assured them that Homero belonged at Georgia Gwinnett — and told his parents that she'd take care of him.

But having missed the deadline for applying to the University of Georgia, Gonzalez thought it was worth taking a chance on the school just down the road from his high school in a suburb northeast of Atlanta.

"I really felt that Georgia Gwinnett College, even though it was unaccredited, was going to be something big," Gonzalez said.

He had already experienced the personal attention that Georgia Gwinnett pledged to extend to every student.

"We said from the beginning that we're going to make this college about its students," said President Stanley Preczewski (pruh-CHEFF-ski), a retired Army colonel who served as the college's vice president for academic and student affairs from the school's founding until he was named president in 2014. "We wanted to create an institution that wasn't about the employees. It's about the students we serve."

In Gonzalez' case, this student-centered approach became evident when he and his family visited an open house before he decided to enroll. The Gonzalez family, which had moved to Georgia from Mexico, was one of the few Hispanic families at the open house, Gonzalez said, and they didn't know what to expect or even what to ask about college.

But as they were leaving the open house, the family met Jessica Damian, an English instructor originally from El Salvador. She spoke to them in Spanish and assured them that Homero belonged at Georgia Gwinnett. And she told his parents that she would take care of him.

"Meeting somebody who was willing to sit down and guide us through everything brought us peace of mind and made us think we would be OK," said Gonzalez, now age 29. Figuratively, "the whole family was going to college. It wasn't just me, and they had to know what they were doing."

Damian served as faculty mentor for Gonzalez and convinced him to serve as president of an organization of Hispanic students for three years. Gonzalez also took advantage of the English Student Success course to improve his English-language skills and worked with the school's tutoring center.

A general business major with a concentration in marketing, Gonzalez became interested in graphic design and built a portfolio doing work for student organizations. When a crew from the Spanish-language news service Telemundo came to cover the opening of the school's new library, he served as a translator. Within weeks, during his senior year, he was hired by Telemundo.

After graduating in May 2011, Gonzalez continued with Telemundo, eventually winning 19 local Emmy awards for broadcast work he helped produce. In 2016, he started his own marketing firm.

In 2013, shortly after winning his first two Emmys, he was invited back to Georgia Gwinnett to deliver the commencement address. By then, his brothers Arnoldo and Esteban were on their way to graduating from Georgia Gwinnett, and other immigrant families from

their hometown of Hualahuises, Mexico, had begun to send students to the college.

In the speech, Gonzalez paid tribute to the college's commitment to its students and to the inspiring example set by his father, who had immigrated to the United States from Mexico at age 17. At first speaking no English, his father memorized new words by writing them on matchbooks, and eventually built a construction business that allowed him to bring the entire family to Georgia.

"You should always forge your own path and — like my father — I did," said Gonzalez, as he proudly displayed two Emmy awards on the podium.

President Preczewski remembers the speech well.

"He spoke about what Georgia Gwinnett College did for him. He said, 'You changed my family. You changed me. You changed my community,'" the president recalled.

A West Point connection

Damian said that commitment to the students goes back to the college's founding and its first hires of faculty and staff.

"Our mission and our vision are still alive, and students are at the heart of this institution," she said.

From the beginning, a group of ex-military officers brought to the school by the college's first president established a clear mission for the college, the first four-year institution created in Georgia in more than 100 years.

The founding president, retired Army Brig. Gen. Daniel J. Kaufman, used to say: "'Hire quality people, pay them a very competitive salary, give them a good mission, and get the hell out of the way.' That's what we did," said Preczewski, who, like Kaufman, came to Georgia from

Tomas Jimenez, dean and senior associate vice president at Georgia Gwinnett, confers with 23-year-old Marri Brown, whom he calls a real success story. Brown, a transgender youth who slipped into financial trouble and was temporarily homeless after she was "kicked out" by her father, got help through the college.

the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

Here are the rules they and their colleagues pledged to follow at the new college:

- Ensure that all classes have no more than 28 students.
- Provide 24-7 tutoring — in classrooms, all around campus, and online.
- Assign a mentor to each student.
- Create an academic structure with no tenure and no departmental bureaucracies.
- Keep support staff lean. (Georgia Gwinnett has one support staff member for every 1.7 faculty members. Preczewski says the ratio at most Georgia colleges is 3-1.)
- Keep tuition and fees low. (Preczewski says a full Pell Grant will more than cover a typical student's tuition and fees.)
- Make everyone on staff accessible and responsive to student needs. (Everyone on campus is given Preczewski's cell phone number. All instructors are required to list their personal mobile phone numbers on each course syllabus. Teachers have no office hours because they're expected to be available to students at any time.)
- Connect with students so staff and instructors can identify students' particular needs and situations that require quick response.
- Build a safety net to meet students' needs for things such as food, housing, transportation, and child care — everyday challenges that can imperil college careers.

So far, it's working, said Preczewski, known to everyone on campus by his nickname, "Stas."

"You open up a restaurant and you serve bad food, you're not going to stay in business very long," he said.

India Doster, here conferring with Residence Director Bakari Benton, faced homelessness in December 2017, after illness affected her grades and made her ineligible for the resident assistant job that had provided her housing. She wrote directly to the college president, and help came quickly to keep her enrolled.

"We've gone from no students in 2006 to 13,000 students this fall. I think we must be serving a pretty good burger.

"I will not begin to say that anybody can do this," he continued. "When you start with a clean slate, it's a lot easier than if you have to come in and change a culture."

Georgia Gwinnett College's enrollment has grown every year for the last 12 years in a county, now Georgia's second largest, that has seen its population explode from 100,000 in 1980 to nearly 1 million today. In 1980, the county population was 90 percent white. Today, there is no majority race or ethnicity. Georgia Gwinnett students come from 37 states and 126 countries.

"We are the most ethnically and racially diverse college, public or private, in the entire South," Preczewski said. "We want this college to be open to those who are first-generation college students, low-income, and minorities."

To help students in this diverse population succeed, Georgia Gwinnett emphasizes two key points: quickly establish relationships between students and staff, and try to help students succeed at the beginning of their college experience.

"The two best predictors of whether students will graduate are, first, establishing a relationship with a staff member early on and, second, success in the first semester," Preczewski said. "(In the first term), we strongly encourage our students to take the minimum number of classes. We want our students to get used to it."

But as the population has grown, so too has the college's commitment to help students overcome non-academic barriers — the difficult stuff of daily life that can easily derail students.

"We've started to discover more and more students were having temporary homeless situations: sleeping in cars, students going from house to house, friends to friends, not knowing where their next night's sleep is going to be," said Tomas Jimenez, the college's dean and senior associate vice president for student affairs.

Other students face food insecurity, transportation challenges, problems paying for textbooks — all obstacles that require assistance beyond traditional financial aid.

The college acts aggressively — and quickly — to address these issues. Preczewski regularly signs personal checks to leave with his assistant so she can help a student pay for a textbook or meet an emergency expense. Nearly 80 percent of the university staff give a portion of their salaries back to the university to help students in need, Preczewski said.

"We are very good at providing a safety net," said Dan Nolan, a retired military officer who serves as the college's chief of staff. "When bad things happen, we'll rally very quickly. It's in our nature: How can we serve? How can we help?"

Now, Nolan said, the challenge is to improve the college's ability to predict the types of assistance that students will need and when they might need them. For example, he said, if a student lacks a campus parking

permit, does that student have a way to get to class regularly? Is there a bus line the student could use?

"Typically, the problem is identified when the student comes in and says, 'I just hit the wall,'" Nolan said. "We have started to ask the question, 'Is there a way we could build a scaffolding so we don't need as many safety nets?'"

The college is now formalizing this scaffold-building effort in a project called Grizzlies Helping Grizzlies, a name that invokes the school mascot. The project began with the student affairs staff collecting funds for cash, gift cards and other short-term support. The college then began to identify and reach out to other local relief and support organizations that address issues such as housing, transportation, and food insecurity.

The need is real. Statistics compiled by the college show that 44 percent of students last year experienced housing insecurity, 43 percent had low or very low food security, 14 percent experienced some form of homelessness, and 7.2 percent experienced all three of these issues.

'I am begging you …'

India Doster wanted to stay in school, so she wrote a note to the college president.

"Dear President: As of now, I am considered homeless," she wrote to Preczewski in December 2017. "I have only one year left here at Georgia Gwinnett College. I managed to get my tuition paid for, but I cannot afford to live here on campus. … I am begging you please to help me so that I can stay here at Georgia Gwinnett College, so I don't have to drop out. I have nowhere else to go."

Doster, 23, had been a resident assistant at the college, a position that afforded her free housing. However, after

Dan Nolan, a retired military officer who serves as the college's chief of staff, says Georgia Gwinnett has always been good at responding to students' needs and is now looking for ways to be more proactive and preventive. "We have started to ask the question, 'Is there a way we could build a scaffolding so we don't need as many safety nets?'"

India Doster, here with Assistant Director of Financial Aid Lawana J. Haynes, is scheduled to graduate in December 2019 with a bachelor's degree in exercise science. And she's working hard to get there. Doster has three jobs — in the housing office, as a student security guard, and with a food service company on campus.

she fell ill with ulcers, her grade-point average dropped below the 2.5 standard she needed to keep her position. She needed a place to live.

Jimenez and the financial aid office intervened quickly. They found Doster student loans and, more important, a place to stay on campus. She now works three jobs — in the housing office, as a student security guard at nights and with a food service company on campus. Most days, she works from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. and often must stay up until 2 a.m. to finish her homework.

The hard work is paying off. She is scheduled to graduate in December 2019 with a bachelor's degree in exercise science. At other schools, that might not have happened, she said.

"This school issues cell phones for just about everybody who works here," Doster said. "As long as you communicate with them, they will help you do about anything."

And often that help goes far beyond finances — as it did for Marri Brown.

In 2013, after completing high school in Decatur, Ga., Brown made a life-changing declaration.

"I decided I wanted to live life as a woman, and my father didn't agree with that," said Brown, whose birth name was Marrius. "He basically kicked me out. It forced me to live wherever I could find (a place) to live."

She stayed with a friend, was briefly homeless and stayed in a shelter, all while applying to college. In the spring of 2014, she enrolled at Georgia Gwinnett, but had to drop out in the fall of 2016 after she lost a job and her car broke down. But a few months later, inspired by a friend's graduation, she decided to return to school in the spring of 2017. She now is on course to graduate in December 2019 with a degree in human development and aging services.

She is active on campus, serving as president of the Black Student Union and working as a student assistant at the Student Center and Student Involvement office.

The college has helped her with food and housing. Although she had a place to live on campus when school was in session, housing wasn't available between terms. The college has changed that policy, so transitional housing is now available when classes aren't in session.

"Marri is a success story," said Jimenez, the school's dean. "She's done an outstanding job of speaking up. She's very brave. She's very courageous.

"Her story is sometimes difficult to tell, but it's a story that needs to be told," Jimenez said. "So, when she stepped up and really let some people know what her story is, it was easy for people here and the culture here to assist her."

After she graduates, Brown, 23, is considering creating a nonprofit to help transgender people. She said she would model it after the Grizzlies Helping Grizzlies program that has assisted her.

"I'm actually thankful I made the choice" to attend Georgia Gwinnett, she said. If she had gone elsewhere, "I wouldn't be where I am today. I probably would be the same person my dad wanted me to be." ■

Marri Brown is due to graduate in December 2019 with a degree in human development and aging services. She hopes to create a nonprofit organization to help transgender people — one that will be modeled on the Grizzlies Helping Grizzlies program that has assisted her at Georgia Gwinnett.

Not just a 'one-campus wonder,' the Beyond Financial Aid approach

While individual institutions such as Amarillo College, Morgan State University, and Georgia Gwinnett College have launched holistic efforts to help low-income students, two statewide systems — in Georgia and Tennessee — operate similar programs on a much larger scale.

The University System of Georgia and the Tennessee Board of Regents have embraced the tenets laid out in Lumina Foundation's Beyond Financial Aid guidebook (atop next page). The programs help with everyday expenses, such as transportation and child care, that often delay the progress of low-income students or prevent them from finishing college.

The Georgia system — serving more than 300,000 students in 26 institutions (including Georgia Gwinnett) — has fully adopted the Beyond Financial Aid approach. The guidebook's principles are integrated into a statewide initiative aimed at increasing overall graduation rates, said Robert Todd, the system's director of policy and partnership development.

"We rolled it into the Complete College Georgia plan," Todd said, which makes Beyond Financial Aid part of each institution's approach to serving students from low-income families.

Child care, transportation and food insecurity were recurring themes when the system's institutions assessed students' needs. Still, system officials don't dictate actions taken at individual institutions. "The locals have the flexibility to tailor the program to each school population's needs," Todd explained.

For example, at Dalton State College, local administrators saw the need for a food pantry, and so they created one, Todd said. It's called the "Birdfeeder," a nod to the school's Roadrunner mascot.

And at Columbus State University, with a large population of adult learners, Todd said, "they knew if they didn't address child care, they would lose a lot of students."

So they addressed that problem in a very direct way. This fall, Columbus State has 70 students who each receive a $125 weekly check to offset child-care costs.

Although the statewide programs are relatively new, dating back to just 2016, each state system already has success stories to share.

"Boy, is that helping families," said Lisa Shaw, who directs the university's Academic Center for Excellence.

In Tennessee, the Board of Regents oversees 27 colleges of applied technology and 13 community colleges, serving a total of 118,000 students. The board recently integrated the Beyond Financial Aid initiative into its broader student success program. Now assistance for things like food and health care are offered right along with other supports such as expanded job-placement services and efforts to boost students' financial literacy.

The goal is for each Tennessee institution "to identify local resources to help students overcome barriers," said Heidi Leming, the board's vice chancellor for student success.

Roane State Community College, in southern Tennessee, identified transportation and food insecurity as urgent needs, said Karen Brunner, vice president for institutional effectiveness, planning, and research.

With nine campuses in two time zones, Roane State has found that students often have difficulty getting to far-flung classrooms and labs. So the school's foundation helps by offering transportation assistance, including money that students can use for gas or a tire repair, Brunner said.

On Roane State's Cumberland County campus, many students needed to be fed. The college partnered with a local Baptist church to bring lunch to hundreds on campus once a month and twice during finals week. The college also teamed up with a Methodist church that provides Meals on Wheels service to the campus' neediest students, Brunner said.

Although the statewide programs are relatively new, dating back to just 2016, each state system already has success stories to share.

Shaw tells the story of a woman who had twin sons, 17 months old. The student wanted to return to Columbus State to finish her junior and senior years and become a nurse, but in the past had been forced to choose between attending school or paying for child care.

"With the assistance from our

also works statewide

child-care program, she was able to place her twins in child care with no out-of-pocket expenses and enroll in our nursing program," Shaw said. "She graduated in two years and provided the twins with a jump start in early education and preparation for school readiness."

At Roane State, Brunner points to the success of Makalea Alexander, a 33-year-old Army veteran and mother of two daughters.

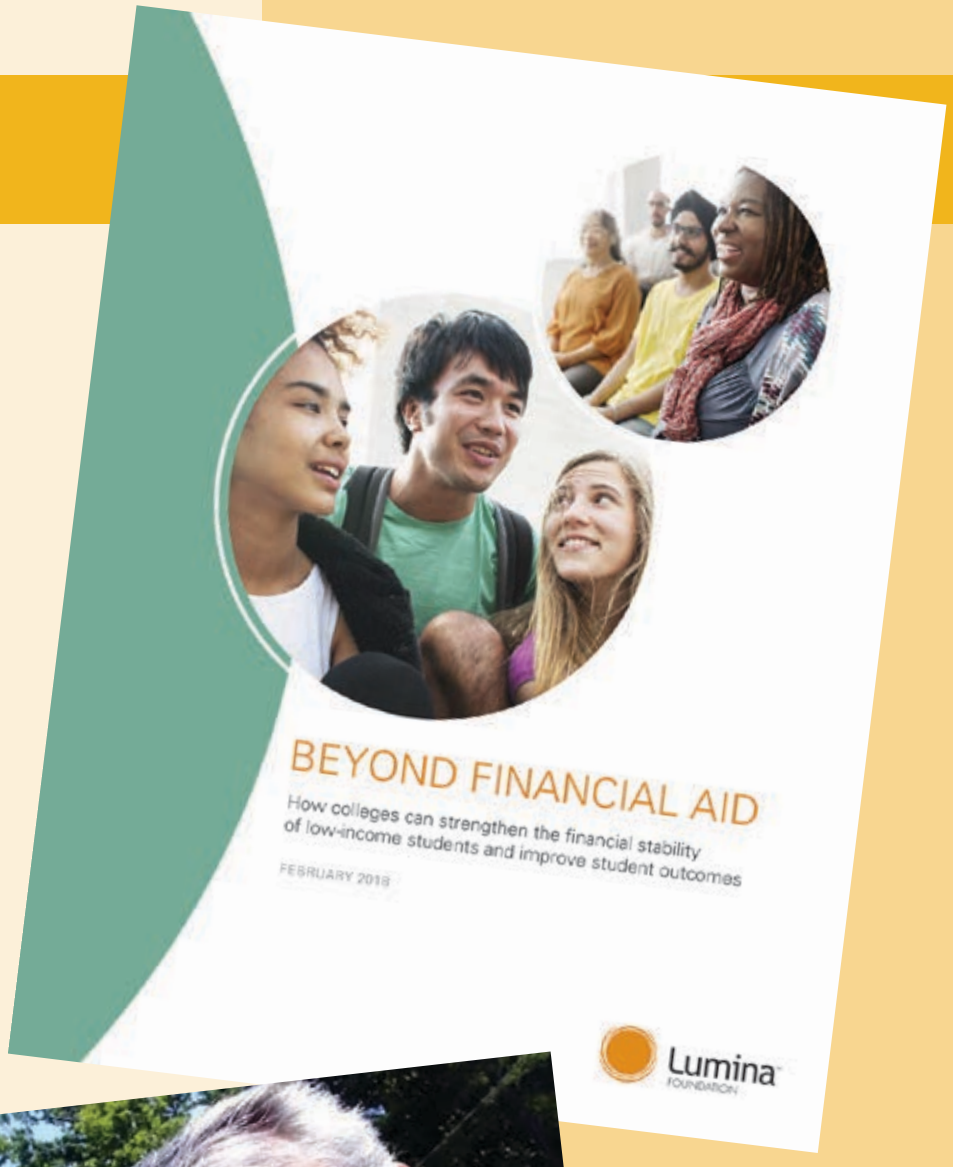
By her own admission, Alexander has had a difficult journey. She struggled with drug addiction as a teenager, was discharged from the Army after failing a drug test and endured a difficult marriage before separating from her husband. She also has battled depression for years.

She said that when she enrolled at Roane State in 2015, the school helped her fill out the necessary paperwork for financial aid and then cut her a check ranging from $100 to $150 a month to help pay transportation costs. And when she completed her course work to become an occupational therapy assistant, the school "paid for my state exam and background check — that's more than $300 — and paid for my state license, another $85," she said.

Now Alexander works 30 to 40 hours a week, earning more than double the hourly rate she had earned in any previous job, she said.

"Roane State helped me get my life back on track, and now I'm able to provide for my daughters," Alexander said.

"I want other people to get an education and feel the way I feel now. The college gave me confidence in myself."



Roane State Community College graduate Makalea Alexander takes time out to grab a selfie with her father, Mark Posey. Alexander, a 33-year-old mother of two daughters, has fought her way back from a range of troubles — including substance abuse, marital woes and depression — thanks to the support services offered by the college. *(Photo courtesy of Makalea Alexander)*

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Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis that is committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all. Lumina envisions a system that is easy to navigate, delivers fair results, and meets the nation's need for talent through a broad range of credentials. The foundation's goal is to prepare people for informed citizenship and for success in a global economy.

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