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Student Retention: Success Stories of Students

Who Went into the Workforce

In any given fall semester, Montgomery College welcomes more than 4,000 new students—that is, students who are attending college, any college, for the first time. Staying in school is key to maintaining momentum toward achieving academic goals. Montgomery College is above average in student retention, but for every 100 new students in the fall, only 67 of them return the following fall. As we examine retention issues this year, it is the other 33 that concern us—why are they not returning? In this month's *President's Focus*, we look at students who *did* return and *did* complete a degree, and then went into the workplace. Their successes are stories of self-motivation and perseverance coupled with excellent instruction and effective services. Here are just a few of their stories.

Brady was a general studies major who was not sure what career path he wanted to pursue. With seven siblings, finances were tight and his lack of clarity on a professional track was a challenge. An attuned English professor, however, pointed out that he was a very good writer, encouraged this focus, and suggested a communications major. Brady pursued this while working 20 hours a week at a church child-care center. Meanwhile, he searched for ways to carve out the career path he was still discovering. He says his visits each semester to the Germantown counseling center were essential to his success. It was there that he learned about the Maryland Completion Scholarship to the University of Maryland University College (UMUC). Covering a third of the tuition to UMUC, the scholarship enabled Brady to complete his bachelor's degree in communication. With his



degree in hand, Brady was hired back at MC as a media relations specialist, where he currently works writing stories for the popular *@MontgomeryCollege* publication, among other duties.

Another student came to MC at age 32, having risen from a front desk clerk to general management in the hotel industry. In his twenties he had struggled at a four-year university with an undiagnosed learning disability, and left in frustration. More than five years in the job world helped him win back some confidence and he saw higher education as a road to more opportunity. He hoped this time would be different and took full advantage of his academic advisor's guidance. His advisor urged him to get tested for a learning disability which, once identified, enabled him to use Disability Support Services for extra time on tests and space in the assessment center. He graduated from MC in a year, having brought some credits from his four-year college experience. Two weeks after graduation, he enrolled at UMUC where he will graduate with a bachelor's degree in business administration in 2019. He currently works in Rockville as an accountant with the long term goal of earning an MBA. He credits the guidance of his academic advisor with empowering him to succeed and the attentiveness of his professors whose email responsiveness enabled him to work full time while studying. This student has just enrolled in a volunteer MC mentoring program in order to give back some of what he appreciates about the College.

Fatih is an immigrant from Turkey who struggled throughout high school, pleading with his parents to have him tested for a learning disability. His parents didn't believe that learning disabilities existed and so he went without help. When Fatih came to MC, he was referred to the TRIO program, which serves low income students. After being properly diagnosed and receiving support at MC, he earned an associate of applied science in hospitality management and transferred to UMUC where he is pursuing a bachelor's degree in business administration. He also works now for Entertainment Cruises in Washington, DC. Fatih reports that many people doubted that he would earn a degree or find a job. His perseverance, along with the support of the TRIO program at MC put him on a path to success.

A recent immigrant from Bulgaria, Nelly, entered MC to learn English, having had some nursing training in her home country. It took her three years to reach a level of English where she could manage MC's nursing classes and had the prerequisites to begin. In that time, she worked ceaselessly on her English, rewriting essays four or five times. She reports that she recorded her class lectures and listened to them in the car while commuting to school.



When Nelly finally enrolled in MC's nursing program, she says the program's use of simulation into the curriculum, gave her significant confidence with procedures long before her clinical rotations. She also describes the commitment of the nursing faculty as unparalleled—they were tireless in their work with students—demanding, but encouraging. Those forces propelled Nelly, who was also highly motivated. She went on to earn a bachelor's degree in nursing from Frostburg University and is currently working on a master's degree in nursing education while employed at Holy Cross Germantown Hospital.

MC also attends to veterans' needs, which is why *Military Times* rated the College "Best for Vets" for our Combat2College program. One veteran who currently works as a software developer at Booz Allen Hamilton started at the College after retiring from the army as a paralegal. He cites the GI bill as a strong tool in allowing his career change. After earning an associate of applied science degree in computer gaming and simulation, he transferred to the University of Baltimore where he earned a bachelor's degree in simulation and gaming design. He is currently working on a master's degree in software development at Boston University and reports that his income has risen progressively as he has gained more training.

Not all MC students take the credit-bearing route to success. Students who are recent immigrants often benefit from MC's combination of English-language training plus a trade skill. One female Ethiopian student started her educational journey in the US by attending English classes at MC, where she heard about the TechHire program. The College's attention to transitioning students to additional career paths benefitted this student greatly. She discovered a passion for technology, and chose to take part in the A+ and English as a Second Language (ESOL) support class that was offered at the time. She did extra work at night and weekends, so her intrinsic motivation was high from the start. But MC's attention to helping her find employment was the clincher. Once she began working with the job development and opportunity specialist, she completed her resume, used referrals to workshops held at Work Source Montgomery, attended job fairs and campus interviews. At a job event coordinated by Tech Hire, she was hired by Best Buy. She moved up quickly at Best Buy, was promoted and nominated to receive Apple certification training that Best Buy sponsored. Best Buy saw great potential in her and paid for her to complete the Apple training. She is currently studying diligently for the Network+ Certification.



Another example of a noncredit pathway is MC's Graduate Transition Program, which serves students with intellectual disabilities, preparing them for employment after two years of training. Charles, who graduated with a certificate of completion in 2011 now works at the National Institutes of Health as an office automation data clerk. He does data entry data and manages the national database for autism research. Working 30 hours a week, he earns a salary and full federal benefits. Since people with disabilities tend to face unique challenges in finding work, this MC program is uniquely valuable in training students while preparing them for independent living and roles in the professional world.

There are clearly many routes to success at MC but the combination of personal perseverance and support from College faculty and staff were the most frequently cited by these successful students. Students face distinct challenges—limited English proficiency, or learning disabilities, financial limits, or lack of career direction. There are resources for all of these challenges—and more—at MC, which is what enabled these students, among many others, to stay in school, finish a program, and then succeed in the working world.

