



President's **FOCUS**

Monthly Report to the Board

February 2015

Closing the Achievement Gap: Facing our Challenges and Closing the Gap at Montgomery College

Montgomery College's Closing the Achievement Gap (CTAG) Task Force took great care last year to study how the Achievement Gap has manifested itself at numerous institutions across the US over several decades. Now we turn to some specific barriers that prevent our students from reaching their potential. Some of these difficulties overlap with other institutions' challenges, while others are unique to our College. Attending to these realities of the gap is important as we prepare to implement the recommendations made by the Closing the Achievement Gap Implementation Team (CTAG-IT). What follows is a discussion of some of the challenges to closing the gap and nuances to which we should be attentive as we engage in this ambitious, important plan. These include barrier courses, data analysis, the common student experience, and, first of all, leadership coordination.

Leadership Coordination

The energy and rigor that went into our CTAG Task Force study proved that there are faculty, staff, and students across our institution who are committed



to this important goal. As empowering students to change their lives is at the core of our mission, then helping all students to complete their goals is our highest priority. Tackling the challenge of assuring that no demographic group of students has a disadvantage—to close the achievement gap—requires our strategic focus and action. The fact that the achievement gap has existed for so long without successful progress on closing it makes the leadership issue even more critical.

There are many models for such leadership and coordination: a committee, annual goals for individual employees, and/or a dedicated office. The last of these three is the recommendation of the CTAG-IT group and I am seriously considering it for our future.

An office with a leader who has responsibility for coordinating these efforts would be an invaluable influence. Without this person, maintaining the momentum and the accountability needed could be difficult. With such a person, the excellent ideas and recommendations we have identified over the last year could be brought to life with vigor and attention. The attention of a single, knowledgeable, and responsible person would give the College laser-like focus on trying the strategies research and best practice have suggested. The impact on students will be more real more quickly.

Determining Baseline and Outcomes Measures

Our success at closing the achievement gap will be carefully measured. Establishing a baseline from which to measure outcomes is a complex task, as it will be spread across many units throughout the College who are engaged in different disciplines. At the same time, the data must be made comparable so that we can assess whether comprehensive strategies are working productively. Ultimately, decisions will have to be made about which cohort to include in our assessments, how to define retention, and how to benchmark our progress. This process will require quantitative and qualitative analysis, plus collaboration among a variety



of faculty, administrators, and staff. Creating testing that is reliable and goals that are measurable will also be necessary. Tracking outcomes and recording them in ways that are meaningful for longitudinal evaluation will be another challenge. What constitutes, for example, a “successful mentoring relationship”? What is the profile of a student who has “engaged thoroughly on a campus”? These questions will require careful, upfront consideration so that our investments of time and energy are made worthwhile.

If we are going to determine which interventions have made a positive difference for students we will also have to define those interventions carefully and ensure that they are practiced consistently to make our analysis valid. Additionally some degree of collaborative spirit will be essential to making this ambitious project a reality. Aligning the academic activities of the College with the services for students in order to produce common measurable outcomes will be a major key to success.

This data and analysis effort is important for Montgomery College. As the board has, no doubt, seen, Montgomery College is brimming with data and reports, both internal and external. We are still, however, maturing as an organization that is proficient and adroit in utilizing data to make hard choices and decisions. Working on closing the achievement gap provides us an opportunity to grow and refine our skills, our organizational vocabulary about data, as well as our norms and expectations for data use for no higher cause than helping more students succeed.

Barrier Courses

We have known for some time that certain courses at Montgomery College have created barriers to advancement for students within the CTAG focus. A list of “barrier courses” at the College was identified several years ago and includes courses in math, English, accounting, biology, and chemistry. Many of these are “gateway courses,” first-level courses in the



discipline that serve as prerequisites to higher level subject matter. We have already taken several steps toward lowering these barriers. In 2011 a redesign by the math department combined two developmental math courses (pre-algebra and elementary algebra) into one course, Mathematics Prep, and yielded promising results. While there was a 23 percent difference between white and black students in terms of need for developmental mathematics education, after the redesign, there was only an 8 percent difference between the two groups in completion of a college-level mathematics course. The difference between Hispanic and White students in the need for developmental mathematics was 28 percent, but among students who completed the redesigned developmental math the difference in completion of college-level math became 6 percent in—a 78 percent improvement.

Although the redesign appears to have made a significant difference in math, a gap persists. Several explanations have been offered, among them an unreliable ACCUPLACER; an absence of data; and interventions that are untimely or ineffective. These three possibilities should be carefully considered for their impact.

The ACCUPLACER, for example, is a test used to determine course placement for incoming students. If students are placed in sections too advanced for them, they may fail to complete because they lacked an adequate basis for progressing through the class. For some of these students inadequate preparation in high school may be the cause. Alternatively, it is also possible that student performance on this standardized exam itself may have resulted in inaccurate placements. Whether the ACCUPLACER is a reliable measure of student preparation—particularly African American and Latino students—has been a topic of debate across the country and the jury is still out.

Another challenge for these barrier courses is that faculty and administrators lack adequate data context, as mentioned above, on student patterns of success to make meaningful corrections in instruction or testing. While we have advanced greatly in our collection of



student data, such data are not always available to the people who might most make use of it. Without tying our most challenging statistics to root causes, our interventions with struggling students may be inadequate or misplaced.

The literature on interventions shows that they can be productive in helping underachieving students to pass gateway courses. Such interventions, however, must happen at the right moment and in the right form. Instructional faculty, as well as counseling faculty must be trained to use all the tools at their disposal to affect such interventions. Broader implementation and use of Starfish, the student progress-tracking system that supports developmental advising, would be enhanced when more faculty are trained in how to monitor students and intervene early to prevent them from falling behind. The software can automatically populate a student's instructors into the Student Success Network, through which patterns of difficulty can become more quickly apparent. Montgomery College recently purchased the "early alert" component of Starfish, and it will be used more widely in the future after more faculty are trained.

Defining the Common Student Experience

Student participation in efforts to close the achievement gap is an area which has been given insufficient attention. Students are uniquely positioned to engage their peers in issues related to achievement, to strategize with administrators about interventions, and to create a culture of pride in academic accomplishment. Students are often more responsive to the movements of their peer groups than older people. Efforts to recruit students and inspire them to work with others are equally important as those in which administrators and instructors are engaged. If our plans for CTAG strategies neglect the potential contributions of students we will be missing a great resource.



Students who are more thoroughly engaged in the College community are more likely to succeed in the classroom, according to higher education research. Service days, tutoring elementary school children, and school-spirit events are just a few examples of activities that help students to build leadership skills and relationships with mentors, both predictors of academic success. Building this model into a “common student experience” (CSE) towards which faculty and staff should direct their efforts, however, is a work in progress. The CSE, launched in 2012, is taking root. Our students expect it and need it. And while we are making progress on our One College model, there are still differing organizational practices and individual campus cultures that stand in the way of fully implementing the common student experience as fast as I would like.

Decisions about how to define the common student experience will need to be carefully considered. Should we seek to engage all students to the same extent? Do all of our students have the same amount of time to become engaged on campus, given our higher average student age? Are there students for whom engagement is not a necessary component of academic success? If so, should they be counted against the “success” measure? These are large questions that will have to be answered in order for our qualitative analysis of the student experience to be meaningful.

Conclusion

Closing the achievement gap is a complicated challenge. Its resolution requires the work of many people spread across multiple physical locations and engaged in diverse disciplinary activities. The need for leadership and coordination to steer the ship in the right direction cannot be overstated. Determining baselines and benchmarks to measure our progress will require careful oversight and strategic planning. Attention to the obstacles presented by “barrier courses” is another priority, which will need to be tackled, as well as the training of



faculty on the developmental advising model. All of these steps are within our reach and will have profound impacts on the success of our CTAG movement at Montgomery College.

To the extent that the challenges discussed in this piece continue to stand in the way of progress, I am not a bit discouraged by them. On the contrary, the diligence our of faculty and staff at identifying these issues and carefully studying their origins will make our work more productive in the long run. Campaigns like the one to close the achievement gap at Montgomery College require sustained, strategic efforts and this introspective part of our journey will lead us productively into the next phase. Implementing the recommendations of the Closing the Achievement Gap Implementation Team is our next task, and I think you will see clearly how our efforts at mapping the challenges mentioned in this piece are purposefully tied to strategic steps. I look forward to the progress I know we will see when we focus on our priorities—shepherding our students to success—and allot the resources necessary to carry them out.

Discussion Questions

1. What information stands out for you in this report?
2. What is the Board leadership role in addressing challenges at the College?
3. How can students be encouraged and supported in engaging their peers in a campaign for student success?

