

# BOARD PERSPECTIVES

## Achieving the Promise

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This was a year focused on students and student success at Montgomery College.

This was also a year that saw changes in the College's external environment. The Maryland statewide elections ushered in a new administration. With a recovering national and regional economy—though sluggishly recovering—state and local governments were challenged to meet funding needs. In addition, the College experienced a slight downturn in enrollment.

Nevertheless, we focused on student success in the classroom and on success in the workplace. We did this during the first year of operating with a new academic structure. And we did this with enhanced data.

### **Achieving the Promise**

Along with the whole College community, the Board engaged in a yearlong discussion and reflection on how we ensure success for all our students. This included extensive consideration of a student success policy by a Board committee. The new policy expresses the Board's commitment to student success and embraces the systemic practices that help students complete a degree, a certificate, or other personal educational goal.

In addition, through monthly reports from the President, as well as dialogues with governance councils, the Board focused on how the College can improve the success of students from groups underrepresented in higher education. Over the past two years, collegewide task forces studied and developed implementation plans to address this issue at the College. The dedication and devotion to students shown by these groups reflect a deeply caring College community. These groups inspire us and have developed what may be a national model for addressing this issue.

At the beginning of the academic year, we had a name for this issue—we called it "Closing the Achievement Gap." By the end of the year, at the recommendation of President DeRionne Pollard, who sought a more accurate and compelling term, we are calling it "Achieving the Promise." Indeed an education is a promise—the singular promise that can change a life, change a family, and change a society.

Achieving the Promise is at the heart of student success at the College.

### **Workforce Development**

A second student success dialogue was taking place in our county this year—a dialogue about workforce needs. The College was front and center in this conversation, as it should be. We knew that the leaders and businesses of Montgomery County were aware that the College is a leader in workforce development.

Or were they?

In compiling a comprehensive report of the College's efforts in workforce development, the first of its kind, we documented a most impressive enterprise that is a workforce engine for the county. We might have even surprised ourselves at seeing exactly how much the College does.

The county dialogue continues on this critical need to create well-educated workers to better our economy. The direction the countywide effort will take remains to be determined, but this Board is determined that the College must be at the table. In fact, we believe the College should be at the head of the table. Who better to lead this effort than the organization that does this work every day and does more of it than anyone else?

These two dialogues, Achieving the Promise and workforce development, while having taken place largely independent of one another, are actually interwoven at their core. A successful student who achieves the promise is a student who is workforce-ready. Our College makes that happen by empowering students to change their lives.

### **Academics at the College**

These two promising and interwoven efforts of Achieving the Promise and workforce development now rest on the foundation of a new academic structure at the College. The Board was pleased to see the development and implementation of the new academic structure, a collegewide array of departments, disciplines, and positions with better lines of responsibility and communication.

We already have seen some fruits from this new organization, including several completely online degrees—a goal we have supported for some time—and a revamped general studies program. The importance of the revisions to the general studies degree cannot be stressed too much. More students are enrolled in the general studies program than in any other major at the College. It is a transfer program that sends more students to universities—some with the completed degree, some without—than any other. Its design and its function must be of a quality that assures students success after transfer, and success in the workplace.

### **Centrality of a Data Focus**

President Pollard has reminded us and the whole College community that “you can't change your data if you don't know your data.” Sometimes it can seem as if we are swimming in an ocean of data; we have so many internal and external reports. Three deliberate efforts this year have made a difference in our institutional focus on data.

The first effort comes in the monthly data focus articles the President provides the Board in her *Monthly Outlook* publication. Each of these has provided a different insight about a key element of the College's students and operations. These included:

- Enrollment: What We Mean When We Talk about the Numbers
- Programs of Study: Who is Enrolled in What
- Performance Accountability Report: Annual Review of Student Progress
- Online Learning: Growth and Digital Options for Teaching and Learning
- Maryland Community Colleges: How Do We Stack Up?
- The College's Jack of All Trades: Workforce Development & Continuing Education
- True Cultural Diversity: Montgomery College Students' Countries of Origin
- Montgomery County Public Schools Graduates Who Attend Montgomery College
- Montgomery College Graduates More than 2,000 Students Each Year
- Montgomery College Is a Major Montgomery County Employer

The second effort was the development of a Board Dashboard, which contains the 10 most important things the Board should know about the College—who our students are and how they are doing. Our Dashboard contains:

- Credit Student Demographics Data
- Noncredit Student Demographics Data
- Credit Students by Method of Instruction
- Enrollment in Precollege Courses
- Student Awards by Ethnicity/Race
- Transfer Students by Completion Level and Ethnicity/Race
- Transfer Students by In-state/Out-of-state and Ethnicity/Race
- Completion by Cohort and Ethnicity/Race
- Student Persistence by Cohort and Ethnicity/Race
- Pell Grants Paid by Ethnicity/Race

The third effort is the Student Success Score Card, announced by the President at her 2015 State of the College Address in April. The Score Card contains important information for everyone, but most especially for faculty and staff. Progress data dominates the Score Card, that is, data that is *actionable*. And these are data broken down by race, gender, and age group, so everyone can concentrate on each demographic group to assure they are all succeeding.

The Score Card contains:

- New Students' Attempts and Completion of "Gateway Courses" in Their First Year
- New Students' Need for Developmental English Coursework and Attempted/Completion in Their First Year
- New Students' Need for Developmental Mathematics Coursework and Attempted/Completion in Their First Year
- New Students' "Return Rates"—Fall-to-Spring and Fall-to-Fall
- Course Pass Rates

- Attainment of Credit-Level “Milestones” by New Students
- Scholarship Recipients
- Expenditures from Unrestricted General Current Fund
- Graduates—Time and Credits to Award
- Students Who Transferred to Four-Year Institutions
- Graduation and Transfer Rates for Fall 2010
- New, Full-Time, Degree- or Certificate-Seeking Students Three Years after Entry
- Four-Year Average of Annual Graduation and Transfer Rates for New, Full-Time, Degree- or Certificate-Seeking Students Three Years after Entry

All of these are tools, each with a different data set, but with the same purpose—to help every member of the Montgomery College community stay focused on students. In these data are important indicators regarding issues that impact student success. We are especially interested in seeing a higher rate of completion—for all students, of every race and ethnicity. With the Board Dashboard giving key indicators about completion focused on the end of the educational journey, the Student Success Score Card provides data that faculty and staff can use to have an impact *during* a student’s journey.

In addition to this Board-level and institution-level view of data, the new academic structure has more deeply engrained a sense of student success built on data analysis in its work. This spirit of attention to data will, no doubt, have a profound impact on student success.

With this collection of useful, Montgomery College-focused data, the Board, and indeed the College community, can say we are coming to know our data. And that is the first step to changing our data.

### **Community-building to Address Non-cognitive Barriers**

As a Board, we have been acutely aware of various non-cognitive barriers to learning and students achieving success. These include family stress, financial problems, competing jobs, transportation, childcare, language barriers, as well as medical, psychiatric, and substance-use problems.

In order to help students complete a degree or certificate, the College must have competence and resources to support students in overcoming non-cognitive barriers. To achieve this distinctive competence, the College must establish mutually beneficial and interdependent partnerships with organizations and businesses that help solve non-cognitive barriers while students attend college.

Conceptually, the Board supports such partnerships, especially in the context of an interactive “college town” that includes and surrounds the three Montgomery College campuses. As this concept develops, there will be opportunities to deepen these partnerships and to explore the feasibility and receptiveness of promoting new

community strategies such as residence models near campuses for students and employees.

## **Looking Ahead**

The College will continue to build on this year's progress in the coming year. We look forward to supporting efforts to "move the needles" of our data reports in a positive direction and we know that the leadership, faculty, and staff of the College will be innovative in their efforts to do so.

In addition, in the coming year, the Board will encourage three specific efforts that support student success:

- Providing even more clarity to different academic programs with an emphasis on guided pathways for students
- Implementing student-centered practices such as on-time registration
- Launching the work of reaccreditation scheduled for 2018

Majors designed with a clear pathway and limited options for students are showing promise in enhancing completion in community colleges across the country. We know a concerted approach at Montgomery College to create such pathways will make a difference.

We salute the College's efforts to implement on-time registration, that is, registration that ends before classes begin. While this might sound like a restriction, it is actually a key principle of starting smart: be registered and be present for class. Again, community colleges are adopting this model across the country. While we know almost every school reports a drop in enrollment during its first year of implementation, the long-term impact is positive for student success. In addition, we are impressed by the efforts College staff have made to encourage students to adapt and improve their academic habits.

Finally, in the coming year, the College launches its work on reaccreditation with a self-study steering committee to be formed and with data collection and analyses over the course of 2016 and into 2017, with a final self-study to be presented to the Board in fall of 2017. This process is another opportunity to understand our successes in student success and our opportunities for improvement.

## **Conclusion**

This was indeed a year focused on students and student success at Montgomery College.

The Board, the College community, and the Montgomery County community can all be proud of the investment made in the community's college, the College that strives every day to empower students to change their lives.