



President's **FOCUS**

Monthly Report to the Board

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Pathways through Montgomery College: Business

The dream of running a business is just one of many that drive Montgomery College business students. With 3,000 students enrolled in the business program each year, a spectrum of ambitions accompanies each semester's cohort, from marketing and entrepreneurship to finance and accounting. In this issue of *President's Focus* I take a closer look at the second largest degree at Montgomery College: business. The program has made some important changes to enable student success and has initiated a variety of extracurricular options that enhance the student experience. The role of faculty advising has been strengthened with increased advising hours, orientation has been made more comprehensive with in-person and online options, and technology tools that improve faculty's knowledge of student progress are being actively used. Several of these strategies parallel the guided pathways approach to improving student retention and completion.

For most students, earning an AA in business at MC is just the beginning. With seven transfer agreements with four-year institutions in Maryland, DC, and online, Montgomery College has designed a business degree that prepares students to pursue a range of professional paths after completing a four-year degree. A large segment of MC business students go on to a four-year institution—445 students in 2014 alone. While the market outlook for business-related jobs in Montgomery County is robust—almost 29,000 total job openings in the business sector are predicted in the next five years—



students are not lulled into complacency. Competition for business jobs requires experience as well as education.

Harold Geneen was the president of a multi-billion dollar company (ITT) when he opined that, “In the business world, everyone is paid in two coins: cash and experience. Take the experience first; the cash will come later.” MC faculty appreciate the value of this adage for 21st-century business students and have created a variety of rich opportunities through which students can gain experience while still in school. These options parallel several of the recommendations that the guided pathways model makes for retention and completion by giving students the chance to apply their classroom skills to real business conditions and building their networks before they leave school.

Two examples of experiential learning in the business program echo the guided pathways recommendations. The Macklin Business Institute (MBI) is an honors program that places business students in cohort honors classes, pays 100 percent of their tuition, and has the students run all the business functions for the MBI Café. The café on the Rockville Campus serves Starbucks coffee with the profits going to support student Enactus projects (discussed below), competitions, and transfer scholarships for the following year’s business graduating class.

Students work up to five hours a week at the café as cashiers, baristas, accountants, operation managers, and marketing directors, developing a range of applied business experience. They contribute an additional five to six hours per week outside the classroom to special projects and a weekly three-hour seminar.

MBI students must also maintain a grade point average of at least 3.4 for the first year in order to remain in the program. The program has been so successful that it has expanded from its 1999 inception as a sophomore program, and now recruits applicants who are still in high school. MBI students are actively involved in extracurricular activities that strengthen their business skills. Some are involved in Enactus, a student-run organization open to all Montgomery College students—linked to the international umbrella organization by the same name—that improves people’s livelihoods through business and entrepreneurial skills. Among the seven projects in which MC’s Enactus chapter is currently engaged is a seven-week skill-building workshop for women in a



local shelter. MBI students also operate the One Hen Project, making over 100 microloans each year to international entrepreneurs engaged in small businesses and farming. Finally, Raptor Tank is a business pitch competition that awarded a total of \$5,000 in seed money last April to help student businesses get off the ground. The award money comes from profits from the MBI Café.

A second example of experiential learning that tracks with the guided pathways' recommendations is the Hillman Entrepreneurs Program. The program helps with retention and completion by creating a learning community of students interested in entrepreneurship that also shares several extracurricular experiences. In *Redesigning America's Community Colleges*, authors Thomas Bailey, Shanna Smith Jaggars, and Davis Jenkins note that studies of learning communities show that "students report feeling more connected to their peers and ... to their instructors; faculty feel that it improves their own pedagogy." Hillman builds on this by providing mentorship, networking-building, and a connection to the University of Maryland, College Park Hillman program. Much like the MBI, Hillman is a competitive program—it had 120 applicants for 30 places last year—and it provides tuition funding (66 percent of student tuition plus a book stipend and a merit scholarship at the end of the first semester). Students must maintain a GPA of 2.8 and are matched with local businesses or government agencies for internships. Since entrepreneurship is central to the program, students visit local businesses on-site and successful entrepreneurs deliver talks on best practices in a required class on entrepreneurship. Hillman differs from MBI in that it is not an honors program and is not limited to business students (although 33 percent are pursuing a degree in business); it welcomes students from other disciplines—engineering and computer science students are commonly attracted to Hillman—giving business students a chance to work closely with students from other disciplines.

Both MBI and the Hillman programs provide students with several advantages on the path to completing the business degree: learning communities, network-building, scholarships, and exposure to the real world of business. According to Bailey et al., these components increase the likelihood of retention and completion by connecting students more tightly to the content of the material they are studying in class, work opportunities post-graduation, and their fellow students.



The role of faculty in student success in the business program has also been enhanced. Just this year, faculty members' office hours were increased from three to five in order to provide more time for advising. Additionally, department chairs are expected to advise under the new academic reorganization. Faculty have also been provided with new technology that allows them to access student records more easily. The new "QlikView" component of MC's data management system allows a faculty member to see who in his/her class is a business major. This information can be critical in steering students toward more intentional academic planning. Certain courses, for example, do not transfer to other schools and so would slow a student's academic progress. Giving faculty this awareness helps them to advise students more thoroughly, keeping in mind the big picture of completion and transfer. Faculty also encourage business students to identify their intended transfer school as early as possible, in order to include the school's requirements in their academic planning.

Information on the requirements of potential transfer schools is provided in a vivid Business Student Orientation video, available on the business program [website](#). This multimedia presentation is a comprehensive introduction to the program with details about requirements and links to information about transfer schools' prerequisites and websites. Students can easily access administrative forms—to declare a major or request a transcript, for example. Pathways worksheets enable students to anticipate what courses they will need, what GPAs, and alternative majors and options for transfer. Also readily accessible and clearly identified is scholarship information at MC and transfer schools. There are also links to MC's online tutoring through Smarthinking as well as in-person accounting tutors. This website is among the most comprehensive and user-friendly sites I have seen.

In addition to faculty and electronic support, the Business Buddies Program works to pair every new business student with an MC "Business Buddy." These pairings allow students to have a peer to talk to for guidance and advice as an informal "buddy" throughout the business program.

Student needs drive much of the decision-making in the business program. Last year when faculty and administrators realized that students were not benefiting from the two-year accounting degree offered by MC, they deleted it as a program of study. The AAS degree that MC had been



offering did not transfer to four-year institutions, nor did it provide sufficient credits to sit for the certified public accountant (CPA) exam. The business program sees students return after earning their four-year degree, in order to prepare for the CPA. They can do this by completing an accounting certificate, which provides the accounting courses and additional credits beyond their four-year degree so that they are eligible to sit for the CPA exam. Making this change in the interest of student success allowed the program to shift resources where they could best serve students.

Guiding students to the classes that best serve their academic goals is the focus of much business faculty energy. Providing students with a roadmap for academic transfer as well as networks and experience for employment are critical to the business program. Learning communities, internships, outreach to local entrepreneurs, orientation, and regular e-mail communication are all elements of the student experience at MC, and have been shown to keep students engaged and motivated. In terms of retention and completion these factors are have been proven effective in steering students in the right direction.

Discussion Questions

1. What information stands out for you in this report?
2. What advice would you give a business student about career opportunities?
3. How do the efforts of the business program faculty impact our success in supporting the 59 percent of students who are not yet counted among our graduates and transfer students?

