



President's **FOCUS**

Monthly Report to the Board

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Pathways through Montgomery College: General Studies

A Montgomery College faculty member recently penned an essay for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in which she reflected on a student's in-class lament: "When am I going to use this [knowledge]?" Her query made me think about the College's recent changes to the general studies program, designed to help our students consider a related question, "How am I going to use this [knowledge]?" In our current economic climate, this is a topic of legitimate concern to most post-secondary educators. In this report, I will focus on general studies (GS) students and what we are doing to make sure they can answer this question about how to apply their education.

GS students are the largest by number at the College and, according to research, may face challenges that can be relieved by the guided pathways approach that I introduced in my previous *President's Focus* reports. Research by the Community College Research Center (CCRC) suggests that for general studies students, "the GS curriculum is perhaps the most confusing and complex program for students to navigate.... Undecided students who enter this track tend to be particularly perplexed by the process of course selection," write the authors of *Redesigning America's Community Colleges*, Thomas Bailey, Shanna Smith Jaggars, and Davis Jenkins. The authors go on to explain how such students are better served by the guided pathways model than by the older "cafeteria" style approach, which can leave them with an excess of credits that do not apply to a specific degree, do not transfer to



another institution, and cost the students more in the end. As Montgomery College focuses its energies on retention and completion while preparing students for a tight job market where competitive skills are essential, this is a good time to take a closer look at how our general studies program might benefit from implementing some of Bailey's paradigms for student success.

The good news is, we have already started. Approximately 12,500 students are declared general studies majors at the College each year, larger than the second most popular degree by about 9,000 students. Several years ago the Middle States Commission on Higher Education made several recommendations about our GS program: increase the academic rigor of the degree, establish more structure to the requirements, and increase the program's coherence. Enrollment patterns were showing that without close academic guidance, general studies students sometimes failed to discover a path that led efficiently to a degree or certificate. At that time, a Montgomery College student could end up with 90 credits and no degree or certificate, while the majority of degrees require close to 60 credits. Such students are also disadvantaged psychologically, say Bailey et al. Students who don't select an academic focus area don't benefit from the motivation that builds when a student has a tangible goal—like a degree focus or a desirable transfer school.

Just this semester several new structures have been put in place at the College to counteract these dynamics. General studies students are being required to choose a core studies plan among four available, and a 60-credit cap has been applied to almost all majors. The first measure is in response to research in several fields that shows general studies students make more progress toward their goals with *some* structure, rather than none. Thus, our faculty created and we are now offering four “core” areas: (1) humanities and arts, (2) social science and health, (3) STEM, and (4) integrative studies. And we ask students to commit to a core by the time they reach the 30-credit point in their studies.

But what about the exploratory value of college? A few points are relevant here. First, all students have room for significant exploration through the general education requirement (32–36 credits). Recall that *general education* refers to courses required of all students to provide breadth and depth for all majors. Additionally, general studies students have seven to 10 credits of electives, depending on their core, which allow them to experiment with new interests and abilities. At the



same time they are reminded by the credit requirements that the exploratory phase has a limit: most students will need a degree, a certificate, or sufficient transfer credits to eventually get a job with a living wage. Second, students can choose to change cores. Research has shown that the *process* of focusing on one path, even if one changes direction along the way, provides students with an awareness of the decision-making process that is valuable to their intellectual development. In our new general studies curriculum, students have the opportunity for exploration, but it is more purposeful as they must complete 15 to 18 credits from a core area. No longer are students cast adrift on a sea of “endless possibilities;” rather, they are thoroughly introduced to several attractive landscapes from which they can choose.

College faculty are central to these efforts to help students decide. They are helping general studies students reflect intentionally on their academic experiences and how they might relate them to a major or a possible career path. In addition to critical advising time with counseling faculty, instructional faculty are experimenting with in-class techniques for getting students to reflect on their learning experiences and how they connect to majors and career paths. We are using all the tools we have to help students refine their goals, track their progress, and incorporate their academic experiences into focused pathways.

‘Intrusive advising’ is a term I like to use in describing the support structure we are putting into place around students. The College no longer waits to notice that students are meandering through their academic experiences. As students approach 24 credits, they are encouraged to set up advising appointments and to select a core, if they have not already done so. Since we have now established requirements for students’ academic decisions—they will need 15 to 18 credits from a single core—there is an implicit timeline built into the process. Since each core has two coordinators, one instructional faculty and one counseling faculty, expertise in academic content and developmental advising are available to each student.

Through tailored advising and reflective academic experiences we are helping general studies students to think about forming an “academic identity,” such as the one that comes pre-packaged when a student chooses a major early on. In addition to increased hours for student-major advising by faculty, we are also experimenting with reflective practices in classroom learning.



Asking general studies students to write about their experiences of engaging academic material—the intellectual skills and processes that are required for thorough inquiry—can illuminate their intellectual interests and inclinations. Such exercises can be valuable in helping students gain insight on their own academic and professional interests. Instructional faculty in general studies across disciplines are already being encouraged to explore such exercises in their lesson planning.

An additional benefit of the new GS program is the opportunity for closer collaboration between instructional and counselling faculty. At many community colleges there is a gulf between the practices of instructional and counseling faculty and Montgomery College is not immune to this. Bailey et al. recommend that this dynamic be dismantled: “advising should be seen as a teaching activity and . . . non-instructional professional staff should collaborate extensively with [instructional] faculty, in order to improve student success.” The new general studies program provides unique opportunities for closer partnerships between instructional and counselling faculty. In fact, the student services and the academic affairs divisions are working diligently to find productive ways to support student success cooperatively through the guided pathways model.

While we are diligently focused on student success, we are also using this opportunity to help our faculty grow. Establishing communities of practice among faculty who are trying new techniques is strategy recommended by Bailey. By grouping faculty together in communities for regular meetings on best practices they end up learning from each other and are more likely to persist—much like students in cores—in change that can seem difficult. The College is currently running such a learning community for 22 faculty members who are piloting the use of e-portfolios by students, another approach for helping students to engage in self-reflective learning and career preparation.

I am proud that the College has enacted important changes to the general studies curriculum in such short order and that we are paying careful attention to the new challenges they may create for some faculty. We are also watching carefully how the new requirements impact student performance: all general studies students must now complete 15 total credits at the 200 level with at least three credits at the 200 level in their selected core. The changes that the College designed were the result of careful consideration of student needs and best practices in retention and completion.



Change can be hard, but if we look at things from the 30,000-foot view, moving our students in the direction that best serves their long-term needs is our primary goal. If we did anything less, we would fall short of empowering our students to change their lives.

Discussion Questions

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

