



President's **FOCUS**

Monthly Report to the Board

October 2015

Pathways into Montgomery College: Student Arrival

We all know the saying, “a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step,” usually credited to the Chinese philosopher Laozi from the sixth century BC. In modern times the message is often used for motivation: just take one step. Don’t be daunted by the length of the entire journey, but make your move.

For many credit students, the college experience can seem like a journey of a thousand miles. This month I’m going to focus on the initial part of that journey because it’s more complex than we often realize. Despite the simplicity of Laozi’s advice, there are some very important decisions that are made in those “first steps” in a college career: how to get financial aid, which courses to register for, what major to select—decisions that can make or break a college career, according to research on community college success. Our credit students who are low-income, first-generation college-attenders, and minority students are the least prepared of all students to manage the complexities of these decisions, and yet they are the most impacted, according to *Redesigning America’s Community Colleges*, a seminal book published this year by authors Thomas Bailey, Shanna Smith Jaggars, and Davis Jenkins of the Community College Research Center at Columbia University.

The good news is that supporting students as they make these decisions can make the critical difference in their long term success. At



Montgomery College, we have been strategic in how and where we provide that assistance in order to guide students onto a successful pathway. But we can still do more. From outreach to application, and advising to course registration, our personnel are constantly considering, “how will this step impact a student’s ultimate success at MC?”

Outreach is, perhaps, the first connection that students have with the College. Sometimes this happens through people: recruiters in high schools, ACES coaches, financial outreach advisers, or friends. MC does an excellent job of seeking out students where they are. Our community engagement centers are located where our students live and work—and have had 5,000 visitors in just under a year. And we understand that reaching students means more than just inspiring them to join the College. It also means conveying some intricate realities about how to pay for college, how to advance developmental skills to the collegiate level, how to begin to choose a major and how to juggle work, study, and other responsibilities. Outreach is layered with vital messaging and information that can ultimately impact a student’s decision about whether to attend MC or even whether to attend college at all. That’s why we have so many different approaches to meet students at the very place where they find themselves financially, emotionally, intellectually, and even logistically.

Because we appreciate that some prospective students learn about MC from secondary sources—from a social media link, an ad on the bus, or a program on MCTV—we are diligent about filling all of our communications with consistent, accessible information about our programs. For that reason we are redesigning our website and exploring an updated branding campaign based on models of best practices. For example, studies of students who try to use community college websites to gather information on academic programs show that students are often disoriented by the array of choices and detailed level of programmatic information. According to Bailey et al., few websites have easy ways to compare program requirements, costs, or transfer paths. In one study reported in *Redesigning America’s Community Colleges*, students at a Detroit college were instructed to use their college’s website to choose four introductory college-level courses that they could take, which would transfer to a specific program at a nearby university. That is a fundamental process all community college students should be able to do. In this case, students scored an



average of only 40 percent correctly. This example is just one in a body of literature on the role of websites as barriers—instead of helpful portals—to successful college enrollment and completion. MC is actively using this knowledge to make our website one that functions optimally to serve student needs.

After outreach, the application process is the next step. Best practices have guided several components that have been shown to keep students engaged, encouraged, and informed at this crucial stage. Two application options are available: in person or online. A \$25 fee is required, though it is waived in several circumstances to incentivize applicant action. In either case, students who apply are assured quickly that they are in the system with a welcome e-mail in advance of their admissions letter. As research in *Redesigning America's Community Colleges* stresses, students who are ambivalent about applying benefit greatly from reassurances that they have taken the right steps.

MC's speedy application process is also reassuring to new students. Within three days of completing the online application, a student's account is activated. Once active, students are provided with the most important tools first: an advising questionnaire to help them start thinking about an academic plan, dates for academic placement testing, course enrollment information, and financial aid information. This is a critical juncture for many students. First-generation college students, minorities, and students from underperforming schools can be at a disadvantage here, according to research. They are suddenly faced with decisions that are interdependent (financial and academic), complex (short-term vs. long-term planning), and often require extensive research to understand their choices and implications. This is where advising is crucial. To get the guidance they need to sort out these varied decisions, students are prompted to make an appointment in the online portal Starfish to meet with an adviser. These advisers are thoroughly trained to guide students in academic placement (that is, interpreting their test scores) and in the creation of an academic plan. They can also be valuable in helping students select a major and choose classes that earn credits toward the field. Extensive research on student success points to advising that is intensive and personalized as providing the most effective long-term contributions to completion. MC stresses advising because we realize its value; our Starfish system allows students to make advising appointments and select the same counselors (as scheduling permits) in order to build



relationships and maximize the impact of sessions. We are also making strides toward training our advisers across disciplines and departments so that they are equally well-versed in academic plans in diverse specialties.

One of the most tangible outcomes of productive advising in the introductory phase is that a student chooses the classes for which he/she will register. The next step—the registration process—can be anxiety-provoking for students with little exposure to college administration. For this reason MC has a team of professionals to walk students through potential challenges: getting on to My MC, submitting financial aid papers, figuring out how to schedule classes around personal and family obligations. For these questions, MC provides professionals at a variety of physical and virtual sites: at Campus Welcome Centers, on our telephone via our Response Center, at Financial Aid offices, and through an online or in-person New Student Orientation. We have staff who speak seven of the most commonly requested foreign languages to help non-native English speakers navigate these steps. With this variety of options, the College is able to serve diverse segments of the population including ACES students, seniors, veterans, transfer students, F-1 students, adult students, and international students, in addition to students who may be a bit behind the curve because of lack of college experience in the family.

MC also has a wide variety of noncredit students and many of them encounter the College in the same way as credit students do. Their educational goals are different and our onboarding processes designed to best meet their needs. The process for them is more self-directed; there are no application or admission steps. Workforce Development & Continuing Education programs are publicized in course schedules, web postings, and at community engagement centers. Because the College has longstanding relationships with industries, students also learn about them through employer referrals. Prospective students then review course and program offerings, contact program staff, and make independent decisions about which courses to take.

In designing our systems for student success—for all students—Montgomery College planning starts at the very beginning, with outreach. If we are intentional about each step along the way—always keeping the student experience at the center—we will serve students optimally.

Several of the best practices for credit student success compliment Laozi's "take one step"



philosophy. Research shows that vulnerable students can be overwhelmed with the complexity of decisions that must be made at the beginning of a college career. For many of these students, their goals can seem a thousand miles away. What MC already does well—and is continuing to improve upon—is helping students to break the journey down into manageable pieces. The very first piece is important because it lays out a guided pathway students may tread in the future. With solid counseling about financial aid options, thoughtful academic planning, and strong campus orientations, their introduction to college can be less confusing and overwhelming and, ultimately, more successful.

Discussion Questions

1. What information stands out for you in this report?
2. Which components of the path into Montgomery College are you most proud of? Which components need to be improved?
3. How does the intake/onboarding process impact our success in supporting the 59 percent of students who are not yet counted among our graduates and transfer students?

