



# President's **FOCUS**

## *Monthly Report to the Board*

September 2015

### **Guided Pathways**

Growing up, my sister and I would sometimes take a journey with our father. I can still remember the fun, the excitement, even the mystery, and, occasionally, the challenges. Even if the journey was just to the other side of Chicago, there was promise of something special—see a relative, spend an afternoon in the library, or play in the park. I did not always know where my father was going or how he knew to get us there, but I trusted he knew the way. And he did. And he got us there.

Life's journeys come in many varieties, many destinations, and many paths. This month, as the new academic year began, I talked to students on all three campuses—many of them new to Montgomery College. I heard their hopes and dreams as they began their educational journeys right here at our College. Ahead of them on their journeys are moments of excitement as they open themselves to new worlds of knowledge. There may be moments of mystery and certainly moments of challenge. But they have put their trust in us. They trust Montgomery College to help them get to their destination.

What kinds of educational pathways do we offer our students?

That is the question on the minds of many community college leaders across the country. The data are clear and tell us that *access* to college—long



the hallmark of the community college movement—is itself insufficient. We have rightfully turned our attention to *success*, or stated in another way, completion. Completing something matters, whether it is a credential such as an associate's degree or a certificate or whether it is transferring to a university to earn a bachelor's degree.

So important is this shift in emphasis that we can say: access without success is failure.

When we shift our attention to student success, we must confront the questions about our pathways. How does a student successfully navigate our offerings from the very first day of the very first class to the very last day of the very last class? Was the path clear when he started? Did she know the path to take? Did he know who could help when he felt lost?

In their book, *Redesigning America's Community Colleges: A Clearer Path to Student Success*, authors Thomas Bailey, Shanna Smith Jaggars, and Davis Jenkins argue that most community colleges could do much better in making educational pathways clear. The three authors are leaders of the Community College Research Center at Columbia University and use their extensive knowledge of community colleges to analyze, critique, and recommend improvements.

One of the critiques offered in *Redesigning America's Community Colleges* is that many community colleges' programs were designed to give students choices—lots of choices. What major would you like? Which courses would you like with that major? When would you like to take those courses? How long would you like to take to finish that program? Having choices, at first, seems like a good thing. Indeed, community colleges have often prided themselves on the choices they offer. But Bailey and his co-authors argue that the typical community college works like a self-serve cafeteria. In such a situation, students have to make choices among seemingly unconnected courses, programs, and support services. Students can pick and choose a little of this and a little of that, and, when there is no clear pathway, no *system* designed for their success, they spend a lot of time—and a lot of money—on an unfinished program, an unfinished goal.

And that, they say, serves no one well.



Bailey recommends that community colleges—and four-year institutions as well—should provide “guided pathways” for students. This means structured academic programs that have a clear path to completion within a coordinated system that provides advising and appropriate student services to support students as well. Bailey and his co-authors acknowledge that many community colleges have innovative faculty and staff who have implemented excellent reforms to address student success. However, small reforms that address just one part of the educational experience do not make sustained improvements because there are structural—systemic—challenges within institutions.

One example recommended by Bailey et al. is the improvement of programs of study to be coherent, easy-to-understand, with well-organized maps. And for students who are still uncertain about their major, they suggest having ready a “default” or “meta” major. In other words, if a student is broadly interested in a field, but not quite certain what to major in, have a series of general courses required by every major in that field for students to take until they decide. That way, they do not waste time or lose credits when they finally do decide.

Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins also recommend steps to help clarify pathways for everyone at the institution. For instructional faculty, they recommend:

- creating maps for all academic programs;
- creating partnerships with transfer institutions and employers; and
- focusing on building skills, concepts, and habits of mind.

For student services faculty and staff, Bailey et al. recommend:

- working with instructional faculty to design a mandatory process for program exploration and selection; and
- implementing e-advising tools to facilitate monitoring and support for student progress along their pathways.

How clear are the pathways at Montgomery College?



I know we are doing many things right and many things well. Indeed, we are already doing some of the things Bailey et al. recommend. And last year, nearly 3,000 students graduated from Montgomery College—an all-time record for the College. Thousands of students transfer to four-year institutions to pursue bachelor's degrees every year. And thousands of our students become contributing members of our local workforce in many different industries.

Good things are happening at Montgomery College.

When I dig a little deeper, however, I find numbers that get my attention. Those graduates with degrees and certificates and those transfer students add up to 41 percent of all of our students! I have to ask about the other 59 percent. Where are they? What is happening to them? And does the critique of Bailey about the community college self-serve cafeteria model apply to us?

The foundation behind guided pathways is to create a *system* in which students can make better choices, embark on a clear path of courses, receive the support they need, and finish sooner. These are all goals that every member of the Montgomery College community can support. To paraphrase Kay McClenney of the Center for Community College Student Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin, the *integrated system* of academic programs and supports at Montgomery College is built to get what we are getting—41 percent success. If we want to change that, we have to address our *system*. Let me be clear: I am extremely proud of every single student success story. I am proud of the 41 percent who have succeeded. But I lose sleep thinking about the 59 percent.

Earlier this year, Santa Fe College in Florida was awarded the 2015 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence. President Jackson Sasser attributes the success of Santa Fe—which has a combined graduation and transfer rate of 62 percent—to a culture of excellence. He said, “It’s about respect for one person at a time.” Even with all their success, Dr. Sasser is still concentrating on those who are not yet succeeding. That is the same spirit I wish for us: that we not rest until every student succeeds.



Over the course of this year, we need to have a community conversation about our pathways here at Montgomery College. What do students see when they look at our 130 programs of study and our Catalog with over 1,300 courses? Can they navigate a major? Can they find the help they need? Can they finish their goals in a reasonable amount of time? Do all of our pieces fit together in one integrated system? We may learn a lot about ourselves in this conversation. Some of the answers should engender great pride. Some of the answers might make us feel uncomfortable, but we must confront the questions. For, in the end, this is not a conversation about us so much as it is a conversation about our students and our mission—our mission to empower our students to change their lives. And until 100 percent of our students are college completers, we have work to do. Our students have put their trust in us—as I trusted my father—to help them make their journeys. As members of the community college movement, we must strive for the day when we can take pride not only in the *access* we provide, but also in the *success* our students achieve.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What information stands out for you in this report?
2. What are examples of well-designed guided pathways at Montgomery College?
3. How do we reach the 59 percent of students who are not yet counted among our graduates and transfer students?

