



President's **FOCUS**

Monthly Report to the Board

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Student Retention: The Role of Academic Support

While the College prides itself on giving students financial and social support that helps keep them enrolled, ultimately academic progress is at the heart of their success. The most structured academic support programs keep careful track of whether students are retained from one semester to the next and one year to the next. The ACES program and Achieving the Promise Academy (ATPA) can point to specific data that indicate that their services boost retention. In fact, the College's efforts around data collection—inspired by our membership in the Achieving the Dream network—have empowered more people to measure connections between their programs and metrics like retention.

Since the College has used the Student Success Score Card to track retention for several years now, it provides a good baseline for comparison to students using academic support programs. The latest fall-to-fall retention data for all students is 65.5 percent. For fall-to-spring those numbers are higher: 80 percent. Comparisons to support programs can be complex since they do not all track retention in the same ways. Additionally, the support programs often recruit—or attract—students who are already “at risk” for non-completion due to factors such as a low GPA, being a first-generation student, or being low income. With these caveats in mind, the retention data for several support programs still reveal their positive impact.

Most of you are already familiar with ACES, which provides academic support, as well as other forms of social support and financial



support, to participants. ACES students continue to have higher first year fall-to-fall retention rates than other new students at MC. For instance, the ACES 2014 cohort had a fall-to-fall retention rate of 85 percent compared to 63 percent for all first-year students at MC that year. The following year, the cohort had a retention rate of 84 percent compared to 65 percent for all first-year MC students. Finally, in 2016 the ACES cohort retention rate of 76 percent compared to 66 percent for all first-year MC students in that year. While it may be impossible to separate out which parts of ACES help students stay enrolled, the academic support element is undoubtedly significant. In fact, ACES students for three consecutive years had higher course pass rates than other first-year, non-ACES students. The biggest difference was seen in the 2014 cohort, which had an 82 percent course pass rate, when compared to 75 percent for other first-year students. That gap has narrowed in subsequent years, to only two points, which may reflect the addition of other support mechanisms being introduced to the wider student population.

Much like ACES, Achieving the Promise Academy (ATPA) is a highly structured program that includes weekly check-ins with coaches who provide one-on-one guidance and monitoring of academic progress. Coaches also direct students to academic support resources such as the learning centers when they are enrolled in high DFW courses or report having struggled with a subject in the past. Such interventions often connect students with the help they need before there is a penalty to their GPA or they decide to withdraw. Checking in with the same person each week is one of the hallmarks of the program, with research on mentoring suggesting that such relationships are critical to student investment in their academics. ATPA one-on-one coaches also provide academic support, as do the embedded coaches who attend the classes in which students are enrolled and are available for tutoring. The most recent cohort of ATPA student who enrolled in fall of 2018 has a retention rate of 90 percent, while retention of spring 2018 enrollees measures 88 percent. Earlier ATPA rates are similarly impressive: spring 2017 (79 percent) and fall 2017 (84 percent) compared to significantly lower rates for students not enrolled in ATPA. This is despite the reality that ATPA students are often those facing multiple challenges in reaching their full potential.

Several other less intensive programs, Boys to Men, for example, as well as MC learning centers, and discipline-based tutoring and mentoring may not always collect retention data in ways that can be compared comprehensively. However, reports from mentors and tutors suggest that these programs provide some combination of mentoring and academic assistance that help students



stay on track. When compared to the retention rates for MC students who do not participate, the impact of these programs is notable.

Boys to Men, a mentoring program for African American male students, was implemented to support this group, which struggles with the lowest retention rates of all MC students when disaggregated by race and gender. Targeted interventions such as this one are often added to other existing academic supports to increase feelings of community among students and have shown promising results. Literature on retention suggests that relationships that encourage academic discipline and/or community belonging can motivate students to stay enrolled. The Maryland Male Students of Color summit is another MC activity that works to build community and focus students on academic achievement.

Several other options for tutoring and academic support that are likely to promote their academic success can be found on all three campuses including the Mathematics Learning Center at the Takoma Park/Silver Spring Campus, the Ackerman Learning Center at the Rockville Campus, and the Math, Accounting, Physics, and Engineering Learning (MAPEL) Center on the Germantown Campus are all places that offer academic support. There are also virtual tutoring options in which students interact with a tutor via Skype. The 2018 Learning Centers' annual report includes retention data based on the 1,559 students who received help from a tutor at one of these sites, versus 9,877 students who did not. The spring-to-fall retention rates for the tutored group was 77 percent, while the rate for the non-tutored group was 70 percent, suggesting that tutoring helped students stay engaged and perform well. Again, these retention rates show a pattern when linked to academic performance. Data from the report showed that 80 percent of students who were tutored at a learning center received an A, B, or C in the class, compared to only 67 percent who did not seek help.

A number of other programs at the College provide structures that likely strengthen academic performance and, anecdotally, keep students engaged, and, thus, more likely to stay in school. The number of award-winning students who have participated in academic learning experiences such as Hillman Entrepreneurs, Renaissance Scholars, Engineers Without Borders, and the NASA Swarmathon, among others, is marked. Whether their academics were strengthened by participation in the groups, or they joined because they were academically oriented at the start is difficult to assess. *Redesigning America's Community Colleges* by Thomas Bailey, Shanna Smith



Jaggars, and Davis Jenkins acknowledges that, “available research on tutoring and supplemental instruction is plagued by self-selection issues, making it difficult to estimate the strength of these services’ positive impacts, although qualitative and correlational studies consistently show positive results.” Regardless, it appears that students who have increased exposure to academics—whether through tutoring, coaching, extra-curricular events, or mentoring—stay in school more often than those who do not. When the College offers academic support programs of quality and substance, it is another powerful tool for enhancing student success and closing the achievement gap.

