AMP Community/Non-Profit Focus Group Feedback
November 12, 2015

Note: the arrow symbol ➢indicates a quotation or paraphrase from a focus group participant.

Focus Group Leaders:
Dr. Deborah Preston, Dean of Arts and Academic Master Plan Leader
Mr. Ken Nelson, Director, Business and Community Outreach, WDCE
Claudia Greer (note-taker), Office of the Deans, Rockville

Attending in addition to group leaders:
Alex Boyle, Foundation Board
Yvette Butler, Gap Busters, Inc.
Jill Cornish, Rockville Senior Citizens Association
Arva Jackson, Primary Care Coalition
Cynthia L. James, Community Bridges
Candace Kattar, Identity, Inc.
Jay Kenney, Montgomery County Area Agency on Aging
Nancy Leopold, College Tracks
Shane Rock, Interfaith Works
Kris Trible, Future Link

The session began with introductions from attendees, all of whom represented community groups associated with interests of Montgomery College students.

Reason for focus group: While we have the MC 2020, strategic plan, we don't have a plan that focuses specifically on academics. The AMP will get us focused for the next 5 to 10 years. A master plan is a requirement of out accreditors. An organization of our size must have a plan that addresses what we're doing, what we should keep doing, what we should stop doing.

What do our community partners need from our college?

Deborah said we want our students to be productive, engaged citizens when they leave our college. Ken added that we want to prepare students for citizenship as well as for employment.

What trends do you see in your community that will require education providers to be responsive?

➢ We work with the Latino community. We see older children, age 17, who are not enrolling in school, and they are way behind in their academics. It's important to have programs for older students where they can learn a language and skill. They are doing menial jobs now and need to develop.

➢ We serve high school students working toward college admission. We see students who are not going to make it out of ESOL. They don't do well in Accuplacer, and they have to pay out of pocket for ESOL courses. They need intensive English. They need to be subsidized, say by a training agency. Most of them need a positive cash flow. Some students are with a family, but some are on their own. Many non-credit programs are not eligible for Federal aid.

DP: What are the access points to these students, who maybe not even be thinking of college.
    Spanish radio stations
    Community centers

➢More students don't even have DACA—students who could have work permit. There's not a renewal or expansion of that program.

➢Three main barriers are money, English, and immigration status. Those who master English quickly can gain access, but many others fall behind.

Other trends.

➢Children may have grown up in a culture where education was not considered particularly important. Boys may have had access to college but not girls, or the oldest may have had access but not younger siblings. For all of these groups, getting connected to the college is essential.

➢We have an increasing number of elderly citizens in Montgomery County, and many are interested in continuing education. We need programs that meet their needs. We need to communicate to people in all the way into their 80s and beyond. Some want a degree, and some want lifelong learning. Some would prefer to audit classes, but they are looking for a real education. Senior employment is an issue. The school needs to offer a "senior employment gateway" for seniors who need to "re-wire, not retire."

➢ There needs to be some push to enable 17-year-olds to consider MC more seriously. Students think they failed if they come to MC. That's wrong. We need to communicate better.

➢ We can't forget the parental population. Kids don't always trust the Welcome Center. Parents don't speak English and they don't understand financial aid. If children see their parents learning they will be inclined to learn. We need support services for parents and their language issues—which include French and other languages, not only Spanish. You need organizers who live and work in those communities. There need to be more foot soldiers. Be more community-organizing based.

➢ Have student-driven initiatives focused on peer communication among students and between students and alums who are mostly from this area. There are savvy people that come to MC and then move on. Could they serve as mentors to those who are here? Peer mentoring is a great way to help students. Colleges should support mentoring.

➢ Create guided pathways. As it exists now, the information on the MC website changes and is jargon-laden. MYMC is very busy. Think of your system as the millenial system. Guided pathways have clear paths to completing specific programs. Strengthening the pathway may be the way to go.

➢ Accuplacer is a terrible test. For students who score low, the odds of getting through developmental courses to credit-bearing courses is low. There are community colleges that have helped students move on to credit courses through co-requisite academic supports (such as in the Accelerated Learning Program at Community College of Baltimore County).

➢ The cultural competency of faculty needs work, particularly in relation to the challenges faced by African American males. How teachers present themselves is very significant. When a teacher sees a student, what are the expectations of that student? There is racial bias. There can also be attitude issues among adults on a campus who explain problems by blaming the students. How a teacher speaks affects the students.

Yvette Butler noted that there is a curriculum on cultural competency that can change expectations of individuals. She pointed to the MCPS Study Circles.
http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/studycircles/

➢ Community leaders should have someone at the college to talk to who can tap their clients into resources. They've learned about contacts informally, but communication is needed.

➢ It seems that the college has grown too dramatically to help students at the lowest levels. What does MC do with students who are struggling? Do you have a way of measuring how you're moving students toward graduation?

Dr. Preston explained that when a student places into developmental, she has 4 attempts to pass a course and move beyond. We have improved our completion rates, but they are still lower than we would like. Some students want to pursue careers that involve strong math skills, but they need to be advised. We should make sure faculty and advisors know what careers don't require high levels of math. When students get to the end of that cycle, how do we route them to another program so that we don't keep taking students' money and making them feel like failures.

There are also undiagnosed learning disabilities, and the test diagnosing them is expensive.

Dr. Pollard has asked MC to develop a "scorecard" to pay attention to retention. The AMP will pay attention to the direction professional development will go. We're unionized. We're stepping up what we ask faculty to do. We are getting all faculty to be trained as advisors.

Someone suggested having "embedded advisors" and support. Deborah Preston reported that this has had mixed success. It depends on the faculty member. Coaches should be part of the

academic process; every student should have an advisor. However, that's a challenge at MC given the large student body.

What qualities should staff have to help ensure student success? Experience, demonstrable skill in working with students.

➢ Textbooks can be very expensive;

DP: We're giving serious thought to the cost of texts and other materials. We've been going toward OERs. A couple of disciplines are advertising "textbook free" materials.

What are major unmet needs in the community that the College can be a resource toward?

➢ Non-profits should be more connected with the college. We should look with students on how to help them be more successful. When we send one of our youth to MC, we want to send them ready to learn.

➢ We have qualitative and quantitative data on MC students. We can beta test your pilot programs. Our students need access to other social services—health insurance, food stamps, housing.

Collaborative community center. We may have a computer lab that enables students to take online classes. We can push education out into the community rather than have students coming to the campus. We can do this in a culturally appropriate way. We're teaching computer skills.

Dr. Preston: We have three degrees that are available entirely online. Earlier attrition rates for online education have leveled off.

➢Anybody should be allowed to take just about any class online.

Dr. Preston: we need some sort of better organized mentoring, coaching umbrella at the college. We have pockets of excellence such as Boys to Men and Achieving the Promise Academy. These programs don't talk to each other and pool resources. We may need to create a council organization so we have standards and best practices for coaching and mentoring. Everyone at this table can help and advise us.

➢ We need sources of financial assistance. Partner with businesses that can give scholarships to whomever they wish. Be more creative about assistance for undocumented students in particular. What about students who leave MC, want to return, but have all these financial obligations? They have outstanding balances. How do students know how to navigate that. MC has payment plans, but few students know about them.

➢ There needs to be private funding, or a special pot of money for those who are undocumented. Students who are not Dreamers or DACA face out-of-state expenses.

➢ Build a coalition to come together, share best practices. You have to have initial conversations around poverty—those are initial challenges. There are students who are going undiagnosed—you can bring social workers as well.