



Acting President's Focus

Monthly Report to the Board

September 2018

Student Retention

At the College's 2018 Fall Opening Meeting, I spoke to faculty and staff about the importance of welcoming new students to the College. The theme of the meeting was Student Success Starts on Day One. We often think about "retention" as the process of keeping students enrolled from one semester to the next. However, we know that some students leave the College without even finishing their first course, so efforts and activities affecting retention have an impact, right from the start. Keeping students in class even when they experience academic difficulties, personal strife, financial challenges, or confusion about their next steps is a team effort. In many ways retention is an *outcome* itself—one that paves the way to completion. Thus, it must be nurtured at every step along the way, from admissions to progression to transfer or graduation. This year my monthly reports—and later, those of Dr. Pollard—will place a detailed focus on how retention is integrated into our work across the College. We will also examine national trends in retention and implications for best practices.

First let's look at the College's success at retaining students as captured in the Student Success Score Card. The percentage of students that return to the College after the previous semester (Fall-to-Spring) has climbed nine percentage points over the last four years, peaking at 80 percent in the most recent cohort. Fall-to-Fall rates are almost always lower as they span two semesters, but they have also been growing: from 60 percent to 66 percent at last measure, over the last four years. The most recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that Fall-to Fall retention at two-year public colleges averages 62 percent.



The differences in retention rates among ethnic groups at MC are relatively small—generally only two to four percentage points between groups. But the College pays close attention to these differences in order to identify groups that might need specialized interventions. The Boys to Men program, for example, specifically serves African American males, whose retention rates, as well as completion rates tend to be lower than other groups. Only 11 percent of African American males at the College graduates with an associate's degree in three years. This is well below rates for white students (20 percent), Asian students (23 percent) and Hispanic students (14 percent). Data regarding Boys to Men participants shows that they have higher GPAs and retention rates over two semesters than those who are not mentored. The annual Maryland Male Students of Color event, being held at the College again this year, is another targeted intervention that includes a focus on retention.

Research on retention shows that students stay enrolled when they feel part of a community. Multiple programs at the College encourage this. Some are based on specific interests or areas of study such as the Macklin Business Institute, Renaissance Scholars, honors classes, and other cohort learning communities. Activities that draw students into extracurricular activities also create a cohesion that likely enhances retention, for example, alternative spring breaks, Raptor Tank competition, the Beacon Honors conference, the NASA Swarmathon, among many others.

Faculty interest in student success has been identified by students as a factor that motivates them. Successful students often cite a particular relationship with a faculty member or staff member as a driver in their commitment to progress. Programs such as Achieving the Promise (ATPA) and Achieving Collegiate Excellence and Success (ACES) track retention rates carefully in order to gain insights on how effective their programs are.

Since developmental classes are often cited as barriers to retention (see, for instance, Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins' *Redesigning America's Community Colleges*), recent pilot programs that place MC students in credit-bearing classes with embedded tutors have sought to reduce the number of students who may feel “stuck” in developmental classes and not return. Additionally, students who are using their Pell grants to pay for developmental classes—which don't earn them credits—are less likely to have sufficient funds to complete in the long run.



Helping students who fail to progress academically, and thus lose their financial aid is another area of retention work. The College is making increased efforts to alert students earlier when they may be in danger of losing funding, and to help them appeal in cases where they do.

Recent research suggests that first-generation students are at increased risk of leaving college after enrolling. The 2018 Higher Education Research Digest published a study by ACT, which showed that first-generation students show a higher tendency to leave school in their second year. Their data show a 15-percent gap between first-generation students and those whose parents had at least a bachelor's degree. Transfer rates were also higher for those with a parent who completed college, when compared to first generation students. (Community college students were also more likely to drop out than students at four year colleges.) Such trends impress upon us the special needs of first generation students, a factor that students can report when applying to the College.

Keeping students enrolled from one semester to the next is just one challenge in the area of retention. Preparing students to transfer—if that is their goal—is another. The College has several efforts in place to make students aware of transfer earlier by increased focus on transfer planning and transfer fairs. The College's recently redesigned transfer planning website and an increase in transfer agreements with other schools has improved students' ability to be more proactive in planning. Making faculty and staff more cognizant of the needs of transfer planning for students is another area of attention. Students need to know early that their coursework will fill the requirements of their intended transfer-school. They also need assistance in securing funding needed to pay for the next phase of their academic journey. For those students who plan to move directly to the job market, connecting them to internships or apprenticeships that can facilitate this should be seen as another retention strategy.

Over the years the College has instituted diverse initiatives aimed at improving retention. The "Pay on Time" initiative, for example, was designed to urge earlier planning for enrollment and registration. Additional steps that have emphasized early planning—such as meeting with counselors and advisors—are aimed to aid retention.

Finally, the College is persistent in its tracking of students who are not retained, in order to understand the decisions that led to this path. The Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness



conducts a survey of such students to determine how the College might adapt its strategies to better meet their needs.

Retention is a process, rather than a single point in time. It involves both institutional practices and personal interventions. Combining these to support students so that they can stay enrolled, make academic progress, and eventually find skilled jobs is the ultimate aim. Attention to ways in which the College can support students in this process involves academic experts, student affairs support, and the efforts of faculty and staff. As we explore these roles more closely this year, I expect we will discover new insights about what retention strategies work best and how the College can strengthen them.

