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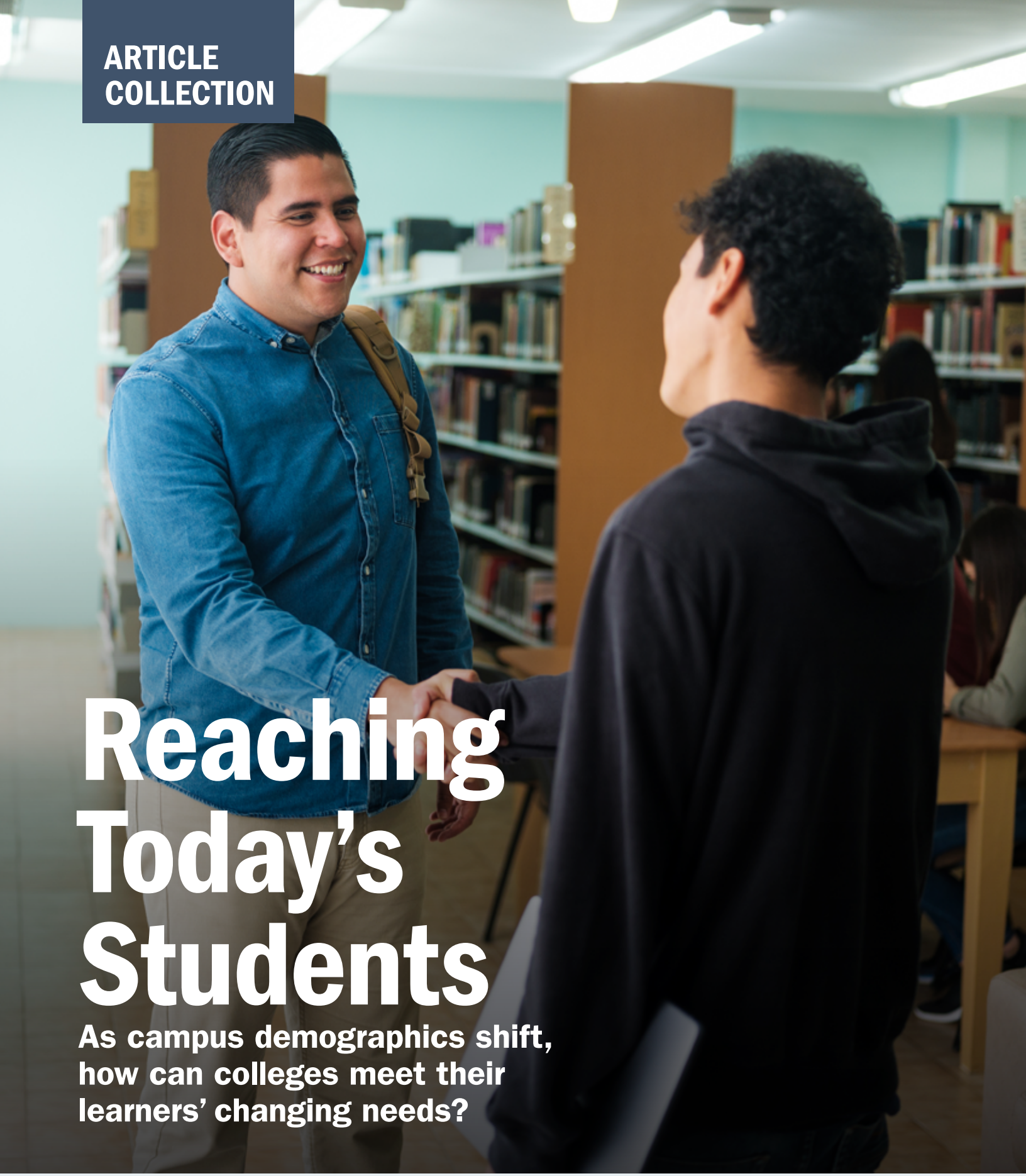

Reaching Today's Students

As campus demographics shift, how can colleges meet their learners' changing needs?

WITH SUPPORT FROM NJIT New Jersey Institute of Technology

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION®

Talent is Everywhere, but Opportunity is Not!

The COVID-19 pandemic brought many challenges to higher education, accelerated some changes that had already begun, and shined a spotlight on institutional weaknesses and student vulnerabilities. Not long ago, I was asked if I had seen new barriers emerge as a result of the pandemic or if it was a catalyst for colleges and universities to reimagine their existing structures or operating models and remove barriers to student success. The answer to that question was yes to both.

The pandemic shined a spotlight on inequality and intolerance.

Who suffered most in higher education? It was the students who already were at a socioeconomic disadvantage. Those students often didn't have the computers, internet access, or spaces that were conducive to remote learning and collaboration. Without a computer, a reliable Wi-Fi connection, and a quiet space in which to work, how can you succeed as a remote learner?

Which jobs went away most quickly during the pandemic? The lower-wage jobs in the service industries disappeared, and when students from lower-income families have job losses within those families, they are not able to persist in their studies for economic reasons. In fact, many of these students must look for a job to make up losses in family income when their parents become unemployed.

Beyond these challenges, we also experienced the death of George Floyd, the targeting of Asian-Americans with violence and hate, and many other examples of overt bigotry and xenophobia, and we must assure that our universities are places of tolerance and respect for difference.

The pandemic also propelled us into the future out of necessity. It supercharged a digital revolution in higher education that is changing not just the way we deliver educational programming but how we should be looking at the entire educational enterprise.

That has made it abundantly clear that we must make the investments necessary to create the technological and physical infrastructure that will enable our core enterprises to be unbounded by space or time. This means much more than delivering classes in online or hybrid modes. It relates to what type of content is available, what sort of technology is accessible, how collaboration is accomplished, and how learning is assessed in real-time and over an extended period. We are moving well beyond the days of sitting in a lecture hall and listening to a professor speak for an hour and then going to the library to read a textbook. This requires investment in physical and digital infrastructure, in networks and software and emerging technologies. Making these investments opens the world for business and industry partnerships, makes possible academic and research collaborations of monumental scope, and enables us to serve the needs of learners from around the world.

"It is our responsibility to make sure that our universities are accessible to students of all backgrounds"

It is our responsibility to make sure that our universities are accessible to students of all backgrounds, including those with limited financial means; that those students have the support they need to reach their goals; and that we are welcoming and inclusive communities where everyone is afforded the opportunities and the respect they deserve.

At New Jersey Institute of Technology, that has meant reaching out into the community to help prepare high school students to pursue a STEM degree through programs like our Math Success Initiative, our Forensic Science Initiative, our Upward Bound program, and other pre-college programs. It also includes our new community college pre-engineering network initiative that will strengthen the pathway and readiness for traditionally underserved students to pursue a STEM degree. We also have incorporated ESG into our strategic planning, have devoted additional resources to student support, and have launched a number of new diversity and inclusion efforts.

The higher education landscape, the people we serve, and the challenges we face have been evolving for some time, but the pandemic acted as an accelerant and showed us both our strengths and deficiencies. Any institution that does not make an honest self assessment and take the steps necessary to embrace the challenges ahead is doing itself and its students a disservice.

Teik C. Lim
NJIT President

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION®

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As campus demographics shift, how can colleges meet their learners' changing needs?

Colleges have accepted — and are continuing to accept — greater numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The pandemic exposed and deepened the challenges these students face. How are institutions shifting priorities and developing strategies to support more low-income, first-generation, adult students, and students of color?

It's critical to quickly identify the students most in need of assistance, take a holistic approach, and offer a range of supports.

Developing those policies and programs isn't easy — or quick — but doing so clearly helps students overcome obstacles and graduate expeditiously. But getting the right support to students remains challenging. This *Chronicle* collection features news articles that describe various steps colleges are undertaking to better serve their students.

Cover photo by iStock

For questions or comments about the collection, email ci@chronicle.com

The Student-Success Challenge

Engineering a better college experience requires more than tinkering around the edges.

BY BETH MCMURTRIE

RICARDO REY FOR THE CHRONICLE

Juan Esteban Silva Menendez had one semester left until he would be armed with a bachelor's degree in biomedical sciences and on his way to a career in dentistry. Then his mother was diagnosed with uterine cancer early this year, during a trip to her native Colombia, and his life began to come apart.

At first, Menendez thought he could power through. When he got a few low C's, he didn't sweat it, since he often stumbled in the first few weeks of class. He knew he would get check-in emails from Adrienne Pollard, in the University of South Florida's Office of Academic Advocacy. Her dashboard signaled which students were struggling academically, prompting her to send friendly messages along the lines of, Hey, I see that you're having some trouble in this class; here are a few resources you might want to check out.

Menendez ignored the messages, as he had done before. "I grew up with: your problem, you fix it, do not ask for help," he says of his traditional upbringing in Colombia and later the United States. Universities, to him, were like government offices: uncaring bureaucracies.

Raising graduation rates takes a culture shift — and a lot more.

But as his family pressures increased, Menendez found himself shaking uncontrollably. Sometimes he would step out of class to throw up. Finally, in March, he sent Pollard two emails and left a voice mail for good measure. She got back to him within hours, setting up a meeting the next morning. Within days he had a case manager and access to a host of services, including mental-health counseling. Equally important, Pollard explained how to petition to withdraw from several of his courses without any academic or financial penalties, and finish in the fall.

For more than a decade USF has been working to catch students like Menendez before their problems snowball. That takes more than adding a layer of support to the existing university structure. Rather, USF — along with a growing number of large, diverse public institutions — is trying to engineer a better student experience by improving communication across offices, reorienting jobs, and creating new entities, like the Office of Academic Advocacy. This kind of change isn't easy, nor does it come without challenges, but it has shown results: USF has boosted its four-year

graduation rates by 33 percentage points since 2009. Even so, getting the right help to every struggling student is hard.

Although the services that helped Menendez had been at his disposal all along, he says he was either unaware of them or didn't think they applied to him. The byzantine university bureaucracy — both real and imagined — had blocked his path. Without a guide, he believes, he probably would have wrecked his GPA and damaged his chances for graduate school.

"Ms. Pollard served as the first domino in a Rube Goldberg machine," he says. She was "like a cool aunt who comes in and says, everything is going to be fine. I've got you. She was an authority figure I could look up to and not feel afraid."

Universities, large public ones in particular, have traditionally treated college like a self-serve buffet. Students chose which courses to take and what services to tap into. They were expected to navigate complex systems, from financial aid and course registration to housing, advising, tutoring, and career planning. They were left to find friends on their own in classes, clubs, and residence halls.

Unsurprisingly, many ran into problems. They were locked out of course registration for unpaid fines. They racked up more credit hours — and thus more bills — than they needed to graduate because they switched majors late in their academic career, or enrolled in the wrong prerequisites. They struggled needlessly in their classes because they weren't aware of academic-support services or thought they were intended for others. They failed to connect with classmates on sprawling campuses where they might not see the same faces in a series of unconnected courses.

Decades into what has become known as the student-success movement, many of those barriers remain. One recent study of student transcripts found that a third of those who had completed the academic requirements of college but never earned their degree were missing a major-specific course, and one in 10 were derailed by small problems, such as a financial hold because of a parking fine. These stumbling blocks disproportionately affect students from low-income backgrounds, first-generation students, and students of color.

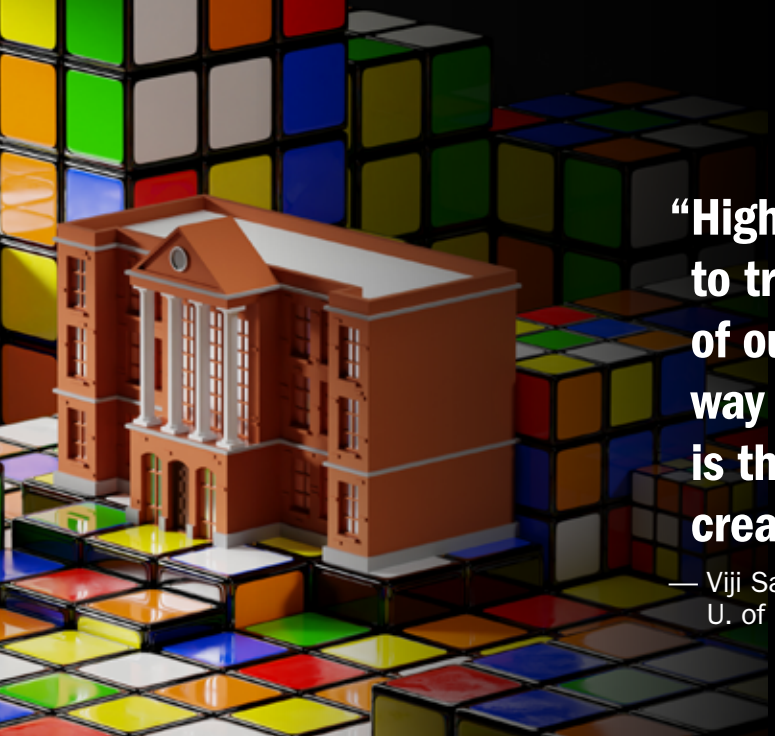
Those barriers also carry a substantial collective cost. While the vast majority of students enter college expecting to graduate in four years, fewer than half do and less than 65 percent graduate in six. Those figures are even lower for Black and Hispanic students. Given the growing cost of a degree, and the fact that it is shouldered by a student body that is increasingly lower-income, racially and ethnically diverse, and first generation, these rates remain indefensibly low, reformers argue.

Public universities are under increased pressure to fix those problems. The Florida Legislature is one of more than two dozen state legislative bodies to use performance-based funding, measuring its institutions on how quickly they get students through college, among other things. Grant makers, too, are calling on universities to close retention, graduation, and equity gaps. And as many states expect their college-aged populations to drop, holding on to students once they're enrolled is a matter of institutional survival.

Timothy M. Renick, who runs Georgia State University's National Institute for Student Success, where he advises about 40 colleges, says speaking of reforms in terms of money saved clarifies the existential nature of what's at stake for students and for colleges. He recently gave a presentation to a college in the Midwest that is enrolling a more diverse student body even as it faces a graduation gap of 20 percent between white and Black students. "That's a moral issue they're facing," he says. "But also a revenue issue."

Why do universities struggle to do something that's clearly in both the public interest and their own? Why, decades into the movement, do so many universities have ad-hoc advising systems, overly complex academic programs, and uncoordinated support services?

The answers are as complicated as the problem. Large universities, student-success experts often say, were structured more to support the people working at the institution than the students they serve. Severe staffing shortages and deepening stu-



"Higher education was originally designed to train the elite, and in many ways a lot of our policies and procedures and the way we think about challenging students is that same kind of narrative, of the cream will rise to the top."

— Viji Sathy, associate dean,
U. of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

dent needs — both driven by the pandemic — have presented significant challenges during the last couple of years. There's also a cultural reason: a sink-or-swim mentality, born when college served a smaller, more elite population, that continues to linger.

"Higher education was originally designed to train the elite, and in many ways a lot of our policies and procedures and the way we think about challenging students is that same kind of narrative, of the cream will rise to the top," says Viji Sathy, associate dean of evaluation and assessment in the Office of Undergraduate Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and a longtime advocate for a more inclusive approach to teaching. "That's really problematic when the landscape of higher education has changed dramatically."

Given how difficult it can be to change that dynamic, it's helpful to look at institutions, like USF, that have made significant strides. The university's experiences illustrate how engineering a shift in culture, priorities, and systems can take years, requires clear and consistent direction, and is accelerated by external drivers. Success also brings its own tensions and trade-offs.

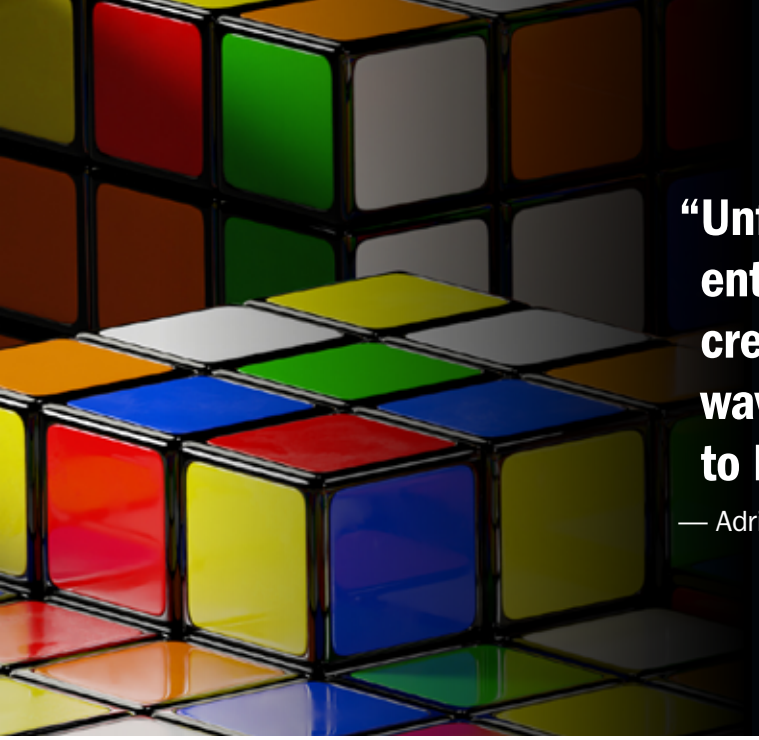
USF's strategies reflect the latest thinking on student success, namely that universities must take a holistic approach. They must quickly identify the students most in need of help and offer a range of supports that enable them to overcome obstacles and earn a degree as expeditiously as possible.

Such changes are not only necessary, but increasingly anticipated by today's students, says Bridget Burns, chief executive officer of the University Innovation Alliance, a collection of large, diverse, public research universities that has made significant inroads testing out such interventions.

"Students have more exposure to user-centered design in the real world than ever before," she notes. "We have more things offered to us that are designed around our needs in everyday society, and so they are highly sensitive to bad design in a way that no prior generation has been."

But some professors question whether a focus on time-to-degree ignores other measures of academic quality, such as having a sufficient number of full-time faculty members and advisers available to mentor students. And they worry that instructors may feel pressured to pass struggling students or encourage them to stick with majors that don't fit if it means racking up excess credit hours. Tracking students raises the specter of Big Brother monitoring their every move through card swipes and clicks in the learning-management system.

Colleges may also make substantial investments in predictive- and learning-analytics systems without having the staffing, or the willpower, to confront the problems that they surface, experts say, such as getting students the academic support they need.



"Unfortunately, you don't really change entrenched systems that have been created over hundreds of years by waving a wand and saying, It's going to happen next year."

— Adrianna Kezar, student-success scholar

"Unfortunately, you don't really change entrenched systems that have been created over hundreds of years by waving a wand and saying, It's going to happen next year," says Adrianna Kezar, a professor of leadership and director of the Pullias Center for Higher Education at the University of Southern California, and a longtime researcher of student-success strategies. "There's always been this idea that we have to do this urgently, instead of doing it right."

Once nicknamed "U Stay Forever," USF has won state and national recognition for significantly raising its four- and six-year graduation rates while largely eliminating completion gaps by income, race, and ethnicity. It has done so by bringing different divisions under one umbrella to better coordinate their operations; using analytics to identify those students most in need of attention; promoting a campus culture in which faculty and staff are encouraged to remove barriers to graduation, and students to seek help; and creating a network of services and structures to jump on problems as they surface. While USF admits students with higher GPAs and SAT scores than it did a decade ago, the university attributes much of the increase in graduation rates to these efforts.

Those structures include the Office of Academic Advocacy, which tracks struggling students like Menendez and takes a case-management approach to their support. To meet systemic challenges, such as unnecessary holds stopping students' progress to a degree, the university's Persistence Committee brings together representatives from more than a dozen offices, including financial aid and the registrar, to recommend solutions. A centrally located Academic Success Center combines previously dispersed support services, such as tutoring, making it easier for students to seek help. And students themselves increasingly play an active role through peer-mentoring programs and enhanced residence-life programming.

Around 2009, when the university began focusing its energies on student success, only 29 percent of its undergraduates left with a degree after four years, and 52 percent graduated in six. USF was long known as a commuter campus and often not students' first choice, overshadowed by the powerhouses of the University of Florida and Florida State University.

A few years later the Florida Legislature introduced performance-based funding, rewarding campuses that met certain metrics on retention and graduation, among other goals. The change in funding served as a sort of rocket fuel for existing efforts, accelerating internal restructuring. In 2018 USF earned the designation of

a Preeminent Research University, which brought in additional money. Today USF typically ranks at or near the top of performance-based funding metrics among the state's public universities. In 2021 its scores earned it an additional $34.5 million.

Today, USF's freshman-retention rate stands at 90 percent. Its four-year graduation rate is 62.5 percent, and its six-year graduation rate is 74.3 percent. It has retained ethnic and racial diversity, with a student population that is 36 percent Pell eligible. The university has also improved graduation rates among transfer students, who make up about half of undergraduates. Of those with associate degrees attending both full- and part-time, the three-year graduation rate rose to 66 percent from 57 percent over the past six years.

USF did bring in more academically prepared classes. A decade ago, the average incoming freshman had a high-school GPA of 3.86. Last fall it was 4.18. SAT scores rose, as well, to 1293 from 1188.

That accounts for some of the retention and graduation gains, says Ralph Wilcox, USF's longtime provost. But the kinds of internal restructuring efforts the university has undertaken — such as enhanced residence-life and tutoring support, early-alert systems, and changes to long-held policies that disadvantaged some students — have been crucial to helping them make it across the finish line.

"If we were simply to admit higher-ability students without providing them the support inside and outside of the classroom," he says, "we absolutely would not have realized the gains we have."

Paul Dosal, who has overseen many of these efforts as vice president for student success, uses an analogy common among higher-ed reformers: He wants to see universities become more like health-care systems.

When a general practitioner refers a patient to a specialist, he says, the specialist has the person's complete history at hand. Similarly, he hopes that people on campuses with specific expertise — in counseling, advising, financial aid — will eventually have a "360 degree view" of a student's situation to better understand what they need. "We need to create a network of providers and ensure that our students are referred in a timely way to the best expert for whatever issue that they're dealing with."

Student Success is one of the largest units on campus. It includes admissions, enrollment planning and management, residential life, health and wellness, career services and undergraduate studies, and typically employs more than 500 people. Having the ability to better integrate the work of those divisions, Dosal says, is the real challenge. "Creating that network, facilitating the referrals and letting the experts do their job and putting students in front of those experts is where I think we all need to go."

One administrator uses an analogy common among higher-ed reformers: He wants to see universities become more like health-care systems.

Renick, of Georgia State University, agrees that for data-driven systems designed to identify struggling students to be effective, they need to be accompanied by people who know how to use them and have the ability to act. And that's often where colleges fall short.

Administrators will come to him and say: This predictive-analytics system we bought isn't getting any results. But when he digs in, he finds that the system isn't the problem, follow-through is. He uses an example: The student who gets a C-minus on his first quiz in an introductory course. A predictive-analytics system may flag that as an early warning sign. But will anyone reach out to the student to make sure they are aware that tutoring is available? Is tutoring tailored to the focus of that particular course? Is it available when students need it, not just on a certain day at a certain time?

Or take another data point available to any college: a student withdrawing from a course. How many colleges have a system in place to reach out to that student within 24 hours to find out why? Probably under 1 percent, Renick says.

On a hot and humid March afternoon, members of a campus fraternity perform a dance routine for an enthusiastic crowd along a palm-tree-studded central walkway of USF's main campus in Tampa. Nearby, clusters of students stand around tables promoting their clubs and causes: the campus food pantry, cancer awareness, the India Association, a Christian ministry.

While not back to pre-pandemic levels, these gatherings mark a return to normalcy — a welcome relief for many, including administrators who keep a close eye on student persistence. Like many other large, diverse public universities, USF, which enrolls about 37,000 undergraduates across three campuses, saw a drop in its first-year retention rate for the class that arrived in 2020.

As they wrestle with what the future might hold for their students, administrators hope to leave as little as possible to chance.

Before they even set foot on campus, incoming students take a survey designed to measure their sense of engagement with USF, as belonging has been shown to improve student success. Was the university, for example, a student's third choice? Do they plan to work more than 20 hours a week? About half of the incoming class of roughly 6,000 students may be categorized as higher risk based on their responses to at least three of the questions.

Those students are assigned to a peer adviser leader, or PAL, typically just a year or two older. The adviser is given only students' contact information. In past years they have been asked to connect at key points during the semester, including at the beginning of the school year, before midterms, and when course registration starts. (This fall, because of staffing shortages, they will reach out once and work with students who respond, the university says.)

Peer leaders and their supervisors say that students are more comfortable sharing their fears and problems with someone close in age. Christina Estevez, a marketing major and PAL, says one student confided that she was struggling in her classes because her parents were divorcing and she felt unmotivated. Estevez encouraged the student to meet with an academic adviser and make an appointment at the counseling center. The student did both and slowly found her footing.

But even students willing to seek help can get lost in a thicket of offices and divisions. The Office of Academic Advocacy, which sits in a low-slung building in the heart of USF's main campus, is there to catch those who are struggling before their situations spin out of control. There a staff of nine advocates monitor dashboards daily, to track students under their watch.

Some predictive-analytics programs have come under criticism for using demographic data, potentially stereotyping certain student groups as high-risk. They also use proprietary algorithms so that their clients don't always know what is being evaluated or how. That's one reason some colleges feel ambivalent about using them.

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USF largely uses a homegrown system, which looks only at behaviors. Has a student gone several days without logging in to the learning-management system? Do they have a GPA below 2.3? Have they been on academic probation for several semesters? Are their grades in any given class significantly below their classmates'? The advocates focus on the 10 percent or so of students — out of the thousands under their watch — with the highest risk scores.

Advocates are not mental-health counselors or financial-aid experts or academic advisers, says Leslie Tod, who was appointed the university's first academic advocate, in 2013, and now leads the office she started.

Rather, they are a first point of contact and a friendly voice who will listen carefully as a student lays out what is often a series of interconnected problems. "We're working with students who have dug the biggest hole," she says. "What we do is free up the time of advisers, housing and so on, so they can continue to do their work. So that the same student doesn't keep coming back."

One undergraduate Tod spoke to was visually impaired and on anti-anxiety medicine, but had stopped taking it and

"I am constantly surprised at how many students are experiencing challenges, and it's affecting their academics, and they don't ever let their instructors know."

— Adrienne Pollard, academic advocate, U. of South Florida

was not doing well. She was referred to the accessibility-services office as well as to someone who could help with her anxiety. Another struggled with a learning disability and was told — incorrectly — that she would need to foot the bill for an expensive test to confirm it before receiving an accommodation. An advocate helped sort out the snafu. Students often seek out help, too, when their financial aid runs afoul of some rule they were unaware of.

Pollard, who worked with Menendez, says that far from expecting college to cater to them, students often find it difficult to ask for help, believing that they should deal with their problems on their own. Research shows, too, that students who are lower-income or come from underrepresented groups are less likely to seek support or guidance than middle- and upper-income students. That's a significant risk on a campus where more than a third of students are Pell eligible.

"I am constantly surprised at how many students are experiencing challenges, and it's affecting their academics, and they don't ever let their instructors know," she says. "What we try to do is empower students to advocate for themselves."

While it may be hard to untangle any one student's problems, it's even trickier for universities to attack systemic issues. That requires pulling people together across divisions and departments to work on common challenges and giving them the authority to act.

Jennifer Schneider, the university's one full-time student ombudsman, sits on the Persistence Committee, created in 2016, where the work of digging into these systemwide challenges often takes place.

Schneider manages about 500 students' cases a year, often some of the most complicated. In her work, she sees patterns invisible to most of the campus. One of the most common questions she asks her colleagues on the committee: Why do we have this rule?

When homeless students told her how fraught it was to have to get written confirmation from a shelter in order to qualify for a tuition-and-fee waiver, she lobbied to switch to a case-management model. That way homeless students can get other forms of support as well, including help finding a place to live. "When we listen to students and give them a voice," says Schneider, "then we can learn."

The Persistence Committee also advocated raising to $500 the floor on the size of a debt a student owes the university — say a parking fee or library fines — that would block them from registering the following semester. It did so after concluding that too many students were being stopped for owing as little as $100. That allowed 1,300 more students to register for classes without restriction in one semester alone, says Thomas Miller, chair of the committee and an associate professor of education.

The lesson USF has learned over the years, in short, is this: To help students succeed, sometimes you need to change the university itself.

Tensions between academics and student-success operations can sometimes flare, particularly at large public universities without deep pockets that also have a strong mandate to raise graduation rates. As Timothy Boaz, president of USF's Faculty Senate, put it, "we don't have extra money lying around to be doing things that aren't absolutely essential."

Some professors worry that an intense focus on retention and graduation metrics without sufficient emphasis on — and support for — strong teaching and academic mentoring could compromise academic quality.

"I think for faculty, student success means, What did our students learn while they're here? Did they take high-quality classes and put together a coherent program of study that takes them to a better place?" says Boaz, an associate professor in the department of mental-health law and policy. "We shouldn't be doing things that compromise that side of it in order to meet all these metrics that we've set for ourselves related to retention rates and all that kind of stuff."

Some USF professors feel that their colleges are stretched thin. They need more full-time faculty who can mentor students and more academic advisers to help students pick the best program for them. A faculty-success work group report released in 2019 provided a long list of recommendations to increase support for faculty members. That includes changing a perceived top-down culture and giving deans more decision-making authority, improving faculty salaries, expanding professional-development opportunities, and creating an office of faculty success.

Valerie Harwood, chair of the department of integrative biology, says that her department has five advisers for more than 2,000 majors. She noted that the number of majors in her department has tripled in the past decade even as the number of full-time faculty members has stayed about the same. "We've been expected to do a lot with basically temporary employees. And that's been frustrating."

Wilcox, USF's provost, says the university has increased the number of full-time faculty — tenured, tenure-track, and instructional — by more than 200 since 2011 using some of the additional money it has received through performance-based funding. As a result, the student-faculty ratio has dropped to 22:1 from 27:1 over the past decade. But he agrees that some of the fastest-growing areas, like business and engineering, as well as Harwood's department, are struggling.

"They're not wrong," he says of professors' concerns about the need for more instructors and advisers. "We're strained to keep pace with the demands of students and the need for more faculty." He is hopeful that a recent increase in USF's annual state funding of $55 million may help alleviate faculty and adviser shortages.

The data-driven approach to student success also troubles some professors and advisers. Studies have documented this ambivalence toward the increased use of analytics, nationally. Some raise questions around the accuracy and validity of algorithms on which the tools were built. Others worry about student privacy.

Diane Price Herndl, chair of the department of women's and gender studies, says she likes the way analytics can help fix some academic problems. When the administration dug into why some engineering students were falling behind, it turned out the university wasn't offering enough sections of a required math class, which it fixed by providing the math department more funding. "That is a really, really good strategy," says Herndl. "A place where this kind of focus on four-year graduation rates really works."

But she feels conflicted about the student-monitoring and -tracking features that are embedded in such systems. "As a parent, I'm kind of glad to know that if my daughter holes up in her dorm room and doesn't come out for three or four days at a time, somebody is going to check on her," she says. "As a faculty member, that feels a little creepy to me. It feels like we're removing some of the training for adulthood that I want college to be doing."

USF will need professors' support as it ramps up efforts to improve teaching and course design. To move their four-year graduation rate to 70 percent from 62 percent, says Dosal, the student-success vice president, that requires more attention to what happens in the classroom. In that, the university is also reflective of a national trend.

Until relatively recently college leaders have been hesitant to look too deeply into professors' teaching practices and the design of their courses and degree programs. But as data-driven decision making has taken hold on other parts of campus, so has it touched academic life. Deans and department chairs can track which gateway courses have higher-than-average rates of D's, F's and withdrawals, or DFWs. They can pinpoint where bottlenecks exist when students try to register for required courses, and whether the degree requirements in certain majors are thwarting timely graduation. All of these are common roadblocks that slow down students' progress to a degree.

Organizations like the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation have helped focus public attention on the impact that well-structured and well-taught foundational courses can have on a student's career. And the pandemic has illustrated how inclusive, engaging courses can keep students connected to their college, even in an online environment.

USF has been making inroads into teaching and curriculum design. In one project, focused on curricular complexity, departments have been reviewing degree requirements to ensure that students aren't being asked to take more credits than necessary and that course sequencing makes sense.

The university has also begun taking steps to increase the use of high-impact practices, such as study abroad and internships, that have been shown to increase student engagement and persistence. And it is working on improving gateway courses with higher-than-average DFW rates.

While professors say they would welcome more resources to strengthen teaching, some worry that academic quality could be compromised by the university's focus on retention and graduation metrics. Boaz says he's heard from professors concerned that their colleagues might feel pressure to raise students' grades. While he has heard no evidence yet to suggest this is happening, he notes the uneasiness is real.

Wilcox, who will step down as provost in August and take a faculty position, says that he does not "police" courses with high DFW rates, but rather holds deans and department chairs accountable for determining the root challenges. If a faculty member needs additional training in course design or effective teaching, they may be encouraged to seek that out. Another tool has been to hire more instructors to reduce class sizes, and to expand supplementary instruction.

Other academic concerns relate to the pressure students might feel to move through college expeditiously even when they might be helped by more exploration.

Tangela Serls, an assistant professor of instruction and undergraduate-studies director in the department of women's and gender studies, says that when she was an adviser in the sciences from 2015 to 2017, she felt that some students would have benefited from extra time to, say, study abroad or do an internship. But her responsibility was to encourage students to finish in a timely manner, without taking on excess credits that might create a financial burden.

As data-driven decision making has taken hold on other parts of campus, so has it touched academic life.

"Generally speaking, I don't really see anything wrong with striving to get students graduated in four to six years," she says. "But I think it's important for us to remember that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to navigating life as a college student."

Dosal, who is leaving USF at the end of June to take a similar role at the University of Central Florida, says that wandering through the curriculum is not an option that low-income students can afford.

In addition to adding on extra tuition costs, a student who spends more than four years in college is losing potential income. "We recognize there are some who oppose the streamlined pathways and still value liberal-arts education and want students to explore as much as they can," he says. "I know there's value to that. Unfortunately, we live in a state and in a time in which it can be expensive for students to do that."

But Herndl argues that this view ignores another aspect of their students' lives. "It's our first-generation students, it's our working-class students, who often have no idea what they want to major in, because they are not exposed to the professional world," she says. "Those are the students we need to give the most latitude. We need to be offering them ways for exploration instead of trying to push them into a major right away."

Can colleges reconcile the tension between needing students to graduate as quickly as possible and allowing them the opportunity to explore? Renick, the national student-success expert, says yes. But that requires timely counseling, tutoring, and financial advising.

Georgia State found that when students switched majors, it was more often because they couldn't achieve their goals, not because they had a change of heart. With additional support, more students who expressed an early interest in STEM successfully completed their majors.

He is a believer in structured academic pathways, where freshmen are put into learning communities with a common academic interest or "meta major" like business, health, STEM, and arts and humanities.

"If you allow them to wander aimlessly," Renick says, "you are going to replicate equity gaps. You are going to disproportionately lead low-income students to drop out with no degree at all."

Kezar, the USC professor, says colleges would benefit from creating a bigger tent, and bringing everyone into the conversation around student success. She has seen instances where, for example, administrators create guided-pathways programs without sufficient input from faculty members. In others they might hire more advisers, but not consider strengthening the role that professors could play.

"We need more full-time faculty in the first year working with students so that they can talk to faculty about majors and talk to faculty about careers. And we can't rely on a career center that students rarely ever go to to help them make these choices. We need to be much more actively involved, and faculty are a huge part of that."

The pandemic threw a curve ball at higher education, making student-success efforts all the more complicated for many universities. Some, like USF and Georgia State, say their early-alert analytics systems continued to help catch students who might otherwise have simply disappeared from their rolls. At the same time, students' academic, financial, and mental-health needs have grown exponentially in the past two years.

Burns, head of the University Innovation Alliance, also noted the effects of the staffing crisis throughout higher education. Still, she says, "it's all long-game work." And to that end, the pandemic has forced colleges to be quicker, more nimble, and more resilient.

Student-success leaders say that while much work remains to be done, universities increasingly understand that improving the undergraduate experience is, at heart, a design challenge. As USF's experience illustrates, that's no easy lift. But it's far from impossible.

Beth McMurtrie is a senior writer at The Chronicle.

Originally published on June 17, 2022

Colleges Brace for More Pregnant and Parenting Students

BY KELLY FIELD

MICHAEL THEIS, THE CHRONICLE

Rocelyn Alvarado and her daughter, Jazmin, at Montgomery College's campus in Germantown, Maryland. Alvarado is the president of the college's new Student Parent Alliance.

Whitney Phinney, a former graduate student at the University of Colorado's medical campus, thought she had permission to bring her infant daughter, Sunny, to class. She'd spoken to the professor about her child-care challenges, and the professor had been sympathetic, telling Phinney that she'd put herself through law school with three children under the age of five.

But when Phinney brought Sunny to the Biotech Entrepreneurship class one Monday in the winter of 2018, and breastfed her during a guest speaker's presentation, the professor wasn't pleased. The following week, Phinney received an email from the director of her program telling her the breastfeeding made some in the classroom uncomfortable and suggesting she step outside if she needed to nurse.

"We also have to wonder what impression it might leave on the speakers regarding the professional conduct of our students," the director added.

Mortified and angry, Phinney fired back that breastfeeding in public is covered under Colorado law, and anybody who was uncomfortable with it should be the ones to step outside.

"It is hard enough to be a mother working full time and attending graduate school, without having to deal with this type of harassment," she wrote. Phinney notified the director and the professor that she was dropping the class and filed a complaint with the university's Office of Equity and the federal Office of Civil Rights, or OCR.

Pregnant and parenting students have been protected under Title IX, which bans gender discrimination in schools and colleges, since it was signed into law in 1972. Under Title IX, colleges must treat pregnant students the same as any other student with a temporary physical or emotional condition, provide "reasonable and responsive" adjustments to their regular programs, and excuse all absences a doctor deems medically necessary. They must not treat fathers and mothers any differently from one another.

> **"For too long, higher education has been in denial that this population exists."**

Yet 50 years after the passage of Title IX, some faculty members and administrators still aren't sure what the law says about pregnant and parenting students, advocates and lawyers said. They said the rules are open to interpretation and are especially murky when it comes to parenting students, who make up one in five undergraduates today.

That could soon change. As part of the update proposed to Title IX rules this past summer, the Biden administration made explicit its expectations of colleges — including careful record-keeping about pregnant students — and affirmed that the law covers lactation.

But the proposed rules, coupled with the recent Supreme Court decision striking down *Roe v. Wade*, are likely to cause a spike in complaints against colleges while also making them — and their students — vulnerable in states looking to prosecute violations of anti-abortion laws, warned higher-education lawyers.

"We're going to have more pregnant students, and we're going to have more enforcement by OCR," said Melissa Carleton, an attorney with Bricker & Eckler, a law firm that represents colleges in Title IX cases, in a recent webinar.

And given the lack of attention most colleges have paid to parenting students, some advocates wondered whether institutions are prepared to meet their legal obligations to this vulnerable population — never mind their moral one.

"These students have been allowed to fall through the cracks in higher education," said Nicole Lynn Lewis, founder and CEO of Generation Hope, a nonprofit that supports teen parents.

An Overlooked Population

Though the number of student parents has been growing for years, many colleges are just starting to come to terms with the size of the population on their own campuses, Lewis said. Programs designed for pregnant and parenting students are growing in number but remain relatively rare.

Discrimination against parenting students can be trickier to pin down, but it is "often rooted in outdated notions about caregiving and sex stereotypes."

"For too long, higher education has been in denial that this population exists," Lewis said. "They've gone underresourced, undersupported, and unwelcomed on many campuses."

Part of the problem may be that colleges aren't sure how many of their students are parents. The best institutional-level estimates come from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, which asks applicants if they have dependents. But even the FAFSA provides an incomplete picture, since student parents don't always claim their dependents; some "dependents" are adults, and many students don't complete the form at all.

The most frequently cited national statistic — one in five undergraduates — appears in a report by the Institute for Women's Policy Research that was based on a federal survey conducted in 2015-16. The report says that 70 percent of student parents are mothers, and two in five are single mothers.

Student parents face several hurdles to completion, including a nationwide shortage of affordable child-care options, a lack of lactation space and family housing on many campuses, and the daily struggle to juggle work, school, and family responsibilities. Though they have higher GPAs, on average, than their nonparenting peers and are often highly motivated, only a third earn a degree or certificate within six years.

Title IX aims to eliminate the most basic of the barriers to completion for pregnant and parenting students, ensuring that they aren't discriminated against in academic, educational, athletic, and extracurricular programs.

In its guidance to schools and colleges, the Education Department has stressed that teachers and professors must excuse medically necessary absences and allow students to submit work after the deadline, regardless of instructors' own policies on attendance and make-up work.

In practice, though, pregnant students sometimes have to fight to have absences excused or to receive extensions on assignments, advocates said. They may face pressure from faculty members to drop a class or to return to class shortly after giving birth.

"There's this misconception that if a professor doesn't like something, that somehow trumps federal law," said Jessica Lee, director of the Pregnant Scholar Initiative at the University of California, Hastings College of the Law.

Lee said she's spoken with students who were failed because they missed exams when they were having a miscarriage, and students who were just discharged from the hospital, still struggling to stand, and were asked by their college, "when are you coming back?"

Discrimination against parenting students can be trickier to pin down, but it is "often rooted in outdated notions about caregiving and sex stereotypes," said Cassandra Mensah, a lawyer on the workplace-justice and education team at the National Women's Law Center. It shows up in comments suggesting that a mothering student isn't committed to her studies, she

MICHAEL THEIS, THE CHRONICLE

Alvarado said she hopes the alliance will encourage other student parents to persist despite the challenges.

said, or that a father shouldn't have to miss class for his child's doctor appointments.

'Who's Going to Believe a Student?'

There's no way to track how many complaints alleging pregnancy- or parenting-related discrimination have been filed with the federal Office of Civil Rights, since the agency provides details only about cases that resulted in a resolution agreement.

A search on the agency's database of "recent resolutions," using the keyword "pregnancy," yields 23 cases involving colleges and technical schools between 2013 and 2020. They include a beauty school that forced students to withdraw upon reaching the seventh month of pregnancy; a state college that required nursing students to submit a doctor's note saying they were physically able to participate in clinical rotations; and a community college with a professor who told a student who gave birth on the day of an exam that she'd have to take an incomplete or retake the class.

The most recent resolution, which hasn't been added to the database, came in June against Salt Lake Community College. It involved a student with morning sickness whose professor suggested she drop the class, telling her she "needed to take some responsibility for the things that were going on."

Those cases probably represent only a

tiny fraction of the complaints filed against colleges, though. Many cases are handled internally, never reaching federal investigators or the courts, advocates said. And the vast majority of all complaints are settled quietly, behind the scenes.

"Most of the time, it just takes a bit of education," Lee said. "Folks don't understand their obligations, but once they do, they're quick to change."

Occasionally, though, a case is so egregious that it leads to a high-profile and costly judgement against a college. That's what happened with Tina Varlesi, a former graduate student in the social-work program at Wayne State University, whose faculty adviser failed to protect her from an internship supervisor who repeatedly told Varlesi to stop rubbing her belly and to wear looser clothing, saying the men at the facility were being "turned on by her pregnancy."

Varlesi, who was eventually flunked by the supervisor, sued the college for pregnancy discrimination and retaliation and was awarded $850,000 by the courts.

"I knew it was wrong, and I knew I had recourse," said Varlesi, whose failing grade kept her from graduating in 2008. Still, she said, several lawyers and professors discouraged her from suing.

"I was told, 'Who is going to believe a student over a professor?'" she said.

Varlesi was rejected by several other social-work programs — she believes she was blacklisted — but was eventually admitted to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, earning her master's in social work in 2014. Now in her 40s with a teenage son, she provides wellness coaching and anti-discrimination training to companies, and occasionally consults for lawyers pursuing cases similar to hers.

But it's still painful for her to recall how she went from honors student to pariah so quickly.

"There are some days where I'm just like …" she said, her voice trailing off. "I lost so much time."

Closing the Gaps

The proposed updates to the Title IX rules governing pregnant and parenting students have been overshadowed by far more controversial changes involving gender identity and the handling of sexual-misconduct cases. Yet they are not insignificant, advocates said.

Under current rules, colleges cannot discriminate against students on the basis of "pregnancy, childbirth, false pregnancy, termination of pregnancy, or recovery therefrom." But the existing regulations don't define those terms, leaving it open to debate whether the law covers lactation and medical conditions that are not related to recovery, such as gestational diabetes and preeclampsia.

The proposed rules would clarify that lactation is covered under the law and explicitly include medical conditions related to pregnancy. In its commentary on the rule, the Education Department said it was seeking to close perceived "gaps in coverage."

> **"These new regulations cut out the gray area. They're going to make the pathway a lot more clear for both students and colleges."**

The rules would also spell out the responsibility of campus Title IX coordinators, who must enforce the law. Among other things, coordinators would be required to notify pregnant students of their rights under Title IX, determine which modifications are appropriate, and document when and how they are provided.

"These new regulations cut out the gray area," Lee said. "They're going to make the pathway a lot more clear for both students and colleges."

She said students often aren't aware they're entitled to accommodations and don't know how to request them, if they are.

But the process of deciding which accommodations are "reasonable and responsive" to students' needs will never be black and white, said Joshua Richards, a lawyer with the firm Saul Ewing Arnstein & Lehr, who has advised colleges on Title IX cases. Students' needs vary, and what's reasonable in one situation may be completely unworkable in another, he said.

Take a pregnant student's request to attend classes remotely, for example. A hybrid program might have no problem accommodating that shift. But it wouldn't work in a nursing program where students have to handle a dummy or administer an injection, Richards said. Title IX allows colleges to refuse requests that would "fundamentally alter" the program or activity. And what's fundamental is open to interpretation.

Richards also worries that the proposed rules' well-intentioned record-keeping requirements for Title IX coordinators will create legal risk for colleges in states where abortion is now illegal.

In Texas, for example, private citizens can sue anyone who "aids or abets" an abortion. If a college's records show that staff had provided formerly pregnant students with information about how to obtain abortion pills through the mail or had offered them advice on traveling out of state, the college or its employees might be sued.

"In some ways, the regulations put schools on a collision course with state laws," he said. Richards helped draft comments for several higher-education associations that asked federal regulators to strike the pregnancy section from the rule and issue separate regulations.

Similar concerns have been raised by advocates for pregnant students who fear that a zealous attorney general might subpoena the records to identify and prosecute students who have had an abortion. They're asking the Education Department to retain the record-keeping requirement but instruct colleges on how to protect student privacy.

Up to the Professor

When it comes to parenting students, the proposed new rules shed little light on which accommodations colleges should provide. They don't specify, for example, whether professors must excuse absences due to child-care disruptions or children's medical appointments.

The one exception deals with lactation, where the draft rules would also require colleges to provide students with a lactation space, much as federal law already requires for employees. Under the rules, the space must not be a bathroom and must be "clean, shielded from view, free from intrusion from others."

It's not clear that such language would have protected Phinney, whose professor told civil-rights investigators she'd never given Phinney permission to bring her daughter to class. If protections for lactation remain in the final rules, it will be up to the Office of Civil Rights and the courts to decide what constitutes breastfeeding discrimination. In doing so, they'll need to answer questions like, are students entitled to breastfeed anywhere on campus or only where children are permitted?

> **"I really struggled to continue because I felt completely unwelcome there, like I didn't belong. I had to choose between being a student and being a parent."**

In Phinney's case, a campus civil-rights investigator found that the professor and the program director had offered "legitimate educational reasons for wanting to ensure the classroom environment was professional and free from distractions," and that their refusal to allow Phinney to breastfeed in class did not prevent her from participating in the program.

"It is within a faculty member's discretion of whether or not children are allowed in the classroom setting," the investigator wrote.

Phinney appealed the decision, and the campus Title IX coordinator upheld it, noting a lack of clarity about whether breastfeeding was covered under the law as "a related medical condition." Federal investigators dismissed Phinney's complaint while the internal appeal was pending, and Phinney did not refile it.

After dropping the class, Phinney switched to another program at the University of Colorado's medical campus and finished in 2020. But it wasn't easy, she said.

"I really struggled to continue because I felt completely unwelcome there, like I didn't belong, and had to choose," she said.

"I had to choose between being a student and being a parent."

Phinney didn't stop advocating for student parents, however. She co-founded a parent-support and "lactivist" group called "Milk and Cookies," and pushed the university to adopt a sweeping lactation policy. The medical campus passed what she considers a "watered down" version of the policy in 2021, and the system enacted its own policy this year.

'A Floor, Not a Ceiling'

Now, with the Education Department signaling that it will take a tougher stand on pregnancy discrimination, advocates and lawyers alike are advising colleges to consider crafting policies that cover not just lactation, but all accommodations for pregnant and parenting students. Such policies are becoming common among graduate schools, but they are less often seen at the undergraduate level, Lee said.

Carleton, the Title IX lawyer, suggested that colleges conduct a cross-campus review of their policies, considering how they approach pregnancy across the campus, including in athletics, research, and other domains.

Colleges shouldn't stop there, either, Carleton said. "The law sets a floor, not a ceiling," she said, arguing that how colleges treat their pregnant and parenting students affect everything from recruitment and retention to fundraising and public relations. "There are legal requirements, and then there is an institutional ethic of care," she said, that helps students graduate.

With that goal in mind, a small but growing number of colleges are taking a systemic look at how they support student parents — and where they're falling short.

Montgomery College, in Maryland, which was part of an inaugural cohort of four colleges chosen to be a part of Generation Hope's FamilyU technical-assistance program in 2021, has begun surveying its student parents to determine their needs and has created a new website pointing them to resources. It's added more diaper-changing stations, lactation pods, and highchairs to its campuses, and has started a blog where student parents can share their stories.

The next step, said Ja'Bette Luisa Lozupone, director of student affairs for the Germantown campus, will be tackling the policies and practices that can derail student parents and getting a better handle on their outcomes.

"We want to find out how many we lose at each point, from registration to completion," said Lozupone, whose job is focused solely on student parents. "When you have a fifth of the population that is parenting, that has the potential to really move the needle when it comes to enrollment."

Student parents are pushing for further improvements, including a study area for families and the option to take all courses online. But they said they appreciate the attention the college is paying them.

"They've brought more awareness to student parents," said Rocelyn Alvarado, president of the college's newly formed Student Parent Alliance.

Alvarado, who is on track to graduate this spring, said she hopes the alliance will "provide a loving and supporting environment" that will encourage other student parents to persist despite the challenges.

"Student parents are often criticized, judged, and looked down upon," even by their families, said Alvarado, whose own family questioned her decision to enroll in college after she became pregnant at age 19.

Alvarado said her professors have been understanding when she's needed to miss class when her daughter is sick, never demanding a doctor's note. But she's never asked for an extension on an assignment, since her professors are always telling students to plan ahead.

"I don't want to use being a student parent as an excuse," she said. "I want them to see me as an equal."

Kelly Field joined The Chronicle of Higher Education *in 2004 and covered federal higher-education policy. She continues to write for* The Chronicle *on a freelance basis.*

Originally published on November 21, 2022

Finishing What They Started

Adults with some credits but no degree hold the keys to enrollment and equity.

BY KATHERINE MANGAN

Fourteen years, one baby, a marriage and divorce, and three job moves after Desirée Vanderloop started college, she's finally closing in on a goal that had always seemed just beyond her grasp.

When she walks across the stage next May to receive her bachelor's degree at Morgan State University, she'll join a growing number of returning adult students who are being lured back by programs designed specifically for people like them.

The skills Vanderloop learned on the job as her interests shifted from pre-med to health-care technology will apply toward her degree. So will 90 of the 102 credits she accumulated, one or two courses at a time, while winding her way through college as a working single mom. An adviser helped her design a degree path that integrated her job skills and studies, saving several semesters' worth of tuition and time.

What's happening at Morgan State reflects an emerging trend in higher ed nationwide as advisers and registrars reach out to former students and help piece together fragments of launched and abandoned college careers.

The number of people who began college but left without a credential grew to 39 million in 2020, up nearly 9 percent in two years. That represents more than one in five people in the United States over age 18, according to a report released this year by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. Re-engaging them can help narrow equity gaps, given that students of color and low-income students are far more likely to stop out of college, a trend that was heightened during the pandemic. And studies have shown that college credentials improve people's job prospects and earning potential over a lifetime.

But diving deeper into this pool of potential applicants could also be a matter of institutional survival for some colleges. As the number of traditional-age college students continues to shrink, contributing to worsening enrollment slides, colleges nationwide are doubling down on efforts to re-enroll those who already have a head start toward a degree.

Some College, No Credential

Number of people who started college and left before earning a credential (as of July 2020)

39 million

That's nearly a 9 percent increase from two years earlier

Nearly 60 percent of this population was last enrolled at a community college

Table: Audrey Williams June.
Source: National Student Research Clearinghouse Center.

"These are students who have, for whatever reason, had to stop out — maybe they had a baby or had to take care of parents or had to work full time," said Nicholas Vaught, a student-success administrator at Morgan State. While they may doubt themselves, "we're not viewing them as failures," he added. The fact that they earned college credits, he said, makes them successes.

As a historically Black college that's enjoyed a surge in attention and enrollment in the past few years, the Baltimore institution isn't seeking out students like Vanderloop primarily to fill seats, he said. The focus now is more on equity and making sure more students get the benefits of completing degrees. In Baltimore, 43 percent of white households — but only 16 percent of Black households — have a bachelor's

degree or higher, according to a 2021 report from the Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity, at Duke University.

Longer term, and more broadly across higher education, though, the number of older adults who have stopped out of college will continue to grow, Vaught said, "even as we see the number of 18-year-olds decline."

Despite the pandemic, more than 944,000 people with some college but no credential re-enrolled during the 2020-21 academic year, and more than 60,000 earned their first postsecondary credential, the report from the National Student Clearinghouse noted. Six out of 10 who re-enrolled in 2019-20 either continued to the following year or got a credential within a year of returning.

For all the potential this population offers, there are challenges. Persuading people to come back can be tough when college costs are high and decent-paying jobs are plentiful. It's not always clear that students pulling down good salaries, with many credits left to earn, would be financially better off if they completed their degrees, according to Ben Castleman, an associate professor of public policy and education at the University of Virginia. He advocates focusing colleges' recruiting efforts more narrowly on certain people, like low-wage workers with relatively few credits left to earn. Even there, it can be challenging.

For many students who stopped out because of work or family responsibilities, money is still tight, time stretched thin, and self-confidence in academic abilities low. They may also still be paying off student loans.

"We know that when students have some credit, no degree," Vaught said, "that also means some college debt but no degree."

Then, there are logistical challenges, like small unpaid balances for tuition or library fees that leave students with financial holds that prevent release of their transcripts. Some colleges have dropped such holds, which disproportionately block low-income students' access to college.

Despite these challenges, with many colleges "still reeling from historic enrollment declines during the pandemic," the

Where to Find Potential Re-Enrollees

Over a third of people aged 20 to 35 who left college without a credential reside in just five states.

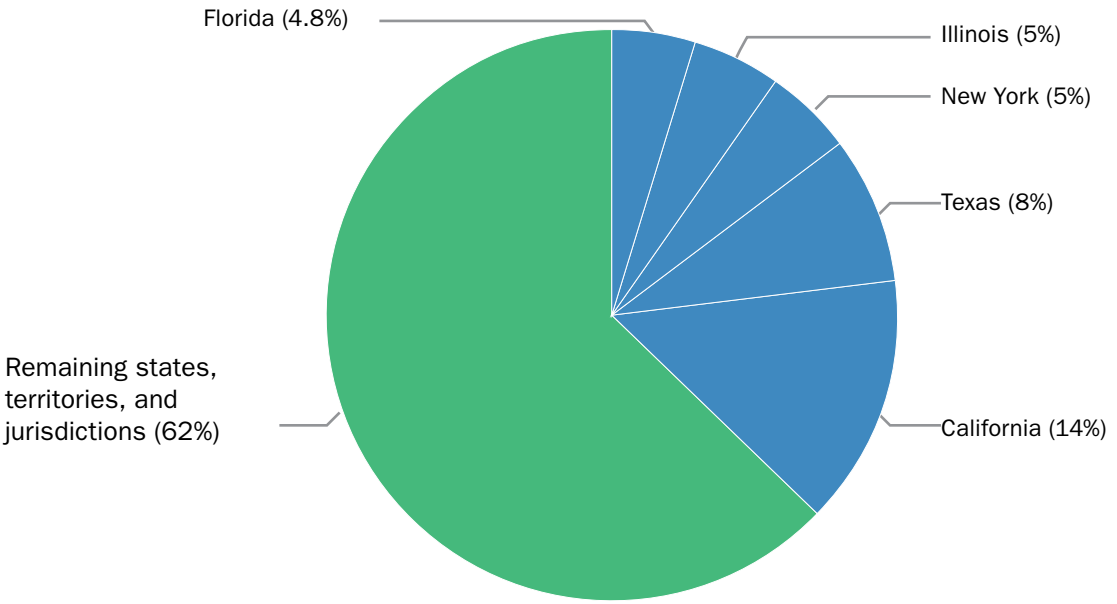


Chart: Dan Bauman. Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

Clearinghouse report notes, "the continued health of higher education institutions, and their ability to meet the needs of future students, may depend on their success at re-engaging" these stopped-out students.

Morgan State found that retrofitting existing degree programs to meet the needs of returning adults didn't work. These students are more likely to bring in credits from multiple colleges, work experience they could get credit for, and complicated lives that need to be factored in when scheduling classes and workloads.

To tailor college more specifically to them, the university this spring started a College of Interdisciplinary and Continuing Studies as an outgrowth of an applied liberal-studies major begun five years ago. The new college, where Vaught serves as interim assistant dean of academics and student success, offers online classes to students around the country at in-state prices.

Its interdisciplinary focus makes it easier for students from a variety of work backgrounds to advance within their current jobs or pivot to a related but new field, said Nicole M. Westrick, dean of the new college. Students can test out of certain courses through credit for prior learning, which involves evaluating how skills learned on the job could be applied to their degree programs. The university has been learning from institutions that have well-established programs for granting such credit, Westrick said, places like Central Michigan University.

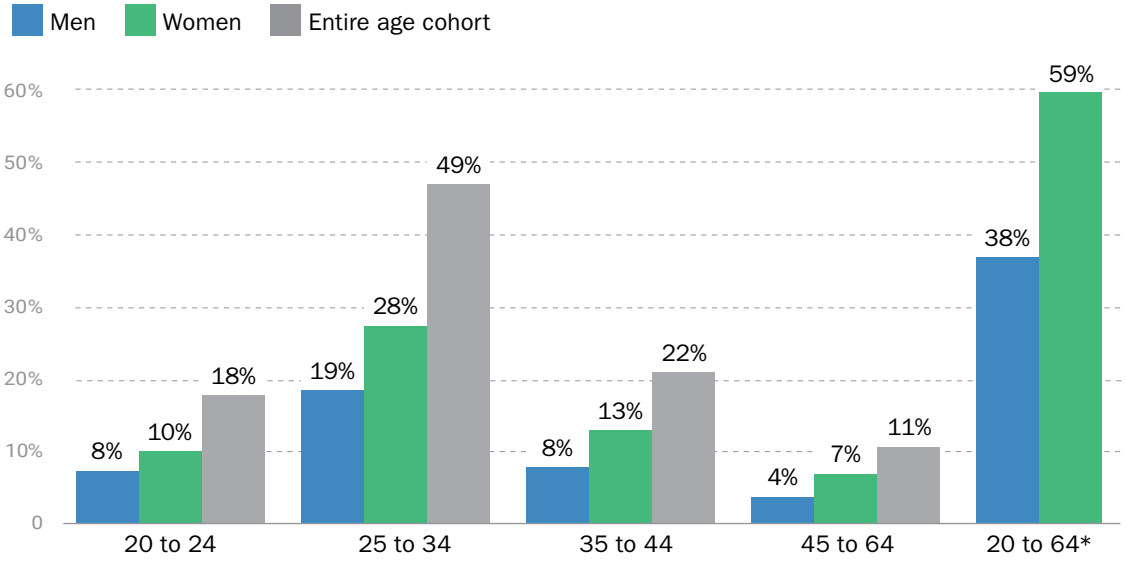
Vanderloop is among the returning students who benefited from that approach. Morgan State applied 18 credits for work she's done in the health-care field and accepted nearly all of the credits she brought in, she said, "so I didn't feel I was having to start over."

She first enrolled at Eastern Michigan University in 2008. Like so many returning adults, her college career took a bumpy, interrupted route over the next decade. A new mother, she had to stop out in 2009 when her husband's military post was transferred to Colorado. A few years later, divorced, she moved back to Michigan with her young daughter, hoping to re-enroll at Eastern Michigan. First stop was enrolling at a community college to make up for her earlier poor grades and qualify to transfer.

"As a single mom, trying to get financially

More Women Re-Enroll Than Men

Of the more than 900,000 students who re-enrolled in college in 2020-21, nearly 60 percent were women.



Note: Gender and/or age data is absent for 25,303 student records. To avoid duplication, a bar for "Entire age cohort, 20-64" is not depicted. Chart: Dan Bauman. Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

back on my feet, I had to prioritize work over studies, and my studies suffered," she said. "Taking a class here and there, I eventually earned an associate degree" in 2020 from Washtenaw Community College. By then, she was living in Maryland, where she'd moved for her job at a health-care software company. Learning that Morgan State's program would allow her to graduate by next spring with a concentration in interdisciplinary engineering, information, and computational sciences, she eagerly enrolled.

Across the country, California State University-Dominguez Hills is engaged in a similar recruitment effort. "Once a Toro, Always a Toro" is mostly geared toward re-enrolling students who started at the campus in Los Angeles County, where two-thirds of students are Hispanic. "The perspective is: 'You didn't leave the family. You took a break and life happened,'" said Sabrina K. Sanders, who oversees the outreach effort. "The sense of belonging is so important to student success."

A 2018 study by the policy research group California Competes found that just half of Latino, Black, Native American, and Pacific Islander adults in that state who attended college ended up earning degrees, compared with two-thirds of white adults. To lower barriers for returning students, the Dominguez Hills program waived application fees, offered online orientations, and scrapped the requirement that students submit a letter of intent to register for classes.

More than 600 students filled out re-entry forms indicating they're planning to enroll this fall. Still, it's hard to predict how many students might change their minds when they haven't gone through the formal, time-consuming process of reapplying for their seats and paying fees.

Someone who's doing fairly well financially may not see the immediate value of returning to college but might be persuaded to return if flexible part-time options, wraparound supports like child care, financial aid, and tutoring are available. "A student earning $25 an hour on the job and supporting a family might want to ease back into college a class or two at a time," Sanders said.

The return to campus can be complicated. Katrece Harris dropped out of the Cal State campus, where she was majoring in criminal justice, in 2014, when her grades plummeted during a family crisis. "My stepdad passed away, and I was helping my mom and younger brother. Mentally, I wasn't there," she said. "I wasn't focused on school."

She didn't realize that if she'd withdrawn from her courses, she could have avoided being saddled with the low grades that stuck to her transcript. In order to finish her bachelor's degree, she has to regain good academic standing through courses she's taking in an "Open University" run by the Dominguez Hills campus that's available to working adults and others who aren't formally admitted to the university. Credit courses are offered, on a space-available basis, to students who want to take classes for personal development, are academically dismissed, late to applying to the university, or come from another university to complete one course.

Once her academic standing is restored, Harris might qualify to have some of the law-enforcement academy classes she took to become a deputy sheriff for Los Angeles County applied toward her degree.

To earn such credit, students can submit a portfolio, paper, test, or other way of showing department faculty that the skills and trainings they've gained on the job correlate to learning or competencies. But granting academic credit for work experience requires convincing faculty members that the two are comparable. No one wants to "give away" degrees, Sanders said. She understands the need for rigor and standards, but she also feels that flexibility and a chance to prove a student has gained necessary knowledge is crucial. Otherwise, she said: "What are we measuring? Hours in seats or competencies and skills?"

The university's president, Thomas A. Parham, said people who come from less-privileged backgrounds often have to defer goals like college to meet more immediate needs like paying rent or putting food on the table. "Part of what we want to do, not just on our campus but across the CSU

system, is provide opportunities to recapture some of those students, to assess what it is that derailed their trajectory toward completion, and see if we can't put some services in place that help position them for success," he said. When setbacks threaten to push them off course again, "We're working hard to convince them that they really do belong in this educational space and that they have what they need to finish."

This applies, Sanders said, to the single mom with a 1-year-old and no child care during the pandemic who said she "tried and tried but just couldn't do it." Likewise, the working student who left college a few years ago when his mother had cancer and needed his support. When the university reached out to him, Sanders said, "the nudge motivated him to come back."

Advisers who stay with the student and check in regularly, from application to graduation, are essential elements of the strategy at both Dominguez Hills and Morgan State. Deborah Hargrave, an academic-retention adviser at Morgan State, can relate to her advisees. She was 29 when she first enrolled at Morgan State in 1995, married with three kids. She dropped out during her sophomore year to work full-time, trying again in 2002 for a semester. "Our kids always came first," she said, and without two full-time incomes, she and her husband couldn't keep them in private schools. In 2011, at her oldest daughter's urging, she re-enrolled in Morgan State, earning a bachelor's degree in sociology in 2015 and a master's in 2020.

Hargrave remembers feeling self-conscious returning when she was in her 40s, wondering "if the younger kids will look at me funny if I ask too many questions or if the professor is going to be annoyed with me." Her adviser, a returning student himself, became a longtime mentor. He referred her to financial help and to tutoring labs, "because it had been a moment" since her last chemistry course and the prospect of picking it up again filled her with dread. Like her mentor, she now starts out sessions with her own advisees by asking about their families and jobs and how they're doing outside their classes. She reminds them they can lean on one another, and she urges them to mentor younger students interested in their career fields.

That kind of personal outreach has given Tara Williams the confidence that she'll be able to complete her bachelor's degree more than a decade after she started. She earned an associate degree in 2011 and enrolled at the University of Phoenix six years later to try to finish a B.A. By 2019, with a full-time job, family, and around $70,000 in student loans to pay back, she said, "I ran out of funds." She had to drop out.

"Part of what we want to do, not just on our campus but across the CSU system, is provide opportunities to recapture some of those students, to assess what it is that derailed their trajectory toward completion, and see if we can't put some services in place that help position them for success."

Now, at age 52, she's enrolled at Morgan State, hoping to graduate in December 2023 with a B.A. in interdisciplinary organizational development. "I hated that stuck feeling," she said. "I was determined that no matter what age, I would go back and finish."

Katherine Mangan is a senior writer at The Chronicle.

Originally published on August 16, 2022

Could 'Course Sharing' Help HBCUs and Other Minority-Serving Colleges Graduate More Students?

BY FRANCIE DIEP

Seven colleges and universities with predominantly Black enrollments are betting that "course sharing" will help more of their students graduate on time.

Under a new arrangement, students at any one of the institutions will be able to take online classes offered by the others.

The hope is that making more courses available to students will ease their path to graduation. No worries if the accounting course you need for your major has run out of seats, isn't offered until the following semester, or conflicts with your work schedule — maybe there's a course-share that fulfills the requirement.

"It was all about retention, persistence, getting students over the finish line for completion," said Jamila S. Lyn, director of specialized programming at Benedict College, in South Carolina. "We see this potentially helping student-parents. We see this potentially helping working students. We see this as helping students who can't come to campus because of a health condition, who have approval for virtual courses."

Many historically Black colleges have low graduation rates, which higher-ed experts attribute to the fact that they are underresourced and tend to serve low-income, first-generation students without financial safety nets. Students might have to work part time to pay tuition, or they might have to drop out for a semester or two if they can't afford to enroll, making it more difficult to graduate in four to six years.

Course-sharing, campus officials said, can offer those students more options to stay on track academically — and could even help some students graduate more quickly, saving them money.

> **"We see this potentially helping student-parents. We see this potentially helping working students. We see this as helping students who can't come to campus because of a health condition, who have approval for virtual courses."**

Roslyn Clark Artis, president of Benedict, came up with the course-share idea and brought it to the Southern Regional Education Board, a nonprofit that grew out of an interstate higher-ed compact and now leads efforts to diversify the professoriate, among other things. Since January 2020, Benedict had been participating in course-shares with non-HBCUs through an online platform called Acadeum.

Students at Benedict did well, Lyn said: 82 percent of them passed their course-share

SEAN RAYFORD, GETTY IMAGES

Graduates at a pre-pandemic commencement at Benedict College, a participant in a new course-sharing project.

classes, despite the pandemic and even though underrepresented-minority students are less likely to do well with online learning.

Participating colleges in the new course-share project do need to think about specific supports for their students, Lyn said: "You really do have this other community now that we will have to consider as we think about academic outreach, attendance monitoring, et cetera." At Benedict, students enroll in the course-share classes through their advisers.

In late 2021, Benedict formed a course-share agreement with Dillard University, in Louisiana, seeing it as an opportunity to send their students to classes run by a like-minded institution.

Fifteen seniors at Benedict needed to complete so many credit hours in the spring-2022 semester in order to graduate on time that it seemed unlikely they could juggle it all, Lyn said. It would have been ideal if they could do a few credits over the winter term. Benedict doesn't offer one, but Dillard does. About 90 percent of students who participated in the course-share program got back on track to graduation.

Stevie L. Lawrence II, vice president for postsecondary education at the Southern Regional Education Board, hopes students and institutions will use the course-share system more creatively, too. Perhaps they'll create new minors, or special focuses in their majors that wouldn't otherwise be available at their home institutions. The board, known as SREB, is coordinating the course-share project and paying for member institutions to use Acadeum.

Benedict has used course-sharing to add an M.B.A. program and two majors, and to teach-out students in academic programs that are being eliminated.

The inaugural course-share members, in addition to Benedict, are Albany State University, Clinton College, Fort Valley State University, Langston University, Southeast Arkansas College, and Texas Southern University. SREB is in talks with other institutions about joining. The initiative is open to HBCUs and other minority-serving institutions in the board's 16-state region.

Tuition for the courses will go to the institution that created and is teaching each course, not the student's home institution. Leaders of the institutions, Lawrence said, are still working out how to ensure students won't have to pay more than they would to take classes at their home institutions.

Francie Diep is a senior reporter at The Chronicle.

Originally published on May 6, 2022

A student grabs supplies from Amarillo College's food pantry.

COURTESY OF CARA CROWLEY, AMARILLO COLLEGE

This College Is Asking Personal Questions — and the Answers Have Helped Boost Completion Rates

BY TAYLOR SWAAK

Seven colleges and universities with predominantly Black enrollments are betting that "course sharing" will help more of their students graduate on time.

Under a new arrangement, students at any one of the institutions will be able to take online classes offered by the others.

In the summer of 2021, Amarillo College emailed its students a message it sends every semester: Would they take a few minutes to disclose their out-of-class needs?

Within 72 hours, 99 students attending the Texas community college had confirmed they were homeless. Some were staying in motels or hotels; others lived doubled or tripled up, or were sleeping in their cars.

"It breaks my heart," said Cara Crowley, Amarillo College's vice president for strategic initiatives. Without asking those questions, "I don't know that we would know. … It's critical we address these basic life needs before they drop out."

Colleges have long collected academic-performance data such as retention and graduation rates. But the Covid-19 pandemic underscored how little many know about their students' basic needs beyond the classroom — including their access to food, secure housing, child care, and transportation — information that 80 percent of community-college leaders said in a recent Ithaka S+R survey is "very" or "extremely" important for determining student success.

Existing student-needs data often comes in broader university-level or nationwide snapshots, like a Hope Center survey of 202 colleges and universities published this year that found nearly three in five students experience "basic-needs insecurity." Yet while there's interest in building colleges' capacity for collecting this data themselves, campus leaders say they face inadequate staffing, funding, and infrastructure, as well as uncertainty of which metrics to add and other challenges.

While there's interest in building colleges' capacity for collecting student-needs data themselves, campus leaders say they face inadequate staffing, funding, and infrastructure, as well as uncertainty of which metrics to add and other challenges.

Some colleges and universities have still made inroads. The California State University system has studied the prevalence of student homelessness and food insecurity on its campuses. Portland State University, in Oregon, conducted a similar survey in 2019 that even included employees, from custodial and groundskeeping staff to faculty members and deans, finding 22.7 percent had experienced housing insecurity that past year.

Amarillo College, in particular, has made its student-data collection a front-and-center priority in the last five years — nearly doubling its graduation and transfer rate in the process.

The two-year institution, located in a flat and rural area of the Texas Panhandle, serves about 9,000 students, 67 percent of whom receive some type of need-based financial aid. The college began surveying its students annually for food and housing insecurity in 2016, and has undergone a "data evolution" in the years since, Crowley said. Now, it's been sending a voluntary one-page, 10-question email survey to every student before each semester begins.

The college then turns that data into action, often via partnerships with local nonprofits and city government. In 2017, for example, when the college learned that nearly 20 percent of its students had "no" or "limited" access to transportation, it collaborated with the City of Amarillo and the local transit authority to get direct bus routes to campus and free rides for students, faculty members, and staff. More recently, during the pandemic, the data has drawn officials a roadmap for how the college should distribute $15.6 million in federal stimulus aid.

Zeinab Ali, a 37-year-old Amarillo College student and mother of two from Somalia, told *The Chronicle* she wouldn't be pursuing her nursing degree if the college weren't assisting her with day-care costs and rent, or helping her look for a safer apartment after she discovered mold this summer. "There are so many people … if they have the resources, they can get their potential, and they can be who they want to be," she said.

Crowley said this approach has played a "huge" part in the college's graduation and transfer rate, which jumped to 58 percent in 2020 from 30 percent in 2015. Just between fall 2020 and spring 2021, too, the retention rate of students who'd filled out the survey and received financial assistance was 7 percentage points higher than the college-wide rate.

Crowley said she believes any college or university can set up a similar system.

"We support our students and we absolutely do what we can, but we seek outside resources to help us, " she said. "You just have to know your community."

Collecting the Data

Crowley acknowledged setting up a system to collect this data wasn't like flipping on a light switch.

Between 2016 and 2017, Amarillo College used free surveys from the Hope Center and Trellis Company, but itched for data that could be tied to individual students. It then started spending about $20,000 annually in 2018 to use survey tools from the University of Texas at Austin that produced student-level data on topics including mental health and transportation. But after shouldering a $3.5-million loss in state funding over the 2015-16 and 2016-17 school years, Crowley said the college wanted to transition to a more "cost effective," in-house assessment.

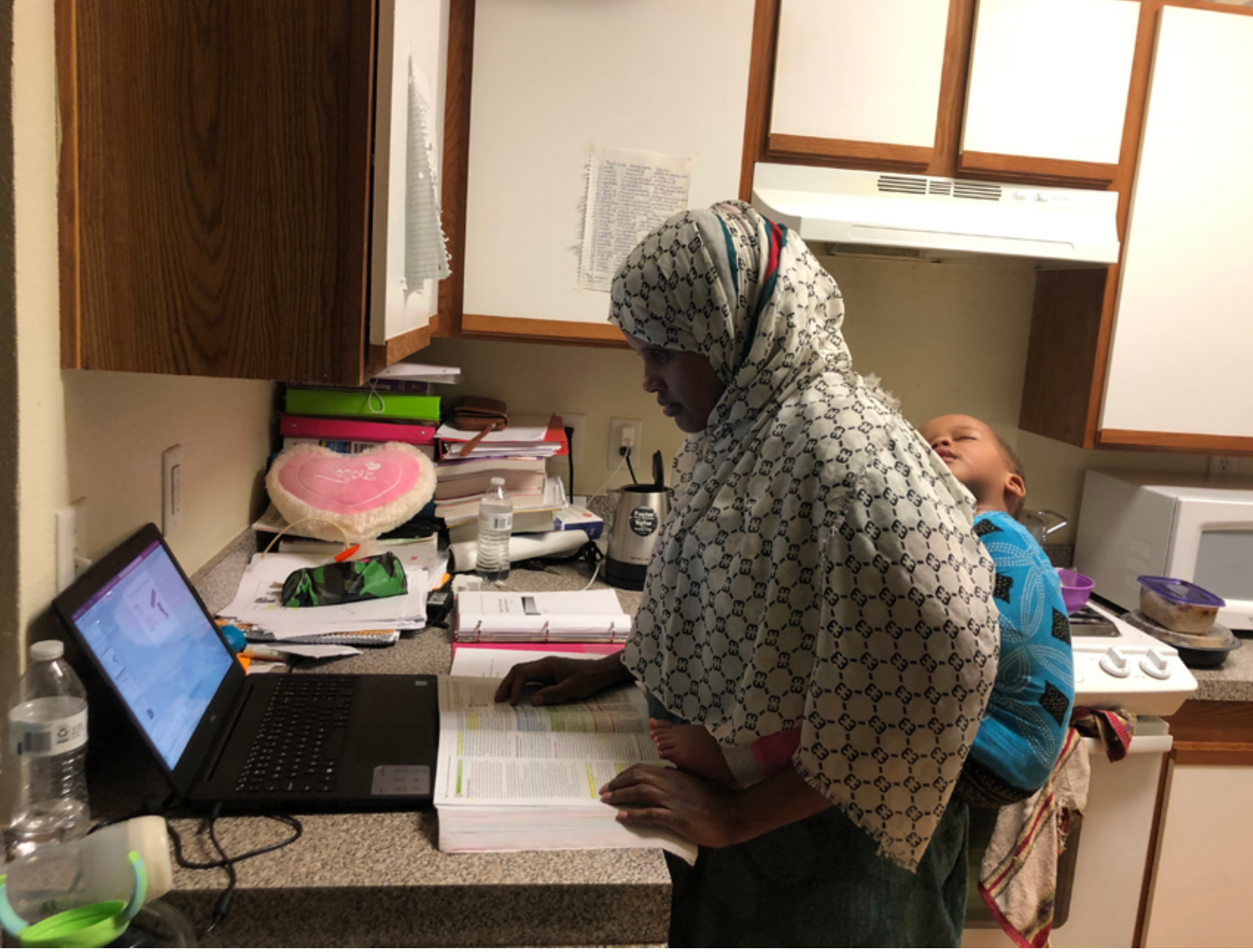
Amarillo College has made its student-data collection a front-and-center priority in the last five years — nearly doubling its graduation and transfer rate in the process.

The pandemic sealed it, with Amarillo developing a 10-question survey — adapted from an Alamo Colleges District assessment — and circulating it to students beginning in August 2020.

How it works: All students receive an emailed link that directs them to log on to their student portal. Once logged on, they're prompted to complete the survey.

Most of the questions ask about their status in the last 30 days. Have they struggled to pay mortgage or rent, or a child-care bill? Did they ever not eat because "there was not enough food"? Are there recurring mental-health-care expenses they've struggled to keep up with?

Respondents answer on a scale of one to five; one indicates "I'm good," while five



COURTESY OF ZEINAB ALI

Zeinab Ali, a student at Amarillo College, studies in her apartment in spring of 2020 as her son rests behind her.

signals "I'm in crisis." The last question, which asks for a "yes" or "no," is about whether they have "permanent and adequate nighttime residence."

Responses are then saved to the student's file within the college's student-information system. If a student answered four or five to any question, the system automatically generates and sends an email to the college's Advocacy and Resource Center and Counseling Center.

While it took "a significant amount of time" and the assistance of three IT personnel to get it up and running last summer, Crowley said the work was done "within our job duties and job hours" and didn't require additional hires. Only one IT staffer is assigned to occasional maintenance.

Crowley added that the college has seen a return on its investment, considering the boost in retention. Students receiving services through the Advocacy and Resource Center had a 4-percentage-point higher retention rate than their peers last school year, which Crowley has calculated equates to about $351,000 saved.

So how likely are students to respond? At the national level, many students are wary of universities stockpiling personal data. Some 53 percent in an Educause report last year said they'd be comfortable with their

institution using their personal data to help them achieve their academic goals.

At Amarillo College, the level of interest in completing this latest survey is difficult to gauge; while it's distributed to all students, the college has capped survey participation at about 20 percent during the pandemic because of limited federal aid. The survey circulated in late August closed after about 72 hours, with 22 percent of students having completed it.

Asked about how long this data is kept once a student graduates, Crowley wrote in an email to *The Chronicle* that the college will decide by end of this academic year whether to keep the data "indefinitely as part of the student's record or transfer them to our institutional research data warehouse."

Claudia Rubi Zaragoza Hernández, a sophomore and president of the college's Hispanic Student Association, said she and friends she's spoken with are OK with the data collection because they see the tangible support students get as a result.

"If they collected data and we don't know why and the college doesn't do anything with that information, I think we'd be more concerned," the 22-year-old said. "But at least here … we get benefits from it."

From Data to Results

On a Zoom call, Ali enthusiastically rattled off all the support she has received in response to her survey answers. She paused at times, getting emotional.

Ali has been struggling financially; she's out of work, and her husband is too, spending months in Africa for a family emergency. After she filled out the survey, administrators notified her that the college would cover her $835-per-month rent this semester, and subsidize full-time day care for her 3-year-old son so she only has to pay $30 a week. The Advocacy and Resource Center, too, is helping her seek out other housing options after a leak in an upstairs unit caused mold growth and attracted mites.

"Amarillo College is my place to go and feel safe and feel equality. It's equal opportunity and a 'no excuses'" policy when it comes to education, she said.

Zaragoza Hernández, too, said the college referred her to various resources after she filled out the survey: The campus food pantry, where she now goes on occasion to grab shampoo, soap, toothpaste, soups, and granola bars. The library, where she rents books for her pre-nursing classes.

This level of wraparound support comes from multiple sources, both inside and outside the college.

One source, both recent and temporary, has been $15.6 million in Cares, Crrsaa, and ARP aid that, by law, must go directly to students. Amarillo College has used its survey to help inform distribution of those funds, giving respondents up to $2,000 each semester last year depending on severity of the need. This fall and spring, the cap will be $3,000.

"Amarillo College is my place to go and feel safe and feel equality. It's equal opportunity and a 'no excuses' policy when it comes to education."

Crowley knows that if the college wants to keep collecting this data long term — and it does — that level of cash assistance isn't sustainable. The plan, in fact, is to start surveying all students next fall. (Students will be handed an iPad to complete it during their mandatory advising sessions each semester.)

"We won't have the financial amount we have now, I'll be honest there," she said. The Cares and Crrsaa money is already spent, and the ARP funds have to be by July 2022 if Amarillo College can't secure an extension. "But students will still get a wealth of information," she added, along with access to some level of assistance through the college's 100-percent donor-funded emergency aid fund, which sits at about $2.9 million.

Crowley is also confident in the deep partnerships the college has cultivated with local providers and 60 nonprofits.

Lawyers in Amarillo do pro bono work for the college's legal-aid clinic, helping with matters including divorces and DACA-renewal paperwork. The college sends students to Heal the City, a nonprofit health-care facility, for free or subsidized psychiatric care. Another nonprofit, Panhandle Community Services, is a key referral for housing, utilities, and mortgage-grant assistance.

Moving Forward

Crowley said there's still room to grow.

There's been discussion, for one, of how to share this data with faculty members — the "front line," Crowley said — so they're keyed in to who may need additional supports. As it stands, that information can only be shared with them if a student has answered four or five to a particular survey question. (The survey makes this clear to the students, Crowley said.)

Wider sharing "will involve significant training. … We also have very strict policies on protecting student information," she said. "Those are things that we're going to try to work through."

She also expects that the survey will be revised by next fall. There's more Crowley wants to know to about Amarillo College's students, like who's a part-time or full-time worker and the number and age of their children, if they have any. Zaragoza Hernández has a question she'd like to see added, too: whether the student is interested in counseling, with a "yes" response directing them to the Counseling Center's website for appointment scheduling.

Crowley offered one caveat:

"Don't ever have a survey with more than about 12 questions," she said. "That's about how long you can keep people's attention."

Taylor Swaak is a staff reporter at The Chronicle.

Originally published on September 16, 2021

Students Are Struggling With Basic Needs. So Colleges Are Tapping 'Benefits Navigators.'

BY BRIANNA HATCH

The three students at Oregon Coast Community College needed help. To finish their degrees, they had to complete an internship this past spring, which required driving to a nearby internship site. But gas was $6 a gallon.

That's when Tracy Jones stepped in. As the student-resource navigator at Oregon Coast, Jones helps students who are facing financial barriers that could derail them academically. She gave each of the three students a $100 gift card for gas.

"They were able to get there, get their hours in, and then graduate," she said. "And now they are moving on."

Benefits navigators like Jones are popping up on college campuses across the country. They help students apply for federal, state, and local assistance; connect them with food pantries and other resources; and provide them with emergency aid when times get tough. Illinois, Oregon, and California passed laws in the past year requiring a benefits navigator — and, in California's case, a physical basic-needs center — on every public-college campus in the state.

Benefits navigators are popping up on college campuses across the country. They help students apply for federal, state, and local assistance; connect them with food pantries and other resources; and provide them with emergency aid when times get tough.

When Cristina Pacione-Zayas was in college, navigating available resources was a challenge, she said. Pacione-Zayas, now an Illinois state senator, sponsored the bill that recently became law there.

A student browses for groceries inside the Beach Pantry at California State U. at Long Beach.

SEAN DUFRENE, CALIFORNIA STATE U. AT LONG BEACH

"You needed to have a certain level of persistence because you would need to go to the financial-aid office for this, go to the office of minority student affairs for that, go to the health clinic for something else," Pacione-Zayas said. "This is going to help streamline the university and college experience for the ever-growing, diverse, lived experiences that college students are bringing to campuses."

But the navigators often struggle to provide all of the help that students need. They cite a lack of discretionary funding, difficulties with student outreach, and lack of resources available — especially in the context of rent spikes and widespread student-housing shortages — as major obstacles.

Jones recently saw two Oregon Coast students drop out "due to multiple barriers that, with my limited budget, I was not able to help them overcome," she said. "Being in an extremely rural, low-income county, benefits programs are few and far between."

Another challenge is that, often, a single administrator can't keep up with the caseload. So some larger colleges are moving away from that model and building a peer-based network instead. Rise, a national organization that trains and funds student-benefits navigators, is partnering with colleges like Illinois State University to scale up peer support.

"Research in the social-work profession has repeatedly demonstrated that people are more likely to utilize services that are recommended by their peers," Stacy Raphael, case manager at Rise, said. "And students just relate better to each other. There is a cultural divide between adult administrators and certainly traditional-aged college students."

Helping 'Students Who Are Alone'

Illinois and California are still in the hiring and planning stages for their benefits navigators, with laws that passed or went into effect this summer. In Oregon, benefits navigators have a semester or two of service already under their belt.

Alana Strickland, benefits navigator at Klamath Community College, spends her day building connections with community organizations and meeting with students on a case-by-case basis — through self-referrals or referrals from professors — to address their needs. She also participates in a statewide consortium with other campus benefits navigators.

"Students don't always know about all the support systems that are available to them, so some may not even think about asking their institutions for assistance in their personal lives," Strickland said. "I've met with many students who are alone and lack a support system, like they're a single parent, or they just moved here and they have no family or no support."

She's currently organizing a blanket drive with the local Salvation Army to "stock up" for winter. She received a supply of $20 vouchers for Goodwill. And she's signed Klamath up for a partnership with Temple University's Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice to learn more about best practices for supporting students' basic needs.

But the navigators often struggle to provide all of the help that students need.

Strickland said much of her impact is direct. She helped one student who was fleeing domestic violence get funding to enroll in the college's GED program, a free laptop and Wi-Fi hotspot device, and a $500 scholarship.

"So far, they completed one term of the GED program, and they're now currently in the summer term," Stickland said of the student. "And they're working on becoming dual-enrolled to start credit courses that jump-start their future career goals."

At Oregon Coast, Jones said, she spends a lot of time online doing research about what benefits are available. "They might be there today, but tomorrow they're full and cannot accept any more referrals," she said.

Jones also meets with students one on one. "Sometimes I'm just the sounding board for students who are having a bad day and just need someone to talk to," she said.

All community colleges and public universities in Oregon have designated a ben-

efits navigator, but the approach varies by institution, said Elizabeth Guzman Arroyo, statewide director of STEP and Pathways to Opportunity. Both organizations are housed at Portland Community College, where Guzman Arroyo works, and focus on expanding access to higher education and economic mobility by bolstering public assistance. Guzman Arroyo is collecting data to measure how effective the benefits navigators are.

Some colleges have also adopted a single-stop model, where one center houses multiple staff members to connect students to public benefits.

"The model that's most effective really depends on the institution type," Guzman Arroyo said, according to the data they have seen so far. "A small case-management model is super effective in a smaller school, but a peer program or a single-stop model tends to be a little bit more effective in a larger school when you have a larger population of students to serve."

Peer-to-Peer Model

Illinois State's team of peer navigators, trained by Rise, will begin their work this fall. The student network will specifically target food insecurity.

Oregon State University already had a benefits navigator in place when its state bill was passed. But the university switched to a peer-to-peer model, like Rise's, after three years.

"We saw a lot of limits to his impact — often he was scheduled a month or more out," said Nicole Hindes, director of Oregon State's Basic Needs Center, in an email about the former benefits navigator. The peer model is designed to "increase the amount of support hours we have available for students and to create a 'drop-in anytime' approach that also impacts some of the stigma issues," she wrote.

Hunter M. Calvert, a student leader at the Oregon State center, said students also sometimes shy away from telling administrators how much they are struggling. "I think students in particular have kind of been taught to maybe not advocate for themselves as strongly in the face of authority," he said.

Calvert is one of four student leaders and 16 student staff members working at the center. They see students on a case-by-case basis, like Jones and Strickland, and also run the weekly campus food pantry and other events.

The benefit of employing students is twofold, Calvert said. When it comes to benefits navigators, "it's great to have one, but it's better to have 16," he said. And students who work in the center are given "this immense opportunity to learn and be imperfect and make mistakes, but also to be successful and grow into basic-needs navigators."

"The model that's most effective really depends on the institution type. A small case-management model is super effective in a smaller school, but a peer program or a single-stop model tends to be a little bit more effective in a larger school when you have a larger population of students to serve."

Over the past year, Rise has built 10 partnerships with colleges across the nation, from Los Angeles Valley College to the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Most of the new student networks are starting up this fall, Raphael said. The organization hires students, trains them in case management and trauma-informed care, and works with colleges to pay them $15 per hour, often in conjunction with the federal work-study financial-aid program.

Raphael said there just "isn't enough staff capacity" to address increasing basic-needs concerns. Student-focused models can be a solution, she said, or at least an extra layer of support.

Lack of Resources

But no matter the model, benefits navigators aren't always able to help students in the way they want to.

Strickland said a lack of funding is the main barrier she faces to fully supporting students. Oregon's legislation gave nearly $5 million to be distributed among community colleges and public universities to support benefits navigators. But the grants can't be used to provide direct financial support, she said.

"We can spend our grant for marketing, outreach, supplies like office equipment, training, and things like that," she said. "And so then you have a student who needs support right then and there, but there's no funding left, or a student's needs may be higher than what a program's limits allow for."

Oregon Coast Community College wasn't able to give Jones a budget for emergency aid. Jones applied for grants to fill the gaps, earning two for $5,000 a piece.

"So up until next April, I have $10,000 to help my students," she said. "But when you have, you know, 500 students, $10,000 doesn't go very far, which is why I have to limit to 'You get $100,' or 'You get your utilities paid,' and it's kind of a one-time shot."

Jones wishes that the state had done more to accommodate that issue. "When they created these positions, they should have at least looked at smaller colleges like OCCC that don't have the funds to have discretionary funding," she said. "They could have created some funding to go along with it because even a small amount can help."

Meanwhile, California's law gave the state's 116 community colleges a shared one-time allocation of $100 million plus $40 million yearly, with additional funding given based on the number of students who are low-income or receiving Pell Grants. All community colleges have now either hired or identified staff members to implement basic-needs centers, Melissa Villarin, a spokesperson for California Community Colleges, said in an email.

The California State and University of California systems, which have had student basic-needs programs in place for years, receive recurring state funding of $15 million and $18.5 million, respectively.

No additional funding for colleges was allocated under the Illinois bill. "But it doesn't say that they have to hire a new person" as the benefits navigator, said Pacione-Zayas, the state lawmaker. "It just says that there needs to be an identified individual or role that would take on these responsibilities."

Even when benefits navigators can find the money, they are often constrained by the availability of the actual resources.

Strickland said housing is her students' top need. But there aren't enough options for her to pull from. "It's hard because I want to help, but I can't just go make housing available," she said.

Finding a place to live is difficult enough — but finding one that follows regulations for vouchers is an extra challenge. "I even had one student where I think the voucher was for $736 and they found a place for $750," Strickland said. "But they couldn't get that place just because it didn't follow the guidelines."

Even when benefits navigators can find the money, they are often constrained by the availability of the actual resources.

Often, the barriers begin with students who refuse to accept help. This happens especially in the cases of housing insecurity, said Henoc M. Preciado, systemwide manager for the California State system's Basic Needs Initiative.

"What we hear sometimes is students thinking like: 'I'm okay with couch surfing like this. This works for me,'" he said. "And although it's still considered housing insecurity, the student is not wanting to accept the support because they feel that there's someone else who needs it more."

Jones said that "sometimes pride gets in the way," too. She has often heard students say: "I don't need help. And I will not sign up for SNAP benefits. I will do this on my own."

Strickland said that at her college, students are deterred from seeking help because there is no one-stop hub for services. Just this week, she met with a student who admitted they did not get help earlier because of anxiety.

"So if there's other students in the same boat, it might be beneficial for all student-support resources to be located in one area on the college campus," Strickland said. "That way, if they were to come in, they can meet everybody in one place."

Benefits navigators also worry that the stigma surrounding public assistance will prevent students from seeking their help. Calvert, the Oregon State senior, is trying to combat that stigma with better outreach.

"We want to communicate in a way so that students have no shame in coming in and getting care," Calvert said.

Normalizing Basic-Needs Assistance

Preciado has noticed the stigma associated with applying for support on California State's 23 campuses, too. To normalize these efforts, faculty and staff members are given training as basic-needs ambassadors.

Faculty members are also encouraged to include information about services in their syllabi "in the same way that we provide a statement on ADA accessibility for students in need of additional support," he said.

"Food pantries and this level of support is a very normal part of life," Preciado said. "And it's being offered on our college campuses in the same way that it's being offered outside of our campuses."

When addressing students who reject help because they feel others need it more, Preciado said it's important to remind them that "accepting support is not taking away support from anyone else."

"We want to support all the students in the best ways possible because we want to be able to tell our funders, the legislature, the community, what the level of need is so that we can continue to be well-resourced to continue to do this work," he said.

Reflecting on Cal State's years of experience with benefits navigators, Preciado said that partnering with off-campus, long-standing community organizations is key. "Supporting students' basic needs is not the work of a unit or an individual, it is the work of an entire community," he said.

In Oregon, Guzman Arroyo hopes the data they are collecting, which will be released next June, will help inform state lawmakers. The data will capture demographics of students being served in Oregon, the needs they are experiencing, and the actual help they were able to receive.

"But then also, we will be able to take the data around what we weren't able to connect students with and utilize that data for new legislation or influence on policy that legislators here in Oregon might be thinking through passing," Guzman Arroyo said.

Strickland and Jones both anticipate that their number of student cases will increase in the fall semester, especially as more students transition from online learning and awareness of their services spreads. They also hope to expand their connections with community resources.

"A lot of people don't even know that we're here in the community," Jones said. "By educating the community partners and the students, I'm hoping to be able to broaden what I can do."

Over the next academic year, Jones is going to stretch her limited grant money as far as it can go. "Even a $100 gift card to Fred Meyer, just because it has both food and gas, can make a real difference in some of these students' lives."

Brianna Hatch was a reporting intern at The Chronicle.

Originally published August 19, 2022

ALL OF THE ABOVE

Underrepresented Student Success Requires a Multifaceted Approach

While pre-college primers for high school students can fuel underrepresented student growth at universities, an array of services is essential to supporting such students not only academically but also emotionally and financially.

Scholarships and financial aid enable these students to attend college — often as the first in their families to do so — but counseling, tutoring and mentoring help them stick, thrive and graduate, with a bona fide opportunity to achieve upward economic mobility.

Sometimes it's as basic as providing food or a suit for an interview. A pantry at New Jersey Institute of Technology does that and more, with the support of alumni who have donated a refrigerator and money to match fundraising.

A surge in student use of the pantry, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, spurred the university to make it the focus of GivingTuesday in December, raising $5,000 that was matched by an alum and grew to more than $14,200.

Building on EOP

Historically, a university's Educational Opportunity Program has played a leading role in nurturing students from underrepresented communities, given its broad range of services, from summer sessions that prepare incoming students for college life to daily tutoring, academic advising and counseling.

That continues to be true, particularly at NJIT, where 70% of its EOP cohort are underrepresented minorities.

This cohort, however, needs more than what EOP provides. That's where outside support can help. Last year, for example, NJIT secured a five-year, $800,000 grant from the philanthropic arm of PSE&G — New Jersey's largest utility — that funds need-based scholarships, research and college-prep programs that introduce underrepresented students to STEM.

The federal government is another key resource. Upward Bound grants from the U.S. Department of Education provide $1.1 million to bolster the TRIO Upward Bound Program at NJIT's Center for Pre-College Programs that will benefit hundreds of high school students in the university's home city of Newark through 2025.

Similarly, this year's federal spending bill included $1.3 million for NJIT to fuel engineering instruction and apprenticeship training in manufacturing and mechatronics that primes underserved students to pursue degrees in STEM.

Such investments illustrate the university's reputation as a national leader in student upward mobility. As President Teik C. Lim explains, "The funding for these important initiatives will open more doors for more people, and will yield a better and more diverse workforce.

Talent is everywhere, but opportunities are not — we are fixing that."

Career Development

Career services are also critical to student success, providing access to real-world internships and cooperative education experiences that often spark job offers. And that need only grew during COVID.

So, NJIT continued to offer career fairs throughout the pandemic by shifting to an online platform that facilitated resumé sharing, group informational sessions and one-on-one interviews with employers. And when the university returned to an in-person fair in the fall of 2022, it set records for student and employer participation.

A softer but no less important measure of success for underrepresented students is, do they feel welcome? Also, are they overwhelmed?

Addressing Mental Health

These questions underscore the need for a robust counseling center. NJIT's Center for Counseling and Psychological Services addresses emotional, social and family concerns with a staff of psychologists and counselors who are versed in academics, career planning, multiculturalism and the needs of LGBTQ individuals.

Alumni, once again, can play a critical role, particularly in acclimation. At NJIT, successful alumni who benefited from EOP meet current EOP students on campus to provide encouragement, inspiration and advice. Tammy Pelaez, a sophomore majoring in financial technology, found such networking invaluable.

"As a first-generation, Latinx-American woman in STEM student, I was so thankful for meeting people who were able to provide me details on future jobs, internships and more," Pelaez said.

Ultimately, universities strive to be holistic in their support of the underrepresented and first-generation students. It's a critical stage in their development and their needs are varied and deep. As such, their success takes a village.

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