

A TALE OF TWO STUDENTS:
BUILDING A CULTURE
OF ENGAGEMENT IN
THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE



*Enrolling in a community college may be as intimidating
for those students who eventually succeed as it is for those who don't.
Why, then, do some persevere while others leave before they meet their goals?
Institutional practice can tip the balance.*

BY KAY M. MCCLENNY AND THOMAS GREENE

WHETHER IT IS THE BEST OF times or the worst of times for today's community college students depends primarily on how their stories unfold in the days and weeks immediately after they step through the open door. Open admissions are a hallmark of community colleges, which so strongly affirm the mission of providing access to higher education. Since their inception, community colleges have been at the forefront in educating and training many of the nation's most underserved citizens. For large numbers of Americans, therefore,

they have provided a stepping-stone to a better life.

However, the persistent achievement gaps involving those traditionally underserved by higher education—particularly students of color and those from low-income families—clearly demonstrate that too many students are being left behind. As some have said, the open door too often becomes a revolving door. Community colleges are increasingly recognizing the need to revise or, in some cases, to wholly redesign students' educational experiences so that more students will have a success story to tell.

In this article, we present two stories that depict the best and worst of times experienced by today's community college students. Within these narratives are both vestiges of the past—pieces that some colleges have yet to fully discard—and exemplars of a potentially brighter, more engaging future. While they are fictitious, these vignettes describe composite student experiences, both positive and negative, that are not atypical in community colleges. The stories are supported by findings from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) and from twenty-four student focus groups conducted by CCSSE staff in 2003 and 2004. Our hope is that these vignettes will convey the importance of accurately understanding students' experiences at each college as they are told through systematically gathered evidence. In particular, the stories reinforce the critical importance of engaging students—connecting them early and often to one another, to faculty and staff, and to the subject matter of their studies. If nothing else, the stories emphasize the reality that in community colleges, given the multiple commitments of their students and the challenges they bring with them to college, engagement does not happen by accident. It must happen by design.

THE WORST OF TIMES

HE WIPED THE FOG from the windshield as he paused to consider his decision one last time. It had been over two years since he had last set foot on the campus of Dickens Community College, and to James, the scattering of buildings now plainly visible before him provided a poignant reminder of one of the most discouraging times of his life.

As he sat behind the wheel, insulated from the sounds of the outside world, images of that recent past came streaming back into focus. He thought about his first days at Dickens, helplessly wandering from place to place, befuddled by the vague directions from people who obviously considered his questions a nuisance. He recalled his growing frustration at having to trudge back and forth between buildings, going one place to apply for admission, to another to get help with complicated financial aid forms, and to a third to meet with an adviser. Everywhere, the waiting lines seemed endless. In the adviser's office, he soon realized that although she was pleasant, she too was completely overwhelmed. Instead of taking the time to answer his questions, she quickly handed him a catalogue and a course schedule, went over some general information, and told him to come back after classes had started to discuss his academic plans.

James hadn't memorized the college catalogue, but

he had flipped through enough of it to get a handle on his degree requirements as well as a pretty good headache. He had also scrutinized the fall course schedule but had found it nearly impossible to come up with classes that fit his work schedule. College algebra was a possibility, but was he ready? It had been over six years since he had last taken high school math, yet taking a remedial course, as suggested in the catalogue, seemed like a step backward. In the end, James enrolled in the algebra course simply because it was one of only two required courses for his degree program that were offered at night.

Soon after the semester began, his experience had gone from bad to worse. James vividly remembered how on the first night in class, his professor had strode to the front of the room, stared directly at James (he thought), and without so much as a "hello," announced that half of the class would drop out by midterm. And after seeing how the professor taught, it wasn't hard for James to understand why. Every week was the same boring chalk-and-talk routine: lecture, example problems, and homework assignment. To the consternation of the students, the professor believed this was the best—and only—way to teach mathematics. For James and the other students who preferred a hands-on style of learning, the tedium was unbearable. Worse, the professor seemed particularly impatient, always rushing from one topic to another and showing little tolerance for the confused students who were often left in his frantic wake. Twice, James mustered the courage to ask for help, only to come away feeling further devalued and wondering whether the color of his skin was yet again the reason for another's cold indifference.

After about six weeks, the price became too high. James knew that to stay any longer would only mean more frustration and self-doubt, and at that point, more was at stake for him than a passing grade. With his self-esteem bruised but intact, James turned his back on Dickens, vowing never to return.

In the cold silence of his parked car, James recognized his dilemma. If he couldn't make it at Dickens, career advancement would continue to pass him by. Without an increase in pay and benefits, even his most modest dreams would move further from reach. The harsh reality staring James in the face was obvious: the path to the middle class ran directly through Dickens Community College. Considering the needs of his growing family, James knew what had to be done. Summoning all his available courage, he pushed his memories aside, stepped out into the crisp morning air, and began the long walk to the open doors of the college. He hoped only that this time things would be different.

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THE BEST OF TIMES

TEARS FLOWED the first time it occurred to Rosa that she might actually achieve her dreams. The thought of earning a decent, living wage—one that would allow her to spend more time with her three-year-old daughter, eventually buy a home, and even save for retirement—seemed like pure whimsy, the fanciful musings of a single mother seeking respite from the day-to-day drudgery of a minimum-wage, sixty-hour-per-week motel housekeeping job. However, since she had taken her first tentative step toward the nursing program at Alldale Community College about six months ago, fantasy had somehow given way to possibility. For the first time in her life, Rosa saw the real prospect of a brighter future.

When Rosa had initially arrived on campus, the first thing she had seen was the college's values—Learning, Community, and Diversity—prominently displayed on banners lining the walkway to the college's front doors. Once she was over the threshold, Rosa had immediately collided with the Welcome Center, which was intentionally situated in the direct path of all new students. The staff at the center greeted Rosa with warmth and genuine interest, patiently answering her questions and personally escorting her to the college's one-stop student ser-

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vices area. Once there, Rosa had moved efficiently through the admission and registration process, participating in the mandatory math and English assessments and a brief new student orientation session, all in that first evening. The financial aid adviser had walked her through the application process for federal and state assistance and had helped her identify and apply to the other support programs for which she was eligible. She also had had an opportunity to meet with her academic adviser as a required part of the registration process. For Rosa, having that immediate personal connection with someone who understood her situation and believed in her ability to succeed had made all the difference during those first few days.

Together, Rosa and her adviser had set up on-campus care for Rosa's daughter, laid out an educational plan—a semester-by-semester road map for achieving her academic goals—and developed a course schedule that took into account Rosa's unique academic needs and her nonacademic responsibilities. Based on the adviser's recommendations, her assessment scores, and Alldale's mandatory placement and prerequisite policy, Rosa chose to enroll in Healthy Foundations, an evening

learning community that combined developmental math with a student success course tailored specifically to the needs of first-time students aiming for health careers.

As Rosa attended her first class sessions, she quickly realized that her instructors already knew her name. Each faculty member had an electronic class roster that included every student's photograph, contact information, and newly assigned e-mail address. About four weeks into the semester, when she began to fall behind in her math class, Rosa discovered firsthand that the college's early-alert system triggered when a new student's grades indicate academic difficulty. One evening, she received a call from her adviser, who provided informa-

The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) focuses on institutional practices and student behaviors that are linked to higher levels of student learning and persistence. In 2004, more than 92,000 students responded to the survey. To learn more about the CCSSE, visit <http://www.ccsse.org>.

tion about the college's math lab and free tutoring services—and an offer to take her personally to introduce her to the lab coordinator. With this just-in-time help, Rosa was able to get back on track.

Alldale also employed a peer calling campaign through which new students received offers of advice and support over the phone from more experienced students, who checked in with them several times throughout their first year. Rosa benefited from all of this, in addition to her use of supplemental instruction and a number of other on-campus and round-the-clock online support services. Even the physical environment of the campus, with its numerous common study areas, facilitated Rosa's and her fellow students' collaborative endeavors.

Rosa was surprised by the unexpected benefits of her first learning community experience. It may have been due to the realization that she was not alone—that at times, many of her fellow students also felt overwhelmed, questioned their ability to succeed, or were distracted by the chaos of their outside life. It may also have been in response to the high yet achievable expectations of their instructors or an active learning environment that called on them to work together and take collective ownership of the learning process. Whatever the reason, Rosa and her classmates bonded quickly, establishing a connection that provided a critical source of support as well as a means of holding one another accountable. Such a tight-knit group meant that a student who failed to show up for class would likely hear from a number of concerned peers. It also meant that when plagued by waning motivation or taxed by the demands of their other life roles, Rosa and her classmates were more apt to seek help and redouble their efforts, aware that in allowing their studies to slide they would be letting down more people than just themselves.

Not only did Rosa's instructors create a strong collaborative learning environment, accommodate individually and culturally diverse approaches to learning, and provide prompt feedback on student performance, but

they also took a genuine interest in each individual student. Faculty ensured that Rosa and the others received personal attention both in the classroom and through required one-on-one student-faculty meetings held at least twice during the semester.

ENGAGEMENT BY DESIGN

HOW HAD ROSA avoided the fate that befalls so many students in similar life circumstances? What had allowed her to weather the sudden storms that so often sabotage the efforts of individuals who struggle mightily to extend their education and improve their quality of life? There is little doubt that Rosa's own tenacious spirit, intelligence, and desire to create a better life for her daughter contributed to her success. Yet as we saw with James, one's personal attributes are sometimes not enough to guarantee success, even in an open-door college.

The difference for Rosa was that as she hesitantly approached the community college, she was met at the doorstep by people who were singularly focused on ensuring her success. Her college reflected a culture of engagement—a shared, institutionwide commitment to establishing strong ties to connect students with their peers, with faculty and staff, and with the subject matter of the learning experience. The importance of student engagement in promoting learning and persistence in college is well documented in the growing body of research on undergraduate student learning, which is helpfully summarized by Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini in *How College Affects Students* and by George Kuh and his associates in *Student Success in College*.

Originating from the college mission, vision, and values and reflected in policies, programs, services, and even facilities, a culture of engagement ensures that students are channeled into and actively engaged in the educational practices that research suggests matter most to their success. In such a culture, the student experience is purposefully designed to make engagement enticing and inescapable.

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The intentionally engaging college begins making good on its promise to students early in their college-going experience, aware that the initial contact period—the first few minutes, hours, and days on campus prior to the start of the term—is when many of the most vulnerable first-time students become overwhelmed and simply disappear. At Northwest Vista College in Texas, for example, banners displaying the college's central values line the campus walkways and bridges. Visible to students, faculty, staff, and members of the community, the banners provide a constant reminder of values that include learning, community, diversity, and integrity. Mindful of the importance of convenient, student-friendly intake processes, Sinclair Community College in Ohio created a call center, a verbal one-stop shop where students can get answers to their questions about admissions, financial aid, registration, and fee payment. Results from the 2004 Community College Survey of Student Engagement document important elements of the beginning-of-college experience for community college students nationally and help to create targets for improvement. For example,

- Many students (88 percent of those surveyed) say that academic advising is very or somewhat important to them, but 36 percent report that they rarely or never use the service.
- Only 25 percent have participated in a college orientation program or course.
- Less than half (42 percent) of the respondents say that their college provides the financial support they need to afford their education.

Increasingly, community colleges are taking seriously the importance of focusing on students' earliest experiences. Housatonic Community College in Connecticut is one of a growing number of colleges that

have made advising mandatory. Zane State College in Ohio has seen a 10 percent increase in fall-to-fall retention since instituting a required orientation course. Similarly positive results have been produced by the Health Careers Success Seminar at Community College of Denver. Taking a comprehensive approach, the Start Right Program at Valencia Community College in Florida mandates developmental and prerequisite sequences, giving students a better chance at early success. The college also enforces application deadlines and does not add students after the first class meeting so that real work can begin on the first day. At Tallahassee Community College, also in Florida, faculty members begin the term already knowing their students' faces and establish early interaction by sending them a personal e-mail welcome. These connections are accomplished by using an electronic roster that includes students' photos and the e-mail addresses that students are assigned during the admission process.

For most community college students, reality means juggling a multitude of responsibilities, including work and family, which often limit their opportunities to interact with faculty and other students in educationally substantive ways outside the classroom. This reality is depicted in these findings from CCSSE 2004:

- Almost two-thirds (64 percent) of students work more than twenty hours per week.
- One-third (34 percent) of students spend eleven or more hours per week caring for dependents.
- Almost all commute to class.
- Most students (84 percent) do not participate in cocurricular activities.

While some aspects of students' lives are not within colleges' control, it is clearly possible, with intentionality and focus, to design collegiate experiences in ways that promote important interactions. Key targets for

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these efforts are illustrated in CCSSE survey data showing that 44 percent of community college students worked with other students on projects during class, but only 21 percent worked with classmates on projects outside of class. In addition, while 15 percent of students very often or often discussed ideas from readings or classes with instructors outside of class, 49 percent never did so.

In response to the challenges faced by multitasking students, colleges that are building strong cultures of engagement strive to make the most of students' available time. Centrally important are efforts that focus on enhancing classroom experiences through curricular approaches such as cooperative learning, service learning, and project-based learning. At Texas State Technical College–Marshall, faculty transform learning theory into practice by making students the team leaders and facilitators of real-world group projects. Expectations and consequences for student performance are outlined at the beginning of each course, and students accept responsibility for their own learning process.

Learning communities, an approach that is expanding rapidly in community colleges, actively engage students in collaborative, interdisciplinary experiences in which strong, meaningful connections with peers, faculty, and the academic subject matter are intentionally fostered. La Guardia Community College in New York, for example, offers a multitude of learning communities that engage students in role-playing activities, problem-based learning assignments, team-taught classes, interdisciplinary research, and field trips that promote shared responsibility for learning.

So important are these connections, and so limited is the capture time—the time that colleges have in which to engage students—that leading-edge community colleges have made collaborative learning experiences inescapable. At Skagit Valley College in Washington, students participate in at least two learning communities as part of the general education requirements for an Associate of Arts or an Associate of Science degree.

In another example of intentional design, Santa Fe Community College in Florida recognizes the impor-

tance of campus environment in promoting a variety of collaborative learning approaches. The college's Tyree Library provides ten group study rooms, and like the entire library, these rooms offer wireless Internet access. Students can also grab a cup of coffee and work together in the library's café or on its covered patio.

Focus groups and interviews with faculty members who are committed to student engagement suggest that while they very intentionally create a cooperative, peer-supported environment, they are by no means hands-off observers. Rather, they see themselves as facilitators of student learning, chosen specifically for their unwavering commitment to student success. Simply stated, they believe that anyone can learn, given the right conditions; and with support from carefully designed professional development programs, these faculty members can become highly adept at putting those conditions in place.

By making engagement inescapable, intentionally placing the experiences that matter most directly in students' paths from the moment they first arrive on campus, community colleges give them little choice but to involve themselves deeply in their education. And although these students may still hesitate to fully trust in their emerging success, they will be rooted securely enough in the educational process that when buffeted by occasional winds of self-doubt and life's myriad other challenges, they will be much less willing to surrender their dreams. Just ask Rosa.

NOTES

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