



President's **FOCUS**

Monthly Report to the Board

April 2017

Impacts: ACES

When I first came to Montgomery College, one of my goals was to build a program that would mitigate some of the factors that keep so many from attending—or completing—college. Poverty, inadequate academic preparation, financial insecurity, and insufficient guidance about enrollment and degree requirements each adds its own burden that ultimately hinders progress to degree. The birth and growth of Achieving Collegiate Excellence and Success (ACES) has been an accomplishment for the College on several levels: it has deepened our interactions with the local public high school system, as well as with the Universities at Shady Grove. It has changed the paradigm of “at risk” students to a more productive “at promise” model. And it has allowed us all to take a deliberate, research-based approach to lowering the barriers that create the most stubborn obstacles to student success. This issue of *President's Focus* will examine the impacts of the ACES program over the last four years.

As you know, ACES students generally come from underrepresented racial or ethnic backgrounds or are the first in their family to attend college. The program began in the fall of 2013 at 10 high schools with high numbers of families eligible for Free and Reduced Meals (FARMS) rates. The majority of ACES students are non-white (69 percent). To mitigate the financial, academic, and cultural variables that can impede progress, the ACES program inserts trained coaches at each stage of the pipeline of secondary and post-secondary education, surrounding students with services,



structures, and communities that can lower a variety of hurdles. This “wrap around” approach means that students are followed by coaches while in high school, once enrolled at Montgomery College, and once they have transferred to a four-year institution.

The program’s focus on “intrusive” advising means that academic coaches are proactive in monitoring and interacting with students regarding their academic progress. It also emphasizes cultural competence, which means that ACES coaches are well versed in the role that cultural difference can play in the success of student-teacher communication and the valuation of education in different households. The diversity of the staff reflects the student population as well: 14 of the 18 staff members are people of color and 12 are bilingual. All of the staff members receive training in cultural competence.

ACES coaches are trained to respond to a number of common challenges faced by students who qualify for the program: despite being just out of high school, many ACES students work, so balancing classes and jobs can be a challenge; many also care for family members, younger children or elderly parents, so their “study time” is not always their own. Given our immigrant demographics, many come from families where English is not spoken at home or they have attended school in the US for only a few years. While these challenges are distinct, they can all be mitigated to some degree with the insights of an attentive adult, knowledgeable about the College’s rules and resources, who can keep a close eye on student progress and make recommendations for changes when needed.

One of the keys to preparing students for college, the literature suggests, is starting early: ACES students apply for the program in their sophomore year of high school and are assigned a coach for their junior and senior years. This means that many “first-generation” students begin hearing about college early on and connecting their academic progress in high school to college testing and admissions. More than 74 percent of current ACES students are first in their families to enroll in college. Since many of our students would otherwise be hindered by financial stressors, ACES coaches help families navigate the process of searching for scholarships and applying for financial aid to pay for college. The coaches also help with test preparation, college applications, and campus visits.

Once ACES students arrive at Montgomery College they are each assigned a campus-based coach, who provides ongoing support and advising to address other barriers that may arise. Among



other challenges, ACES students sometimes arrive academically underprepared for college-level classes. Coaches help them see how developmental courses can prepare them to enter college-level academics with the rigor they need to earn credits.

Many ACES students need help envisioning a career path and then connecting it to an academic major. ACES coaches are specially trained to walk through these explorations with students while keeping them on track in a timely manner. Since the ultimate goal is transfer to a four-year institution, students are carefully coached to enroll purposefully in classes that will transfer successfully. At no point in the academic pipeline are students left on their own. Counselors work diligently to fill in the gaps that often arise for students whose backgrounds may not adequately prime them for the decisions and preparation that successful College completion demands.

While the program is still young—it is entering its fifth year in 2017—we are already seeing some encouraging outcomes. ACES has grown by attraction from 1,000 students enrolled in the first class to 1,300 by the second year, and then 1,700 by the third year. There are currently 624 students attending MC. Our fall-to-spring retention rate is strong: 91 percent, compared to 71 percent for our overall student population. ACES students' GPAs are also impressive, surpassing our average non-ACES student GPA: 2.7 for ACES and 2.1 for others. ACES students' course pass rates have also surpassed those of non-ACES, recent high school graduates, at 82 percent for ACES and 72 percent for others. None of this would have been possible without the program's attention to the financial hurdles that discourage many from enrolling in college. With 223 students enrolled in the FY17 cohort, 150 of them are receiving Pell grants, and 215 receiving some kind of financial aid for a total of \$1.1 million. As a first-generation college attender myself, I remember just how confusing the introductory requirements for the FAFSA were to me and my father. The hurdle of the FAFSA process is one that has become evident over the years, and the introduction of coaches into the process seems to have yielded productive outcomes: 90 percent of ACES students were awarded financial aid in year 2015–2016, compared to 52 percent for non-ACES students.

The long-term success of the ACES program has yet to be determined, but its innovation is inspiring supporters throughout the county. Since mid-2013, the Montgomery College Foundation has secured almost \$2 million in support for ACES scholarships and program costs. Last year, the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation awarded a three-year, \$250,000 grant for ACES



scholarships, \$150,000 of which was a match challenge to secure new funds. Almost 200 additional gifts for ACES have come from individuals, area businesses and foundations, including Westat, Pepco, the City of Takoma Park, the Community Foundation for the National Region in Montgomery County, the Caobas Foundation, and Les and Marsha Levine, among others. Our county council, which initially invested \$600,000 in the program, then watched its growth in 10 high schools, subsequently voted to expand it to three more schools, giving even more students a shot at a college education. There are now 47 Montgomery College ACES graduates currently enrolled at four year institutions. We will be following their success with bachelor's degrees closely, as we welcome the new crop of ACES students next fall, each taking another, courageous step toward a college degree.

Questions for Discussion

1. What observations stood out to you in this report?
2. Do you think ACES could be scaled up further? What challenges could it face at a larger scale?
3. What other strategies might help ACES students transition smoothly to the workplace after college?

