

## **Survey Identifies 6 Ways to Help Community-College Students Succeed**

*By Ashley Marchand*

Even though most community-college students say they are motivated, many haven't developed the habits that could lead them to actually achieve their academic goals.

That was a key finding of a new national survey of community- and technical-college students that is being released on Monday. A [report](#) on the survey, "Benchmarking and Benchmarks: Effective Practice With Entering Students," provides six benchmarks for colleges that are trying to improve students' habits during the critical first three weeks of class.

The Survey of Entering Student Engagement, or Sense, which is administered by the Center for Community College Student Engagement, was given to more than 50,000 new students at 120 community colleges during the fourth and fifth weeks of classes in fall 2009 to assess early impressions of institutional practices and student behaviors. The survey began in 2007 with a pilot test involving 22 colleges.

While 90 percent of community-college students said they agreed or strongly agreed that they had the motivation to do what it took to succeed in college and 85 percent believed they were academically prepared, about 33 percent said they had already turned in an assignment late and 24 percent of students said they neglected to turn in an assignment at all. A quarter of the students surveyed also reported that they skipped class one or more times within the first three weeks of class.

### **Goal-Thwarting Behavior**

Angela Oriano-Darnall, assistant director of the survey, said students' goals when they first enroll at community colleges are sometimes negated by their actual habits in the classroom.

"That gap between students' aspirations and those behaviors that we know do not better prepare them for success in college, ultimately result in high attrition rates among community-college students," she said.

The six benchmarks listed in the report offer staff members and administrators ideas about how to help more students stay in college and graduate or transfer. They are fostering "college readiness" programs for high-school students, connecting early with students, encouraging faculty and staff members to have high

expectations for students, providing a clear academic path, engaging students in the learning process, and maintaining an academic and social-support network.

Iowa Valley Community College District, for example, provides lunch-hour workshops to support new students academically and socially. The lunches have been particularly helpful for students, like laid-off workers, who were surprised to find themselves back in the classroom.

Recently two local factories shut down and another downsized, sending about 150 blue-collar workers to Iowa Valley to retrain for other jobs.

"They were people who, for lack of a better way to say it, never had to think like college students before," said Jim A. Merritt, director of the career and employment center at Iowa Valley.

Staff members and administrators reviewed the new students' answers from a 2008 field test of Sense to determine their needs and perceptions about academic success. They then administered a separate questionnaire to learn what kinds of help students wanted.

Those answers led to the development, in spring 2009, of "lunch and learn" workshops on the topics of preparing for final examinations, interacting with student advisers, and taking online courses.

Iowa Valley also helped students connect early with staff members (one of the key benchmarks) during the workshops. "We really wanted to put faces in front of the students," Mr. Merritt said. "We really wanted to do it in person so they could see those people, get to know them, and learn their names. Retention really goes up when they make a personal connection."

### **Keeping Students Engaged**

Retention did seem to rise as a result of the workshops. The retention rate of the 78 students who participated in the spring workshops was 93 percent the following fall, compared with the general student-retention rate of 75 percent over the same period.

Connecting students to community-college faculty and staff members, whether through workshops or even academic advising, can also help create a clear academic plan for students, another benchmark identified in the survey.

While the majority of students said they had help setting academic goals and choosing classes in their first semester, about 30 percent said an adviser did not help them choose classes. And 31 percent said they disagreed or strongly disagreed that an adviser helped them set academic goals and create a plan to achieve those goals.

Not only is it important for students to lay out their academic goals with the help of a faculty member, it is also critical for faculty members to have their own set of high expectations for the students they advise. "When entering students perceive clear, high expectations from college staff and faculty," the survey said, "they are more likely to understand what it takes to be successful and adopt behaviors that lead to achievement."

Ms. Oriano-Darnall calls the first few weeks of class the "front door" of the community-college experience, the time when academic habits can be formed. Opportunities to help students during those opening weeks are crucial to bolstering attendance and ultimately graduation, she said.

"We have to focus on the front door of colleges because students don't succeed if they don't come back," she said. "If we can't get them through the first semester or the second semester, they're not going to complete their educational goals."

## Retooling Remediation

April 14, 2010

Six states that are trying to revamp remedial education are focusing as much on what happens outside of the classroom -- in state policies -- as inside. Among the targets for change are state funding formulas and individual course rules.

The [Developmental Education Initiative](#), a three-year project funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation for Education, recently unveiled the [state policy framework and strategies](#) that its six participating state partners plan to implement so that they can dramatically increase the number of students who complete college preparatory work and move on to complete college-level work. The six states – Connecticut, Florida, North Carolina, Ohio, Texas and Virginia – were selected for this project because of their prior commitment to community college reform; institutions from these states were first-round participants in [Achieving the Dream](#), a multi-year and -state initiative to increase the success of two-year college students.

Michael Lawrence Collins, who is program director at [Jobs for the Future](#) and helped frame the policy goals of the initiative, said the time has come for states to take ownership of their role in reforming remedial education. He admitted that some state officials do not see it as their responsibility to organize and reward innovation in curricular design, preferring to leave this role to the philanthropic sector. Still, he argued that it is incumbent on states to create the conditions in their policy frameworks that can foster this type of institutional creativity.

“Most institutions are trying to innovate [their remedial programs],” Collins said. “But, here’s the thing: they can’t do it inside their current funding formula. We’re saying, ‘You’ve got the data metrics; give your institutions some resources. Remove the policy barriers to let them try to remediate students in different ways.’ It’s almost like [research and development]. That’ll point us to what works and augment what is a weak evidence-based system.”

Collins said he would like to see states remove “rigid census dates and seat-time requirements,” which he argued hinder innovation in remedial coursework design. For instance, as most states fund courses for a 16-week or semester-long model, those remedial courses or methods that do not fit such a model do not receive money. Collins argued that this derails “accelerated delivery” methods such as short refresher courses that only last a few sessions and cover only the specific areas in which students are deficient, a strategy which, he noted, has achieved success in research. Many studies have found that students who take a long time to reach college credit courses are likely never to do so, while the refresher approach lets new students start in right away on college-level work.

“We’re not necessarily after separate funds for developmental education, but support for institutions to do things differently if it helps students,” Collins said. “If it’s a line item in a budget, fantastic. If it’s an augmented funding formula to weigh developmental education delivery, that’s also great. They can do it any way they want. We just want states to begin to change their minds about how they fund developmental education. That’ll vary from state to state.”

Though changing funding mechanisms is the primary point of the initiative, there are a number of other “policy levers” the participants are suggesting that their state lawmakers can use to improve the delivery of developmental education. Some of the other suggestions include aligning college entrance criteria with the exit requirements of high school, redesigning curriculums to help students avoid remedial courses whenever possible and making data on student success more easily sharable and available.

Following up on the broad policy framework put forth by Jobs for the Future, education officials from the six states participating in the initiative will soon release detailed plans showing how they hope to implement reforms to developmental education. These officials have already released a set of [policy priorities](#), hinting at major changes in their states, and took time to talk to *Inside Higher Ed* about the potential impact of their work.

“We think funding is the biggest barrier for our institutions to stretch their wings,” said Cynthia Ferrell, developmental education consultant to the Texas Association of Community Colleges. “The way they’re funded locks them into doing things they’ve always done them. This limits them being innovative and the pace of remediation when

it's tied to a 16-week course. If there are non-course-based services or other methods, they haven't been funded by the state."

Though Ferrell said the state would like to move eventually to an outcomes-based funding system – appropriating dollars to institutions based on how many students complete courses instead of enroll in them – she noted that the state has already adopted some separate funding mechanisms for remedial coursework at community colleges.

"The state has funded innovation grants to provide money outside of regular funding for the piloting of development course redesigns, case management systems for students and combining student services," Ferrell explained. "Also, the state is providing some funding for non-semester links [or refresher] courses."

Texas plans to support the scaling of "promising innovations and redesigns."

Back east, the Virginia Community College System is in the process of redesigning its English, mathematics and reading developmental education programs. Eventually, it will "develop mechanisms and methodologies to hold colleges accountable for the success of developmental education." An annual institution tracking system is planned to be in place by July. Though the details of this accountability system are still being finalized, state officials agree that the conversation surrounding remedial education has changed substantially in recent years.

"It's been a culture change for Virginia," said Gretchen Schmidt, the community college system's director of education policy. "Talking about developmental education within our Department of Education is a shift. Just like we talk about student success all the time, we're now talking about college readiness and developmental education all the time at meetings. It's not like Achieving the Dream, where some colleges are participating and some are not. When the statewide recommendations come out [for the redesign] and they're proofed by the presidents, everyone will be on board. We've really built an internal culture of evidence."

Officials in Florida are hoping to reduce the need for remediation at community colleges through "early intervention" techniques in the state's high schools. John Hughes, association vice chancellor for evaluation at the Florida Department of Education's Division of Community Colleges, noted that the state is in the process of procuring a customized college placement test that judges a student's understanding of the material outlined in the [Common Core Standards Initiative](#), which Florida's K-12 institutions recently adopted.

Florida plans to provide "an opportunity for college placement testing and remediation while in high school." Officials believe more high school students will eventually have to take remedial courses before they graduate. Given the funding difficulties in Florida, community college officials welcome the help from their secondary school colleagues.

"It's been difficult to support developmental education in the past," said Judy Bilsky, executive vice chancellor of the department's Division of Community Colleges. "That's one of the reasons why we've been so interested, in Florida, in sharing the responsibility of college readiness with the [K-12] school districts. We're hoping to move most of developmental education to the 12th grade. ... That'll free up funding to go to the next level of courses [at the community colleges]."

Even if Florida succeeds in aligning high school completion requirements with college entrance requirements, officials say there will still be room for remedial courses. They will just be more useful for adult students returning to education instead of traditional-age college students, Hughes said.

— [David Moltz](#)

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## How Do You Build the Best-Educated Country?

*By Libby Nelson*

Dyersburg, Tenn.

A few weeks ago, Andrea Franckowiak's phone rang, and Ginger, a former student, was on the other line. She'd called to say thank you.

Ms. Franckowiak, an associate professor of writing at Dyersburg State Community College, in western Tennessee, remembered Ginger well. At a college where four out of five students need at least one remedial class before beginning college-level work, Ginger had struggled more than most. It took her six semesters to pass the college's remedial writing course and move on to Composition I.

But she eventually passed, and as she told her former professor, she went on to get a bachelor's degree from the University of Tennessee at Martin.

Replicating successes like Ginger's many times over is necessary if the United States has any hope of meeting President Obama's goal of becoming the world's best-educated country by 2020. Meeting that goal will also hinge on changing attitudes in states like Tennessee, which has long ranked among the lowest in the nation in the proportion of residents with a college degree, and in places like Dyersburg, a former factory town where educators often struggle to persuade residents that a college degree is no longer a luxury.

Even as state leaders in Tennessee and elsewhere agree on emphasizing the goal of getting more people through college, some college officials question the proposed solutions and whether the emphasis on graduating more people on time is the right measure of success.

"Why is it because you graduate, you're productive?" asked Jane Theiling, director of Dyersburg State's developmental-studies program, and the college's mathematics coordinator. "Why can't you be productive because now you can read to your child?"

### Values and Happy Meals

Dyersburg is a town of about 17,000, an hour and a half north of Memphis on state highways that cut through fields of cotton, sod, and soybeans. The town's edges are defined by suburban-style strip malls, vestiges of a building boom in the 1980s, before factories started to close and jobs dried up.

For years many residents have regarded a college degree as little more than a fancy piece of paper. "The culture does not appreciate higher education," said Karen Bowyer, who has been president of Dyersburg State for 25 years.

A high-school degree, or even less, was enough to get a job at the nearby Goodyear tire factory or the Worldcolor printing plant in town. Some residents in the heavily Baptist region distrust a college education because they think it leads students to question their faith, administrators said. In the county where Dyersburg State is located, nearly 18 percent of residents live in poverty, and attending college can be a distant dream for those just trying to get by.

Persuading parents and students that a degree is valuable has become part of the community college's job. In a recent promotion, McDonald's in Dyersburg handed out 50,000 bookmarks that touted the financial value of a college degree to customers who ordered Happy Meals. The bookmarks, provided by the community college, were printed with a chart that listed average income by levels of education, showing residents that they could earn an average of \$67,766 with a bachelor's degree and \$82,022 with a master's degree, but only \$38,837 as a high-school graduate.

College degrees of any kind are rare in northwest Tennessee. One of the seven counties Dyersburg State serves, Lake County, has the lowest proportion of young adults with a college degree of any county in Tennessee—and the fifth-lowest of any county in the nation. Only 5 percent of people ages 25 to 34 have an associate degree or higher, compared with the national average of 38 percent and the statewide average of 31 percent. Even in Dyer County, where Dyersburg is located and where degree attainment is highest among the counties the college serves, only 20 percent of 25- to 34-year-olds have a college degree.

"When I graduated from school, it wasn't hard to get a pretty good job," said Tracey Crossno, 37, who enrolled at Dyersburg State this fall to study nursing after working as a mortgage processor. "I wasn't going to college because it wasn't a priority. I could make money instead of studying."

That attitude is beginning to change, college leaders said, particularly since high-paying manufacturing jobs are leaving the region. But it is still pervasive among older residents.

"We still have a group of people who are the parents and the grandparents who don't see the value of higher education, and they don't encourage the kids," says J. Dan Gullett, assistant vice president for academic affairs at Dyersburg State. "They're still stuck in that era when you can do things besides go to school."

Dyersburg State Community College itself straddles the divide between the future and the past. High-speed Internet access is rare in the region, but the college's math classes use technologically sophisticated graphing

programs in new computer labs. Some students have never even seen the Mississippi River, 12 miles away; still, a professor is taking a small group of students to India in May for a three-week trip to study sociology, philosophy, and history.

### **Sweeping Changes**

Three hours east of Dyersburg, in Nashville, state officials are making an all-out push to increase the number of state residents with a college education. Like Mr. Obama with his 2020 goal, the state's leaders want to spur major change in a short period of time.

But Gov. Phil Bredesen, a Democrat, is less sanguine than the president about the chances of catching up within a decade. The president's benchmark is "a fine aspirational goal," the governor said in an interview, but probably not achievable. "From where we are, we're not going to be the best-educated country in the world in a decade," Mr. Bredesen said. "In a generation? Maybe. Fifty years? Maybe."

Tennessee has further to go than most states to meet that goal. The state ranks 40th in the proportion of full-time college students who complete a bachelor's degree within six years, and 45th in the proportion of full-time community-college students who complete an associate degree within three years. To contribute its share to meeting the president's 2020 goal, Tennessee would have to raise the average number of undergraduate degrees and credentials it awards each year by 5.9 percent, according to the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, a nonprofit group that provides data and advises states and colleges on higher-education strategies.

At the governor's urging, Tennessee made legislative changes this year aimed at improving the state's record on college completion, in part by financing colleges based on their graduation rates.

The state left many of the details, scheduled to take effect for the 2012 fiscal year, to the state's Board of Regents and the state higher-education commission. Governor Bredesen said he hopes that the new law will encourage different types of institutions to develop individual strategies to improve their graduation rates.

The law makes other changes as well. Remedial classes will no longer be offered at four-year universities but will become solely the responsibility of community colleges, a change intended to ensure that students arrive at four-year colleges ready for classes that will count toward a degree. And two-year institutions will be required to offer standardized programs that are the same throughout the system, and to set up transfer and dual-enrollment guidelines to make it easier for students to move to four-year institutions.

"It's pretty clear that they're leading the country," said Stan Jones, president of Complete College America, an alliance of states working with nonprofit organizations to achieve President Obama's 2020 goal. Tennessee has

joined that effort, as well as other nationwide projects to help more students graduate from college. "This is pretty substantial change," Mr. Jones said. "It's the biggest change I've seen at least in 10 years in higher education."

Governor Bredesen acknowledges there will be challenges ahead for his higher-education goals, including limits on resources for colleges. "Substantial cuts" are coming to higher education in Tennessee after money from the federal stimulus package runs out, he said. But Mr. Bredesen said he hopes the crisis will spur colleges to re-evaluate where they are spending their money, and reassign resources if necessary.

"When times are good, you don't think about these hard things," the governor said. "It's when times get tough you have to sit down and decide what's really important."

### **Doubts at Dyersburg**

At Dyersburg, though, many officials are skeptical about Governor Bredesen's plans for improving education outcomes.

Like many Dyersburg State students, Tina Morris had a long path between enrollment and her degree. She graduated from high school in the spring of 1980 and enrolled at the community college in the spring of 1981. Without finishing her associate degree, she transferred to the University of Tennessee at Martin. Then "a life happened," she said: She dropped out of the university to get married, before returning a few years later. In all, her bachelor's degree took 10 years.

"If you just look at the graduation rate, you're missing the heart of what we do, because I would be one of the ones who is considered unsuccessful," said Ms. Morris, who later earned an M.B.A. and is now vice president for institutional advancement at Dyersburg State.

Three decades after Ms. Morris first enrolled at the community college, many Dyersburg State students continue to follow a similar pattern. Dyersburg State has a three-year graduation rate of 9 percent, slightly below the Tennessee average of 11 percent and well below the national average, 28 percent.

Many students who enroll at Dyersburg State never intend to earn a degree. They come to the community college for specific skills and leave once they can get a better job. "Our mission has not been to graduate large numbers of people," said Larry Chapman, dean of students at Dyersburg State. "Our mission has been to meet their needs, whatever those needs are."

Other students do intend to graduate, but their timeline may not fit into the state's formula for success, based on completing an associate degree in no more than three years or a bachelor's degree in no more than six.

"In a perfect world, where our students have 100-percent supportive family and friends, and they have all the money, and high-speed Internet, and a car that never breaks down, and children who never get sick, and ... they don't have to work two part-time jobs, or a full-time and a part-time job and struggle and deal with everything," the state's time frame "makes perfect sense," said Ms. Franckowiak, the English professor, some of whose students have needed years just to pass a remedial class. "But for real students, it takes a lot longer."

Administrators and professors said the ultimate way to measure Dyersburg State's success is through generational changes. Students, even those who do not graduate, are able to better help their children succeed in school, they said. They are more likely to appreciate education and more likely to engage with civic life and culture.

Governor Bredesen acknowledged that catching up to the rest of the world might take time. "This is something that's been going on for half a century, the decline in the importance of education and the educational performance here, and it's going to take awhile to get us out of it," he said. But Tennessee does not have several generations to wait for change, he said.

By one measure, Dyersburg State is already moving toward the goal of more college graduates: Its enrollment is booming. Enrollment increased by 24 percent for the fall semester, and by 25 percent more for this spring. The college now has more than 4,200 students.

What has made the biggest difference wasn't a bookmark in a Happy Meal, college officials said. It was the thousands of manufacturing jobs that have disappeared from northwest Tennessee in the past decade as factories have downsized or simply closed.

The business leaders who remain are the college's allies in stressing that education is the key to revitalizing their corner of the state. With manufacturing jobs gone, the leaders say, Dyersburg's best hope is to attract new jobs with the promise of an educated work force.

Dyersburg State "is so important to the future economic growth of this area," said David E. Hayes, president of Security Bank in Dyersburg. "It's more evident to me than ever that people who think jobs are going to come back driven by low wages are people who have their heads in the sand."

The governor echoed Mr. Hayes's urgency. He wants colleges to have realistic goals for improving their graduation rates, he said, which will probably vary by institution. But he wants to see the numbers increasing—and soon.

"We've just got to solve this problem," Mr. Bredesen said. "If we don't, if a generation from now we're lagging as far behind the rest of the country as we are today, I think we just get sort of consigned to a backwater status. And that would be a tragedy."

Inside Higher Education

## **The Completion Agenda**

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SEATTLE -- A few years ago, gatherings of community college leaders commonly featured discussions of the unfairness and inaccuracy of using graduation rates to measure institutional success. There were no shortages of arguments to make: Many community college students don't want a degree, or they transfer before earning one, or they just wanted to take one course anyway, or they can only afford to take one course at a time.

Those sorts of criticisms still came up here in discussions this weekend at the annual meeting of the American Association of Community Colleges. And those criticisms remain easy to back up. But in public statements here, on the agenda, and in a series of activities, the emphasis is much more solidly than in the past on the importance of community college students finishing up -- ideally their degree or certificate programs, but sometimes just a single course. In speeches, new campaigns and informal discussion, the talk of the conference is completion.

At the meeting's opening session Saturday night, Mary Spilde, president of Lane Community College and the AACC board chair, announced that six national associations focused on community colleges will issue a joint statement Tuesday pledging a "unified effort" to increase completion rates. In addition to AACC, the effort will be joined by the Association of Community College Trustees, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, the League for Innovation in the Community College, the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development and Phi Theta Kappa.

While AACC is not releasing details on the effort until Tuesday, Spilde said it would represent an "unprecedented coalition for commitment." Several involved with the effort said that they viewed it as a first step in a process in which community colleges might be encouraged to set very specific goals for increasing completion rates -- similar to the way many college presidents have made pledges to reduce their carbon footprints.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation -- which has become a major player in financing and agenda setting in community college education -- was involved in bringing the various groups together, and the signing of the statement will take place just before Melinda Gates addresses the community college leaders.

Diane Troyer, a senior program officer at the foundation, was frank before a packed session Sunday that the foundation wanted to help propel more of a national movement

for change at community colleges, which are historically local and state-oriented institutions. "I think one of the things that holds us back is that we don't have a system" of community colleges, but instead rely on local governance, where "it's difficult to reach consensus around really huge goals."

She said that the statement being signed Tuesday would drive the associations and their members to "reach consensus on what works, instead of letting a thousand flowers bloom."

And Troyer was not particularly sympathetic to those who have noted all the reasons for low graduation rates at community colleges. Even if students don't all come to graduate, she said, "they don't come to us for three weeks of math," but that's what a lot of students leave with.

Troyer's Sunday appearance here featured her and Holly Zanville, senior program director of the Lumina Foundation for Education, talking about their vision for improving completion rates at community colleges. George Boggs, the AACC's president, led the discussion, and audience members lined up to ask questions and praise the foundations (even having been warned jokingly by Troyer that she didn't have any grants to give out on Sunday).

The questions did not generally challenge the idea that completion rates need to get much better and that fairly radical changes in the ways community colleges operate are needed in order to do so.

Both Troyer and Zanville praised a combination of college policies (offering short, intense modules of remedial education, for instance) and state policies (basing more funding on completion rather than enrollment). Troyer noted that the top predictive factor on whether similar community college students will graduate is where they live. "States matter," she said.

Zanville also spoke about the importance of new approaches. Asked by an audience member about what she thought about "university centers" -- created on some community college campuses, with bachelor's degrees offered by a range of providers or the colleges themselves -- Zanville praised the idea. She noted that many low-income students don't want to travel far to finish a degree. And she said it was clear that a range of new institutions -- such as university centers and for-profit "mega universities" with more than 100,000 students -- were changing the landscape.

"I don't think any of this is going to go away," she said.

Both Troyer and Zanville talked repeatedly about the idea that reforms must "scale up" and be ideas that won't help just a few students, but ultimately most students.

While their discussion was big picture, other events here Sunday zeroed in on specific parts of an agenda focused on completion.

The Association of Community College Trustees announced the creation -- with the Community College Leadership Program of the University of Texas at Austin -- of a Governance Institute for Student Success. The idea for the effort (financially backed by a Gates grant) is to better train trustees and presidents to focus on student success.

And many presentations here that focused on individual colleges avoided any mention of reasons for low completion rates and focused on specific policies to increase them -- and the importance of collecting data to monitor progress.

For example, Anita Gliniecki, president of Housatonic Community College, in Connecticut, described her enrollment gains this way: total enrollment increased since 2005 from 4,400 to 5,900, but the full-time equivalent figure increased from 2,300 to 3,400. "We've been pushing more students to come full time because we know they will stay," she said.

Her topic was about how the kind of remedial reform much touted by Gates and Lumina has played out successfully. In this case, through work with Achieving the Dream, a major reform project, Housatonic has created "open entry, open exit" remedial math. In these programs, students study with tutors on a self-paced system, frequently finishing in weeks, rather than a traditional semester. Not only are these students finishing more of their remedial math, but their fall-to-fall retention rates are much higher than those of students who receive remedial education in traditional semesters.

"We used to focus on just bringing them in, but now it's about what happens to them," said Gliniecki.

Bill Truehart, president of Achieving the Dream, said in an interview that at the college level and among national leaders of community colleges, the conversation has changed. "There is a different expectation now," he said, "and it is about completion."

— [Scott Jaschik](#)