TRENDLINE

Nontraditional students

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Once a small minority in higher education, nontraditional students are now a market many colleges and universities want a piece of. And with the supply of prospective high school matriculants poised to shrink, their interest should only grow.

Nontraditional students are older than the 18-to-24-year-olds colleges have traditionally targeted. And many have jobs to go to, family to look after and, certainly, additional life experience to pull from. As a result, they're asking for a different kind of college experience than their classmates who have arrived fresh from high school, and institutions are pushing themselves to give it to them.

models to help learning fit their schedules, and adding services like child care support and guided pathways to help them complete their programs efficiently.

How your college is serving nontraditional students? Let us know.

Hallie Busta
Senior Editor, Higher Ed

How colleges are bringing back stopped-out students

Sagging enrollment and a greater focus on outcomes are pushing colleges to reenroll students instead of replacing them with new recruits.

By: Natalie Schwartz

As one of the largest university systems in the U.S., the City University of New York (CUNY) can be a launching pad into a successful career for the 270,000-plus students it enrolls. Yet the common issue of retention often stands in its way.

Around one-third of full-time, first-time freshmen who started an associate degree program with CUNY in the fall of 2016 left the

CUNY's retention rates are better than most, but they still reflect a big issue in higher education. More than 1 million college students drop out each year, a trend that cost colleges $16.5 billion in lost revenue in the 2010-11 academic year alone, according to a report from the Educational Policy Institute.

"It's a population that hasn't been focused on at all," said Anne Kubek, chief operating officer at ReUp Education, a San Francisco-based startup that helps colleges reenroll students who left without completing their degrees. "If you stop out at most universities, that's it. They don't connect with you. They don't follow up with you, you never hear from them again unless they're looking for monies owed."

That may be changing. Several headwinds — including sagging enrollment, diminished state support and a greater focus on student outcomes — are pushing colleges to bring back their stopped-out students instead of focusing solely on replacing them with new recruits.

ReUp Education is honing its reenrollment methods on 20,000 former CUNY students. Paul Lowry via Flickr

At CUNY, officials have looked to ReUp Education for help bringing back some of its lost students. Through a grant from the

receive its services for free. In exchange, the company gets to hone its reenrollment methods on some 20,000 former CUNY students who never finished their degrees.

The results of the test, CUNY officials say, will be used to determine which strategies are best at bringing students across the finish line.

"It was clear to us that the notion of working with a partner ... was going to be both incredibly instructive and helpful from a research design perspective," said Angie Kamath, CUNY's dean for continuing education and workforce development. CUNY's size requires it to be "really scientific and research-oriented in order to try things out that could eventually scale," she added.

Reaching out to stopped-out students

Launched in 2015, ReUp has turned reenrolling students into a science. Using predictive analytics and machine learning, the company can pinpoint the students who are most likely to enroll again and reaches out to them via text messaging, phone calls and email.

ReUp picks who to contact first based on factors such as how long they've been stopped out, how many credits they have left to complete and their support network, though the company eventually works its way through the entire roster of stop-outs.

The company's 18 success coaches talk with interested students to learn why they left, work through issues that could prevent their return and support them once they reenroll. "It's not just good enough for us to bring a student back," Kubek said. "We need to bring back students who have a pathway and clarity around how they're going to get through to graduation."

ReUp gets paid through a revenue-share agreement for each semester a student is enrolled. So far, the company has recovered $25 million in tuition revenue by helping reenroll some 8,000 students across about 20 colleges through the spring 2019 semester. Those results have garnered the backing of investors,

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Kubek credits ReUp's early success to its blended use of automated messaging and human support coaches. "We really look to the technology to help us reach out to students at a large scale, engage with them on a regular basis and help manage rosters for coaches so (they) are doing things only humans can do," she said.

ReUp began its work with CUNY in June of 2018, and it expects to wrap up its test in the fall of 2019. Preliminary reenrollment figures are not available, Kamath said.

However, the system has gleaned several findings about its stopped-out students through the effort. For one, Kamath said, students tend to be motivated by two things: wanting to finish what they started and having upward economic mobility.

"Social mobility is what we do," she said. "Being able to make students really change that notion of, 'I flunked out,' or 'I left school' or 'I dropped out,' ... and flip that to say, 'I want to finish what I started, I want a better economic future, I want social mobility for my family,' is really important."

Meeting students where they are

While the right messages are critical, it's also important to examine why stopped-out students left college in the first place.

InsideTrack, a Portland, Oregon-based company that specializes in student coaching, has made reenrollment a key part of its services. Along with contacting and coaching stopped-out

For instance, in 2018, InsideTrack worked with UCLA Extension to reengage about 600 of the continuing education school's former students. About 260 responded to InsideTrack's messaging, and about 120 — or roughly 20% — eventually reenrolled.

Of those who didn't return, about one-third said they didn't have time for school because of work or family responsibilities. Others said they had planned to take time off school all along — a common reason for stopping out that more colleges should be aware of, said Dave Jarrat, senior vice president for strategic engagement and growth at InsideTrack.

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>
> Corine Gonzales
> *Director, The University of New Mexico's Graduation Project*

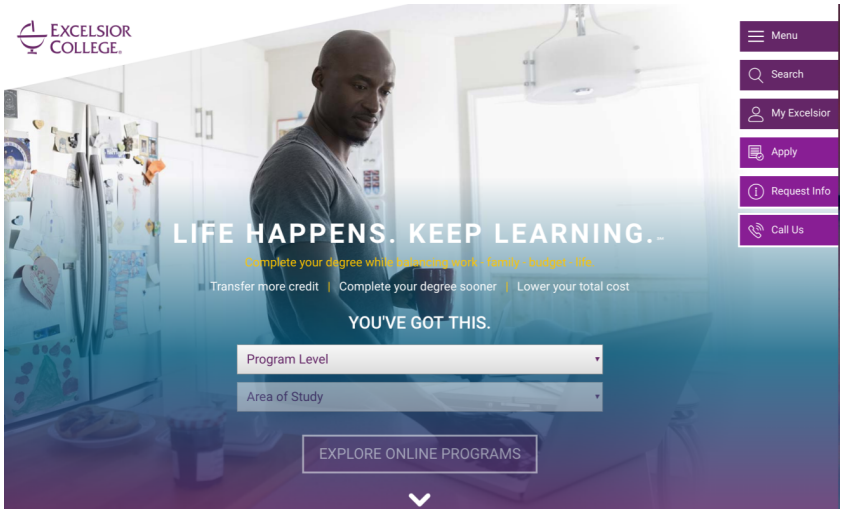
"Most schools do not proactively engage their students around ... needing to take planned time off for a family vacation or a known increase in the intensity of their work," he said. "If they did, they'd be able to help these students prepare for their stop-out so they could go through it with intention and come back well-prepared."

It's also critical to keep in mind the obstacles specific student populations may encounter. For example, Jarrat said several international students ran into issues with their visas while attending UCLA Extension.

At Excelsior College, a private nonprofit online school in New York catering to working adults, officials looked to InsideTrack to figure out why some of their students who are veterans had stopped out. This population faces several unique struggles, as many are working adults and may have doubts over whether they're cut out for college, said Chris Johnson, director of Excelsior's Center for Military and Veteran Education.

After contacting roughly 400 to 500 stopped-out veterans, InsideTrack unearthed a surprising reason why some left Excelsior. Throughout the admissions process, Johnson said, the center gives veterans intensive advising about their benefits and enrollment and evaluates whether they're eligible to apply prior credits to a degree.

But once they're handed off to an academic advisor, they generally aren't contacted for one to three weeks. "Many veterans were saying that's too long," Johnson said.



Excelsior College enlisted InsideTrack to figure out why some students stopped out. Excelsior College website

To remedy the issue, Excelsior is forging closer ties between admissions officials and advisors to create a streamlined pathway for veterans — "more of a VIP process," as Johnson calls it.

The steps to reenrollment may present barriers as well. For instance, outdated policies may require students to bring cash to the registrar's office in person or to provide their high school transcripts for admission. "If you're 40 years old and you've been out of school for 20 years, going back and finding your high school transcript is often not easy," Kubek said.

Other common pitfalls are unclear transfer policies or "convoluted" websites, Kubek added. Having a point of contact to

"These are the types of things that can be really helpful in breaking down the barriers for students to help them figure out how to come back to school," Kubek said.

Getting creative to reenroll students

Although working with third-party providers focusing solely on reenrollment can be helpful, some institutions are turning toward unorthodox partners or employing new policies to reenroll their stopped-out students.

In 2014, the State University of New York (SUNY) teamed up with a federal loan servicer to send a message to its students who had stopped-out and still had debt. If they returned, SUNY told them, they could avoid defaulting on their student loans.

The campaign proved successful, according to a local media report. About 20% of those who received the messages in the program's first year reenrolled in college, with around 78% of that group doing so at a SUNY campus.

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Moreover, the effort helped the system recoup more than $8.7 million in tuition revenue, SUNY officials said during the annual American Association of Community Colleges' (AACC) conference in April.

SUNY, said at the conference. "We need to make sure we don't lose them somewhere in the process."

Other colleges have introduced financial incentives for returned students.

In 2016, for example, Colorado's Pueblo Community College introduced a plan that forgave students up to $1,000 in institutional debt if they reenrolled and finished one semester. More than 300 stopped-out students have since come back, bringing in nearly $350,000 in revenue, Pueblo officials said at the AACC conference.

The University of New Mexico's Graduation Project targets students who withdrew their senior year. Courtesy of The University of New Mexico

Likewise, the University of New Mexico offers its reenrolled students up to $750 in tuition assistance each semester for two years through an initiative called The Graduation Project, which targets students who withdrew their senior year.

College officials use email blasts, mailing campaigns and phone calls to reach the students, directing them toward a website where they can fill out an interest form. From there, a student success specialist will guide them through the reenrollment process. In the fall of 2018, the effort helped reenroll roughly 120 students.

circumstances or financial obligations got in the way of students' studies and they never returned.

"Sometimes you'll get students who are one class away from graduating, but they just didn't finish," Gonzales said. "A lot of students at the end of the day just want that nudge. Like, 'OK, I've got to do it.' And somebody reaching out, 'This is a sign I've got to finish.'"

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Capella U shares lessons from 5 years of competency-based education

The model, which lets learners complete curriculum at their own pace, is gaining momentum nationally as a way to reach nontraditional students.

By: Hallie Busta

Capella University offers a look at the first five years of its direct assessment competency-based education program (CBE), FlexPath, in a recent report that includes lessons learned so far and barriers to broader implementation of the model throughout higher ed.

programs. Through the direct-assessment method, FlexPath gauges students' progress based on measures such as exams, papers and projects, rather than time.

Advocates say such a model allows students to work more quickly through material they are comfortable with and slow down when they need to spend more time on a topic. This can be especially helpful for adult learners, who require more schedule flexibility than traditional college students, the report notes.

FlexPath participants finish bachelor's degrees 59% faster and master's degrees 42% faster than students in similar credit-hour programs, and they borrow 45% less financial aid than those in Capella's equivalent credit-hour programs. They also persist over two years at higher rates.

The data comes as regulators consider rules that intend to make it easier for colleges to explore alternative educational models and as a growing number of colleges adopt or express interest in CBE.

While a growing number of colleges say they are using or are interested in CBE, many are still in the early stages of launching a program. Of 501 colleges surveyed recently by the American Institutes for Research and Eduventures, just over half (57%) that said they were in the process of rolling out CBE programs were still in the planning phase, while only 11% said they had an entire program using CBE.

Challenges to uptake include regulations that govern which programs are eligible for Title IV funding and other institutional initiatives taking priority, respondents said. Questions about promised student outcomes also linger, given the limited use of CBE in postsecondary education.

Other challenges to CBE include a financial aid system that currently tracks students' progress and issues disbursements according to a time-based academic model, said Jillian Klein, vice president of government and regulatory affairs for Capella's parent company, Strategic Education Inc.

Possible changes in rules that spell out what counts as regular and substantive distance education stand to impact CBE because

interview.

CBE requires a unique approach. "A lot of the changes and desires to think differently and critically about how to define what it means for a substantive and good academic interaction needs to be thought through differently for CBE," she said, noting that the Education Department is limited in how it can address those differences through regulation. Creating a separate definition of CBE in a reauthorization of the Higher Education Act would offer more flexibility.

"There still, from a regulation perspective, needs to be some experimentation and more larger-scale testing before we write in stone what those rules are for CBE," she said. That includes finding an alternative measure to the credit hour.

FlexPath's first five years also revealed operational considerations for implementing CBE. For instance, Klein said, although Capella officials initially thought a completely disaggregated faculty model would work best, they found students were confused, particularly early on, about which instructional team members to refer to about what. She said it's too soon to tell whether a disaggregated model is the right approach.

Looking ahead, the ultimate outcome for CBE would be allowing students to pick a mix of direct assessment and credit-hour programs based on what they think their learning needs will be in those subjects. "That's likely where we would see a sort of sweet spot," she said.

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Amazon, the Marines and community college partner on data training

Northern Virginia Community College is offering Marines college credit for courses completed as part of their military training in the hopes they'll return to finish the degree.

By: Hallie Busta

Amazon Web Services (AWS), the U.S. Marine Corps and Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) are teaming up to develop a set of data intelligence training courses for Marines.

Offered through NOVA and billed as a "non-traditional (military) training solution," the courses cover topics such as cloud computing and artificial intelligence (AI). They also will be available to all students and count toward an associate degree in information systems technology.

The news follows the launch of a bachelor's degree in cloud computing from AWS Educate, NOVA and George Mason University, and it reflects growth in Amazon's cloud platform as a conduit for technology training at community colleges.

For the Marine Corps, the NOVA partnership represents a shift in how training is typically offered. Although it has historically been delivered by the military at their installations, the need for data skills and the opportunity for service members to earn college credit for the work pushed Marines to work with NOVA.

at a local entity" that it had worked with before, said Chad Knights, NOVA's provost of information and engineering technologies.

For NOVA, in turn, there was a chance to innovate knowing the courses would have takers. The program also includes the first machine learning and AI courses developed in Virginia's community college system.

"Any time you launch a new program, there's a concern you won't have a student body," Knights said. "This has enabled us to stand up a very organized program where we know we're going to have students, because we'll have Marines coming in to take the course."

Previously, Knights added, NOVA would offer prior learning credits for service members' military training. In this case, NOVA mapped the skills and knowledge Marines would be required to learn directly into the courses. "Sometimes that credit for prior learning is not as easily transferable as the actual credit course," he said.

Marines will complete 31 credits at NOVA and cap off their instruction with a course offered by the Marine Corps. The program structure sets up Marines to return to NOVA to complete a full degree and also offers skills that can parlay into higher-level military and civilian jobs.

Its "blend of academic instruction, commercial courses and internships, and traditional military training represents the future of Marine Corps intelligence training," Col. Randy Pugh said in the announcement.

The Marine Corps is looking into scaling the partnership to related fields and could more fully integrate the concept into its training, according to the announcement. That would likely require making such programs available online, Knights said.

NOVA is working to build transfer pathways for the program with local institutions, including George Mason and George Washington University, so students can put the credits toward a four-year degree, Knights said.

institutions. Community colleges are proving critical to that approach.

The company sees them as "a flywheel for changing the face of education" because of their ties to high schools, four-year institutions and the workforce, Ken Eisner, director of worldwide education programs at AWS, told Education Dive. "They become a great lever to truly create long-term pathways for students into cloud careers."

Knights said he views AWS Educate as "an enabler" for its cloud curriculum, offering tools and industry perspective on the skills graduates need. It is a strong local employer. Although many of the foundational skills learned are program-agnostic, Knights said, the curriculum has students using AWS Educate Classrooms for hands-on learning.

In addition to Amazon, tech firms like Google, Facebook and Apple have been working with colleges to develop technology curriculum.

Martha Parham, senior vice president for public relations at the American Association of Community Colleges, is optimistic about the relationships. "As tech changes at kind of an exponential rate, these partners make it possible to offer these types of courses," she said.

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Report: 2.6M student-parents may be leaving child care aid on the table

A report from the Government Accountability Office said colleges should make sure students know they could quality for a dependent care allowance.

By: Natalie Schwartz

College websites often don't tell students that they may be able to cover child care costs through additional federal loans, according to a report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO).

That could be contributing to up to 2.6 million student-parents potentially leaving aid on the table, the federal watchdog found. It urged the U.S. Department of Education to encourage schools to inform students that they may be eligible for a dependent care allowance.

The report comes as colleges are hoping to stave off enrollment declines by enrolling more adult students, many of whom need extra supports like child care assistance.

In 2016, 22% of undergraduates were student-parents, and half of them were also working full-time. Juggling those competing priorities — job, education and children — can make it considerably harder for student-parents to finish college. Indeed, 52% drop out without earning degrees, compared to 32% of students without children who do the same.

majority of whom are women and racial minorities. Yet most institutions' websites reviewed by the GAO didn't tell students about the dependent care allowance or how to request it.

"It could be helping a lot more students access additional aid that could help meet their basic needs and remain stable while in school," said Lindsey Reichlin Cruse, study director at the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPC). "A lot of these students are missing out."

Moreover, there isn't a standardized way to request the allowance. In some cases, students have to provide proof of need through child care receipts or birth certificates. And in others, institutions offer a flat amount based on factors such as the age of students' children, the GAO report notes.

'A really critical need'

The Ed Department could be putting more pressure on colleges to inform students of the dependent allowance, Reichlin Cruse said.

The federal agency, however, said that it would be "inappropriate to indiscriminately" ask colleges to encourage their student-parents to request additional aid, suggesting that doing so may negatively impact student loan repayment rates.

The GAO pointed out that the department provided no evidence to indicate that would be the case, and that it was merely recommending that colleges provide more information about the allowance.

Meanwhile, it may be getting harder for student-parents to attend college, with the number of institutions offering on-campus child care facilities at a steady decline between 2002 and 2015, according to IWPR. This could be a result of colleges cuting such services to make up for flagging state funding, Reichlin Cruise said.

"It's often seen as an extraneous support that mostly serves faculty and staff," she added. "Those child care centers are serving a really critical need for their students. Without

Research by Reichlin Cruise and others suggests that student-mothers are disproportionately women of color, with numbers showing that about 50% of all black female students and one-third of Hispanic female students have children.

"If we care about improving equity, racial-ethnic equity, in particular, and college outcomes ... we have to be talking about the student-parent issue as well," she said.

Article top image credit: Getty Images

As higher ed eyes adult learners, community colleges add supports

Two-year institutions are looking beyond academics to create guided pathways to help this coveted group of students graduate or transfer.

By: James Paterson

Community colleges have historically been viewed as second fiddle to four-year institutions. But in recent years they have been pulled into the spotlight for being particularly well-positioned to

That attention has led educators and policymakers to see enrollees in the nation's some 1,103 community colleges — about half the students in higher ed currently — as being in need of more customized instruction, better support systems and clearer pathways to a workforce that is clamoring for them.

Underlying the need for more support is the "dizzying array" of demands these students face, according to a recent survey of more than 50,000 students at 10 community colleges. They include the need to hold a job and meet the needs of family, as well as academic obstacles ranging from costly, ineffective remedial classes to poorly designed online courses that don't offer enough help.

What's more, pushback on rising tuition prices and growth in free college initiatives has put community colleges in a position to need to cater to a wide variety of students. Some suggest this change has triggered an "identity crisis" within those institutions, with many being asked to shift resources to efficiently provide job-specific degrees and skill sets as well as clearer transfer paths to a four-year degree.

In response, community colleges are adopting structured pathways and a case-management model that offers broad academic and personal supports, said Josh Wyner, vice president at The Aspen Institute and founder and executive director of its College Excellence Program.

"About 80% of community college students say they want a degree, but only about 20% complete it. Life gets in the way," he said. "They need clear, efficient, useful pathways, and sitting alongside them they need support so they have real momentum toward their degree and beyond."

Northeast Lakeview College is part of the Alamo Colleges system.
TParis/Wikimedia Commons

Developing pathways

Research increasingly shows that college students are more successful when they are offered a "guided pathway" through their coursework, Wyner said. That concept is the basis of a new project from the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the Center for Community College Student Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin.

It will provide a framework for those kinds of pathways and will work with 20 community colleges to implement them.

Wyner highlights the Alamo Colleges District, a five-college system in the San Antonio area, that enrolls some 98,000 students and has structured its guided pathway around several benchmarks to keep students on track. For example, students must choose a major after they earn 30 credits and meet with counselors who carry unusually low caseloads of 350-to-1. In response, the college's three-year graduation/transfer rate rose from 28% in 2011 to 47% in 2015, Wyner noted.

In South Dakota, Mitchell Technical Institute's (MTI) focus on such pathways helped it reach a 77% four-year graduation/transfer rate, well above the range of metrics used to gauge student persistence at community colleges.

success to an unusually close relationship with employers in the area who help the institute develop specific job-rich fields of study and up-to-date curriculum and then hire students into internships and full-time roles.

"Current economic conditions are very favorable for our graduates," Wilson said. "There is strong competition for highly skilled workers, so we're working hard to recruit and educate as many future technicians as we can."

MTI is one of 10 finalists for a $1 million award from The Aspen Institute for community colleges that serve as role models for access, graduation rates and outcomes in the workforce.

Making connections

MTI program officials meet twice a year with workforce advisory committees to review their instruction and determine if courses should be added, revised or eliminated. A career center carefully monitors state labor data and employment reports from graduates and employers, interprets the information and provides students with details on wages and employment opportunities in particular careers. It also connects students to employers, including at job fairs, like one last month where some 100 companies met with the college's spring graduates.

Montgomery College, in suburban Washington, D.C., also offers similar employer-guided training in technical skills. In particular, it provides training for lower-level lab jobs at biotech companies and retrains tech workers with skills in that and other in-demand fields. One cybersecurity retraining program is designed to fill strong regional demand in that field, according to Sanjay Rai, the college's senior vice president for academic affairs.

"Community colleges were created to be very responsive to the needs of their regions, and that's even more critical today in our fast-moving digital economy," he said, noting that Montgomery College restructured itself several years ago to be more flexible to students' needs, allowing it to create pathways and programs without the approval process four-year colleges may require.

There, nine Maryland public colleges offer its students and others that have a two-year degree a path to a bachelor's degree in three dozen programs.

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> Sanjay Rai
> *Senior vice president for academic affairs, Montgomery College*

Pasadena City College (PCC), in California, improved advising for its 27,000 students with more contact and specific attention to their course selection and path to graduation or transfer, as well as to their academic performance and need for supports. And it paid off, said Cynthia Olivo, vice president of student services. Forty-one percent of students go on to a four-year college, well over the national rate for community college students who transfer within six years. More than half get their bachelor's in six years, she said, also above the national average of 42%.

Other community colleges offer courses team-taught by instructors at four-year institutions or have agreements that let students take courses there, said Lynn Pasquerella, AAC&U president.

"These practices help to build social and cultural capital among community college students who have been underserved," she said, noting that it also helps keep them from having to retake courses at the four-year institution, which can add cost and be "a disincentive to completion."

Rounding out supports

Olivo said PCC employs about 100 graduate-level counseling program students each year as "coaches" who help students with

The college also provides intensive training for faculty members, who Olivo said typically are excited about teaching the college's low-income and minority students but have themselves often had very different college and life experiences. A cohort of about 40 new faculty instructors meets each week throughout their first year to learn how to better interact with their students. (One annual lesson is from a faculty member who based her dissertation on writing a syllabus for nontraditional students.)

"We want them to learn about our students and what they need in the classroom, and not just about grading, the mailbox key and where the coffee machine is located," she said.

Other examples of addressing these students' needs come from Amarillo College, in Texas, which allows students who are placed in developmental courses to test out of them at any point. Other colleges allow students to take them concurrently or offer introductory classes with extra help instead, avoiding the additional expense they often cause. Amarillo also offers faster-paced eight-week courses designed for students with busy schedules.

And while the flexibility of online courses benefits some community college students, they have also reported difficulty navigating them. In response, PCC has added technical and academic support, which students can easily request online. Some courses have embedded graduate students to provide one-on-one assistance.

Amarillo College attributes increases in its graduation rate to a shift in focus on addressing students' broader needs. Billy Hathorn/English Wikipedia/Wikimedia Commons

Reframing the issue

The structural changes Amarillo made boosted its three-year graduation rate from 13% to 22% between the fall of 2015 and 2018, according to President Russell Lowery-Hart. It also contributed to an increase in the share of full-time students from 25% to 45% over that same period. He added that the improvements were a result of the college's shift in attention from academics to students' broader needs.

Amarillo's new Advocacy and Resource Center was the focus of a campaign launched in October 2017 called No Excuses 2020, which calls attention to a variety of supports for low-income and other underserved students. The center uses analytics and predictive modeling based on retention data, FAFSA information and other reports about student employment, dependents, marital standing and academic success to identify at-risk students and direct them to the appropriate services.

Those include counseling and intervention programs, a food pantry and a clothing closet. It also connects students with community resources for access to services such as housing, transportation, legal support and child care.

That's compared to just 33% of students who were offered but did not use the services and remained enrolled in the spring.

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>
> Cynthia Olivo
> *Vice president of student services, Pasadena City College*

Acknowledging that students' lives outside of campus can have a significant impact on their academic performance, other community colleges are making similar moves.

Montgomery College offers free parking and public transportation, along with low-cost or free food from food pantries. Asnuntuck Community College, in Enfield, Connecticut, offers free child care, funded by the student government and supported by parents, who are required to volunteer. Similar discounted child care centers are offered at a number of community colleges thanks to a federal program that got more funding last year.

In California, PCC staffs its unique Veterans Resource Center with caseworkers who help veterans navigate college and connect them with a variety of community resources, including mental health services. The center also offers a class designed to help navigate the transition to college and civilian life.

"We're beginning to better understand these students and see how successful they can be if we address their unique needs and help them develop their very valuable skills and strengths," PCC's Olivo said.

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