

**Increasing College Graduation Rates for  
Low-Income, Minority, and First-Gen Students:  
Lessons Learned from 4 Colleges That Are Doing the Work**

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## Executive Summary

More than ever, high school students in America are going to college – and not graduating. The number of students heading off to college has doubled over the past thirty years, but completion rates have barely budged. Only half of all students who enter a four-year college will have collected a degree six years later.<sup>1</sup> And the majority of dropouts are clustered in the lower reaches of the income distribution. While close to 90 percent of entering college freshman who were born into the top income quartile will complete their college degree, only 25% of entering freshmen born into the bottom half of the income distribution will walk across the stage on graduation day.<sup>2</sup>

So what’s going on here? What are all of the pieces of the puzzle that prevent low-income students from doing as well as their higher-income peers? The answer can usually be sorted into one of the following categories, but is generally some combination of all of them, calling for comprehensive solutions to deal with a comprehensive problem.

- **Academics.** While not the sole reason, academic preparation certainly plays a role in whether or not a student is successful in college.
- **Finances.** Low-income students’ financial situation can impact both their decision of what school to attend, and the way they spend their time on campus, both of which affect retention and success.
- **Expectations.** Vincent Tinto, a national expert on student retention and success from Syracuse University, whose research I’ll refer to throughout the paper, refers to the obstacle of “expectations,” or student knowledge of what college is like – academically, socially, organizationally – that is often gained informally, from an early age, by wealthy students.
- **Mindsets.** Low-income students also have to battle against negative mindsets related to all of the factors above, specifically around competence (Am I good enough? Can I compete?) and belonging (Do I belong here?). Research has shown that low-income students are more likely to interpret small obstacles as signs of incompetence, and that they don’t belong, rather seeing them as the small obstacles that they are.<sup>3</sup>

The good news is that the fifth factor that contributes to whether or not a student graduates is one that’s in a college’s control: support. Indeed, colleges of equal institution type (small private/large public) and selectivity level (highly selective to less selective) vary widely in the extent to which they graduate students.<sup>4</sup> And the reason is because some colleges have made deliberate efforts to make student retention, success, and graduation a focus for their students generally, and low-income, minority, and first-generation students more specifically.

The purpose of this paper is to take a hard look at the colleges that have done this work well in recent years, or are just now embarking on some promising efforts that are changing the face of the institution. We'll look at Georgia State University, a large, comprehensive urban research university, with demographics strikingly similar to Wayne State, that has improved graduation rates by 22 percentage points over the past decade, while eliminating the graduation gap between underrepresented minority and white students.<sup>5</sup> We'll look at Franklin & Marshall College, a small liberal arts school that, over the past five years, has gone from a small, regional college with very few poor students, to a national leader in the effort to attract, retain, and graduate high-achieving, low-income students from across the country. We'll look at the University of Texas - Austin, an elite flagship state college that doesn't have elite graduation rates, and the university's recent efforts to improve outcomes, particularly for the relatively large number of Pell eligible and minority students they serve. And we'll look at Valencia College in Florida, a two-year community college whose outcomes beat the national expectations for community colleges on just about every metric.

What we find is that some common elements emerge in the approach taken by these colleges, including:

- **A focus on data on a whole range of student outcomes.** In all of the case studies below, the first step in reform centers around getting precise data on who is struggling, where they're struggling, and why.
- **Proactive interventions.** Partly as a result of analyzing the data, the colleges and universities in the case studies are proactive, rather than reactive, in the supports they offer. These institutions don't wait for students to struggle, but instead already know who is most likely struggle and where they're most likely to struggle, and then offer academic, social, and financial supports to those students and in those areas, from day one.
- **Pilot, then expand.** In all of the case studies, we find a willingness on the part of the college or university to try new things. It often seems like the schools are creating new programs on the fly, in response to the data. They then evaluate those efforts, and look to expand the successful ones.
- **Mindsets matter.** And finally, in the case studies we find that all institutions not only offer supports, but also are mindful of how those supports impact student mindsets. Many low-income, minority, and first-gen students may enter college pre-disposed to doubt themselves: do I really belong here, and can I do the work?<sup>i</sup> These institutions acknowledge this, and constantly try to send the

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<sup>i</sup> This idea of student mindsets affecting persistence and success comes from years of psychological research from researchers like Carol Dweck, David Yeager, and Gregory Walton, and is summarized in the New York Times article, *Who Gets to Graduate*, by Paul Tough.

message in their interventions that the students do belong there, and that they can do the work.

- **Leadership and commitment.** In each case, the president of the institution provides the vision to make student retention and success, particularly for low-income and minority students, a campus-wide priority. And reflecting that vision, the institution makes the staffing changes needed to reflect that priority, creating new positions and offices particularly designed to encourage the success of low-income and minority students.

These findings aren't exactly revolutionary, but in some ways that's the point. If you look across the landscape of student retention and success programs at most colleges, they'll look pretty similar – they all have learning communities, student data systems, academic advising, academic support. However, as with most reform efforts, the execution is what counts. Everyone has data, but do we know specifically why, where, and how students are failing? Do we know who will need support, and what supports they'll need, before they step on campus? Do the supports offered create a stigma in which the students receiving support feel like they don't belong, or can't do the work? What are the strategic priorities laid out by the college, by the president, and do they include student retention and success, particularly for traditionally underrepresented populations? And does the staffing and fundraising at the college reflect that commitment?

Below is a description of a set of schools that is doing this work well, and hopefully we can learn some things that will help with our own collective efforts in helping low-income, minority, and first-gen students get to, and graduate from college.

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## Why Do Students Fail to Graduate?

Low-income students drop out of college for a variety of reasons. And while some of the reasons may seem obvious, it's more complex than many casual observers may believe. Poor academic preparation, for example, would likely be most people's go-to factor: low-income students aren't graduating from college because their high schools did not properly prepare them. And while academic preparation clearly plays a roll in student success, it doesn't tell the whole story. If you take two students with relatively high academic skills (1000 to 1200 on the SAT; around 22 to 26 on the ACT), but one is from a family in the top income quartile, and one from the bottom, their odds of graduating are far different: the wealthy student has a 2 in 3 chance, while the poor student's odds are just 1 in 6.<sup>6</sup>

So what are all of the pieces of the puzzle that prevent low-income students from graduating at rates on par with their higher-income peers? The obstacles can usually be sorted into one of the categories listed below: academic skill, financial constraints, expectations, and mindsets. However, more often than not, a student leaves college as a result of some combination of all these factors, calling for comprehensive solutions to deal with a comprehensive problem.

### ***Academic Skill***

Poor academic preparation is probably the most cited factor preventing low-income students from graduating. The argument goes that students attending urban high schools serving majority low-income students will have lower academic skills than their wealthier peers – they aren't challenged enough, are taught by less-qualified teachers, and are surrounded by lower-achieving peers.

And the data does support the notion that low-income students, on average, enter college under-skilled, as measured by standardized tests.<sup>7ii</sup> While this surely doesn't tell us the whole picture, as a student's high school GPA is actually more predictive of their college success, higher test scores do tell us something about their potential success in college.<sup>iii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> This section is labeled "academic skill" because we need to differentiate between academic skill (as measured by test scores), and academic habits, which are at least partially measured by a student's GPA. Academic habits will be covered in the "expectations" section.

<sup>ii</sup> It should be noted, however, that the potential reasons low-income students have lower standardized test scores are vast and complex, and extend far beyond the quality of the student's high school.

<sup>iii</sup> In *Crossing the Finish Line*, by William G. Bowen, Matthew M. Chingos, and Michael S. McPherson, the authors find that a student's high school GPA is actually more predictive of their college success than the student's SAT score. That said, the authors also find that a student's SAT score is highly correlated with success in the freshman year, perhaps suggesting that academic skill is critical in the introductory, core college courses.

This idea receives anecdotal evidence in the New York Times article, *Who Gets to Graduate*, by Paul Tough. In the article, University of Texas Chemistry professor David Laude, who we'll get to know later in the paper, finds that the students that consistently received Ds and Fs in his introductory Chemistry class almost uniformly had two traits: they were low-income, and they had a lower than average (by UT standards) SAT score. And doing well in classes like Intro to Chemistry is important, as freshman year GPA is an important factor in student retention – students who are initially successful tend to stick around.<sup>8</sup>

### *Money*

A second obstacle low-income students face is pure financial constraints. The “net price” – the amount due to students after federal, state, and institutional grant aid and scholarships – for low-income students at hundreds of colleges across the country is equal to or even greater than their family's annual earnings.<sup>9</sup> As tuition has risen at colleges across the country, the main source of federal aid, the Pell Grant, has not kept pace,<sup>i</sup> and state support to public institutions has decreased dramatically as well.<sup>10</sup> And the aid coming from the colleges themselves has not been enough to fill the resulting gap, particularly as institutional aid has shifted significantly from need-based aid to merit-based aid, in an effort to attract high-achieving and/or wealthy students.<sup>11</sup>

The resulting financial constraints on low-income students impact student success and retention in two-ways. First, lack of funds can impact a student's initial decision of where to attend. And if financial constraints cause a student to go to a community college over a four-year school, or a less selective four-year college over a more selective one, the student has a diminished chance of completing college out of the gate, as research shows that the more selective the college is, the more likely the student is to graduate.<sup>ii</sup>

And financial constraints also impact student success through the choices students have to make once they're in college. Many researchers point to “engagement” as the touchstone of college success – students who are engaged in both their academic coursework and co-curricular organizations on campus are far more likely to have a positive experience, stay in school, and graduate.<sup>12</sup> Financial constraints can cause students to take on a job, live off-campus and commute, or attend school part-time,

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<sup>i</sup> The Pell Grant is the primary grant given by the Federal Government to low-income families to help pay for college. A family of four in the mid \$30,000 range will generally be eligible for the full amount of the grant, \$5,730, and the value of the grant then decreases until families earning around \$60,000 won't be eligible for any assistance. It should also be noted here that drops in state funding are considered by many as responsible for the tuition increases.

<sup>ii</sup> When a student chooses to attend a college that is less selective than the colleges they are “qualified” for, it's known as undermatching. Statistically, students who attend a less selective college, rather than the most selective one they can get into, are less likely to finish. For the most thorough review of the problem of “undermatching,” see *Crossing the Finish Line*, by Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson.

making them far less likely to “engage” fully with campus life.<sup>i</sup> This may be why researchers have found a positive correlation between “net-price” and graduation rates for low and moderate-income students, but not for high-income students.<sup>13</sup> There’s also some evidence to suggest that financial constraints limit a student’s ability to engage socially; without a bit of spending money to join their peers for pizza, they may feel excluded from the “college experience.”<sup>14</sup>

### *Expectations*

Following academic skill and finances comes another obstacle that adversely affects low-income students, which researchers generically refer to as *expectations*. In the literature on college success, expectations generally mean two things. First, there is the expectation of the effort and work habits needed to be successful in college. In *Completing College*, Vincent Tinto writes, “First-generation and low-income college students...typically lack the sorts of shared knowledge, or cultural capital, that more affluent students and those from college-educated families commonly possess about the nature of the college experience and what it takes to succeed.”<sup>15</sup>

In a study by Shaun Harper of the University of Pennsylvania, called *Succeeding in the City*, the author spoke with a group of high-achieving Black and Latino male high school students in New York City, and followed them through their transition to college, to try and tease out the secrets to their success. One thing that he found, across the board, was that even these high-achieving high school students had a lot of trouble adjusting to the rigors of college. Almost every student had found success in high school with minimal academic effort: they got their homework done, but could usually finish it during school hours; they did well on tests, but didn’t really need to study.<sup>ii</sup> College was a whole different ballgame, and students struggled to adjust.<sup>16</sup>

The second piece of expectations has to do with all of the aspects of the college experience that wealthy students seem to just pick up as if by osmosis, from years of hearing stories about college from their parents, cousins, siblings, and peers. From how to get involved socially, to how to join clubs, to eating at the dining hall, to how to pick your classes, wealthy students come to college with a bank of both concrete and abstract knowledge about the college experience that low-income students lack. This is particularly noticeable in areas like knowing what it means to attain credits, choose a major, and navigate course selection. It’s not uncommon to see students drop out of college a few credits shy of graduation because they missed taking a gateway course in a

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<sup>i</sup> Indeed, researchers posit that one of the reasons that community college graduation rates are so much lower than graduation rates at four-year residential colleges is that the only place that community college students engage with the college is in the classroom, while four-year residential colleges afford numerous opportunities to engage with the college, both inside and outside of the classroom.

<sup>ii</sup> In another interesting finding from *Crossing the Finish Line*, in the statistical models they used, they found students’ SAT/ACT scores to essentially be proxies for high school quality. This may suggest that some schools are better at building the academic expectations of college better than others, which benefits students during their transition to college.



particular subject, or because they've accumulated credits without making progress towards a degree in a specific field.<sup>17</sup>

However, this large bucket of "expectations" also plays a role in a bunch of different areas of college life that are perhaps less obvious. From missing a meal because the dining hall closed early, to not understanding how to sign up for student clubs, to not knowing how to manage a newfound abundance of free time, too many missteps early on can significantly damage a student's experience.

### *Student Mindsets*

The three factors above – educational preparedness, financial constraints, and expectations for college success – all have an impact on this fourth factor, student mindsets. For years now, psychologists have understood the impact that student mindsets have on the ability to learn and persist. And the leading psychologists studying student mindsets are starting to understand, based on some experimental findings, the power of mindsets during the challenging transition to college.

This transition can be particularly hard for low-income, minority, and first-generation college goers. More specifically, research has found that this population is more likely to have negative mindsets in the areas of *belonging* and *ability*.<sup>18</sup> In the article "Who Gets to Graduate," Paul Tough writes that when wealthy and white students experience setbacks in college, they tend to not take them too personally, and think of them as an anomaly, rather than the beginning of a pattern of failure. However, racial and class-based minorities may be more likely to interpret the events as the start of a permanent pattern of struggle – and a sign that they don't belong.

One of the most famous experiments demonstrating the power of student mindsets on academic success was conducted by psychologists Gregory Walton and Geoffrey Cohen of Stanford University. In the experiment, struggling first-year students at a prestigious college were asked to read essays written by upperclassmen about how they had struggled when they first got to college and felt like they didn't belong, but then gradually made friends, did better in school, and ended up thriving. The first-year students were then asked to write about how their own experiences reflected those of the student essays they'd read, so that their essays could be shared with a later class of students. The idea behind this design is that students come to their own conclusion about the reading or discussion, and then share their learning with others so that they make the shift in their mind from the one being helped, to the one helping others.<sup>19</sup>

The students who went through the intervention experienced dramatic results. Compared to the control group, the treated students tripled the percentage of black students who ended up in the top quarter of the class as measured by GPA. What makes this finding even more dramatic was that the intervention had no impact on white students, giving credence to the idea that the African-American students really were experiencing negative mindsets, and needed that kind of reinforcement to overcome

them. And what makes the results even *more* dramatic is that the intervention took all of an hour.<sup>20</sup>

### *Support*

Despite all those obstacles, there are colleges that beat the odds, and are able to help their low-income, minority, and first-gen students succeed in higher education. And the colleges that do this well support students in all four areas above. They'll offer academic supports in the all-important freshman year, to compensate for any skill gaps.<sup>i</sup> They'll offer opportunities to help students overcome financial obstacles. And they'll offer intensive counseling and advising, to ensure that students are signing up for the right classes, developing the right academic habits to be successful, and getting involved socially on campus. And they design these supports in a way that will lead to positive mindsets in ability and belonging.<sup>ii</sup>

However, to learn more about what works, we need to dig into the individual college case studies, and hear their individual stories. Again, all colleges will offer similar sounding programs – what makes the difference are the small details and sense of intentionality with which each program is carried out, and that's what we're going to try and flesh out through the case studies that follow.

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<sup>i</sup> Many researchers argue that nothing is more important to student retention than academic support in the freshman year. In one 2006 study of several thousand first-time college students, the perceived level of support available to students was the single most powerful predictor of growth in academic competence throughout the school year (Tinto, 25).

<sup>ii</sup> As Tinto writes about student mindsets, "For those students who enter college academically underprepared or who have struggled academically in the past, success depends as much on their coming to see themselves as being able to succeed as it does the acquisition of basic skills." Early success encourages a mindset of academic competence that encourages future success, while early failure can undermine future success (Tinto, 26).

## Case Studies

The case studies below all represent a different type of college, serving different student populations, but all increasing access and success for low-income, minority, and first-generation college-goers.

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### **Case Study #1: *Georgia State University – Atlanta, GA* (large, public, research, urban)**

When looking for a model on how to graduate low-income and minority students, everyone turns to Georgia State.<sup>21</sup> Over the past decade, Georgia State has increased its graduation rate by 22 points, and minority students are now more likely to graduate than white students.<sup>22</sup> And what makes Georgia State even more intriguing, particularly for Detroiters, is that Georgia State shares nearly the exact same demographic make-up as our own Wayne State University: at both schools, Pell recipients (a signifier of low-income students), make up just over 50% of the freshman class; at Wayne State almost 30% of students are Black and Latino, while at Georgia State 45% of the students are underrepresented minorities; and both schools have a significant number of part-time students with 37% and 27% of students attending part-time at Wayne State and Georgia State respectively.<sup>23</sup>

The difference, however, is that Georgia State has figured out how to graduate students. Georgia State graduates 50% of its first-time, full-time<sup>i</sup> students in six years versus Wayne State's 28%, and Georgia State graduates 53% of its underrepresented minority students, versus Wayne State's 10%.<sup>24</sup> And it wasn't always this way – a decade ago, Georgia State had a six-year graduation rate equal to Wayne State's, before raising it 22 points.<sup>ii</sup>

What's notable about Georgia State's graduation rate is not the overall number – 50% is still below the national average.<sup>25</sup> However, amongst large urban research universities, that enroll a high percentage of minority and Pell-eligible students, Georgia State sits above the rest, and has eliminated socioeconomic and racial gaps in graduation rates, over a period of only ten years.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> First-time, full-time is the student population used to compute graduation rates.

<sup>ii</sup> It should be noted that Georgia State's average ACT score for entering freshmen is a couple points higher than Wayne State's – 23.5 versus 21.5. So it could be that GSU has a slightly more academically prepared bunch. However, this doesn't change the fact that the school has made tremendous gains in just 10 years.

### *How they did it...*

Like the other stories in this paper, this one starts with a focus on data. In the mid 1990s, Georgia State officials found high rates of failure in the introductory and gateway courses that many students needed to graduate.<sup>27</sup> Georgia State's response was the Supplemental Instruction program, which 9,000 students now go through every year. The supplemental instruction sessions are led by high achieving peers on "work-study" programs<sup>i</sup> – rather than professional tutors – saving the university money. Students who went through at least five SI sessions achieved, on average, a half-letter grade higher than their non-SI peers.<sup>28</sup> These types of supplemental instruction courses are thought to be more effective than generic tutoring centers, as they're done in small groups, are tied directly to a particular class, and are proactive rather than reactive: students receive support from day one, not after an early-warning indicator has shown that they failed their first test.<sup>29</sup>

SI may also be preferable to other student support programs, like development courses or mandatory trips to the learning center, because it reduces potential stigma by making the support course specific, rather than student specific. The message is, this course is hard, and we're going to help you with it, rather than, you may not be able to do the work, so we're going to help you. In addition, SI is available to all students, and the first students to take advantage of SI may in fact be the high achievers, eager to improve, signaling to the other students that it's a chance for academic improvement, not remediation.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to analyzing *which* courses students were failing, GSU also took a hard look at *who* was failing. This analysis led to an intensive orientation and learning community program called Success Academy, for students with the highest "at-risk" characteristics. Students involved in Success Academy (4% of the freshmen class, and the most "at-risk") take introductory courses over the summer before school officially begins, with a cohort of students all taking the same courses, enabling them to build community, gain college-level academic skills, and get acquainted with the campus and its resources.<sup>ii</sup> These students then stay together in the fall and spring, taking some core content courses together, and choosing a couple electives on their own.<sup>31</sup> Being a part of this learning community helps to create a small, supportive, community-based environment in the midst of a large university. Students who went through this program starting in the summer of 2012 – and remember, this is the most vulnerable 4% of the freshmen class –

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<sup>i</sup> Work-study is a federal financial aid program in which the students are employed part-time on campus, and the federal government subsidizes their wages to varying degrees.

<sup>ii</sup> In the report *Black Male Student Success in Higher Education*, by Shaun Harper of the University of Pennsylvania, Harper conducts in-depth interviews with successful Black male students at colleges across the country to get a sense of what's led to their success. In the report, participants claim that the benefit of summer bridge programs, particularly at a majority-white campus, is getting acquainted with an unfamiliar environment prior to *all* of the students arriving.

ended up achieving a 2.96 average GPA by the end of the Fall semester, better than the remaining 96% of the freshmen class.<sup>32</sup>

While they were able to predict a lot of student difficulties on the front-end, the school also instituted a web-based tracking system that would alert advisors when a student met an obstacle that was not predicted. For example, if a student failed to register for a certain class that was required for graduation, advisors would receive an alert to reach out to the student and ensure everything was all right. University officials say that this type of system, in which advisors receive an alert and reach out to the student, rather than the student reaching out on her own accord, reduces the stigma that first-year college students often feel in asking for help.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to academic support and academic advising, GSU has also focused on easing students' financial constraints, and in doing so have highlighted the impact that small grants can have on student retention and success. In 2011, the school began a program called the Panther Retention Grants program, which offers small grants to students when they fail to pay a tuition bill, keeping them afloat. According to the school's statistics, after a grant that's sometimes as small as \$300, 90% of students re-enroll without requiring additional grants, and 70% of students within two semesters of graduating were able to do so partly as a result of these grants. The school also offers small, \$500 grants each semester to students who've lost the Georgia Hope Scholarship<sup>i</sup> for academic reasons, contingent on regular attendance at academic and literacy skills workshops, and academic advising sessions. 62% of students, when given the second chance to improve their academic standing, were able to remain in the scholarship program.<sup>34</sup>

In an internal report, the school credits its success to school officials' willingness to try new approaches, and then bring those new approaches to scale. One example of this type of work can be found in the redesign of the school's college algebra course. GSU piloted a "blended-learning" approach to the course, which historically had a drop/fail/withdraw (DFW) rate of 43%. In the pilot, students attended a one-hour lecture each week, with the other two hours of the week's work spent not in a lecture hall, but in an adaptive-learning math lab, where students could address specific skill-gaps and receive on-time support from instructors. The DFW rate for the course fell from 43% to 21% in 2012, and 7,500 students now take this hybrid approach.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> The Georgia Hope Scholarship awards students with tuition scholarships of varying amounts to in-state public and private schools for students with a 3.0 or above high school GPA. Students need to maintain that GPA in college to maintain the scholarship.

## **Lessons Learned: Georgia State University**

**Focus on data.** The first, and perhaps most obvious principle in the Georgia State case is that it all starts with the data. The school figured out which classes weren't working, and enrolled 9,600 students in peer-led supplemental instruction. They figured out which students were most likely to struggle, brought them to campus early, put them in learning communities, and surrounded them with supports.

**Pilot and expand.** It bears repeating that according to GSU, the formula is simple: look at the data, try a program to address shortcomings, and then expand the ones that work.<sup>36</sup> There's obviously a lot more to it than that, as the scale at which Georgia State has instituted some of their reforms is pretty impressive: 9,000 students take part in Supplemental Instruction, 7,500 students take part in blended math, and all 25,000 students are enrolled in their web-based advising program. Still, their analyze, pilot, expand approach is helpful to have in mind.

**Be proactive.** If you look closely at GSU's reforms, they're all proactive, rather than reactive. Through predictive analytics, the college identified those students most likely to dropout, and placed them in their Success Academy so that they had a strong start. Through analysis of course outcomes, they understood which classes students did most poorly in, and expanded supplemental instruction in those courses, not waiting for them to struggle, but supporting them from day one. And their comprehensive advising system notified counselors when students hit a snag, prompting advisors to reach out to the students, rather than the other way around.

**Small interventions can make a big difference.** GSU's interventions aren't exactly groundbreaking: advisors reached out to students when they saw something amiss; the college offered small grants to students that missed tuition payments. These interventions may seem small, but they also have made a big difference, both in the lives of the students and in the graduation rates of the university.

**Student success for all.** GSU president Mark Becker points out that GSU reforms aren't only focused on specific racial or ethnic groups, but on the student body as a whole. The message here is that student success is important for everyone, not just certain sub-groups. These more "comprehensive" approaches may build a stronger campus-wide commitment to the issue of student retention and success than other "boutique" approaches,<sup>37</sup> and being committed to retention and success of all students may reduce the potential stigma inherent to only offering services to specific groups deemed "in-need" of help.

**Commitment.** This final piece is perhaps a bit more vague, but probably the most important takeaway from the research. Again, at colleges across the country, you'll find programs similar in name and intent. The difference is in the commitment, design, and execution of the programs.

So how do we tell which programs are actually likely to make a difference? How can we tell if a university is truly serious about student retention and success, versus simply throwing programs at the problem?

GSU provides a good example of how we can get a sense of a school's commitment. First, their data on, and future plans for, student retention and success was not hard to find – a memo about their work in this area was front and center on their website. This type of documentation shows that they're constantly reflecting on what they've done, and how they need to improve.

In addition, their internal documents are written in very specific language. They know which programs they're focusing on, why they're focusing on them, and who they're serving. Scanning other websites, and their student retention and success plans, you'll find general language about supporting students, being more welcoming, and having stronger advising. But what's the specific program? Who will it be serving? And what are the impacts? Saying that you offer learning communities is one thing – recognizing their success, and enrolling 2,500 freshmen in them, is another.

It's equally illuminating to look at the strategic plans that the college publishes.<sup>38</sup> In Georgia State's 2011 Strategic Plan, the first goal listed, front and center, is to "Become a national model for undergraduate education by demonstrating that students from all backgrounds can achieve academic and career success at high rates."<sup>39</sup>

**Leadership and staffing.** Closely related to commitment is the leadership and staffing at GSU. In 2008, the university established an office of student retention, which is staffed by an assistant VP whose sole work is around student retention and student success. She manages with 11 outreach coordinators, who work on the various elements of GSU's student success plans.<sup>40</sup>

And finally, this commitment starts from the school's president, Mark Becker. President Becker keeps a blog on the university's website, in which he discusses issues of importance to the university. And just about every post on the blog is about student success, the programs that GSU is implementing to encourage more success, and how they're narrowing (and have now closed), the gap between graduation rates for white students and minority students. Again, the commitment to this cause at GSU is front and center.

**Case Study #2: Franklin & Marshall College – Lancaster, PA  
(small, private, liberal-arts)**

Franklin & Marshall is in many ways the polar opposite of a school like Georgia State. While Georgia State enrolls nearly 24,000 students, F & M enrolls under 2,400. While underrepresented minorities make up nearly half of Georgia State's student body, they make up only 10% of F & M's.<sup>41</sup> Franklin & Marshall is ranked by Barron's, a college guidebook, as "Most Competitive," the highest selectivity ranking, while Georgia State falls into the "Very Competitive" category, somewhere in the vast middle of colleges and universities in the United States.

Yet like Georgia State, F & M has also been generating a lot of press around their efforts to get more low-income, minority, and first-generation students to and through college. In recent years, Franklin and Marshall College has undergone dramatic reforms in an effort to increase access and success for this population of students, and they're now considered a national leader amongst institutions of their type in recruiting, retaining, and graduating low-income, minority, and first-generation students.

F & M has gained national attention for a lot of reasons, but one is clearly the leadership provided by President Daniel Porterfield. Porterfield views F & M's efforts in the recruitment and success of low-income students not as charity, but instead as a talent-development strategy.<sup>42</sup> One of the most striking findings in the world of college access and success to come out in recent years is the phenomenon of "undermatching," in which high-achieving low-income students fail to apply to many top colleges that they could have gotten into, opting instead for local or regional, less selective colleges. Porterfield thinks that due to the undermatching problem, colleges are missing out on a huge chunk of potential, and he wants to make sure F & M is tapping into that group.

*Attracting low-income students*

It goes without saying that before colleges can graduate low-income students, they need to attract them to attend the school in the first place. And just 6 years ago, F & M wasn't attracting very many low-income students. In 2008, only 5% of the incoming freshman class was Pell eligible, as the school concerned itself more with recruiting, and offering merit aid scholarships, to high academic achievers whose families could also pay the full freight.<sup>43</sup> But for the last three years, nearly 17% of the freshman class has been Pell-eligible, with little to no gap in retention and GPA between the Pell-eligible students and their wealthier classmates.<sup>44</sup>

To attract talented low-income students, F & M partnered with high-achieving charter school networks that serve low-income, minority students, like YES Prep in Houston, and Achievement First and Uncommon Schools in New York. By promising certain supports (financial, academic, social) to students from those networks, they were able tap into a steady stream of high-achieving students. They also joined on as a training site for the College Advising Corps, a program that places recent graduates in under-resourced high



schools to serve as college counselors. Through this program F & M was able to place recent graduates in area high schools to attract high-achievers to F & M. And finally, F & M started a 3-week summer program for low-income high school students, to give them a taste of life on campus.<sup>i</sup>

### *Making the budget work*

Tripling the number of Pell-eligible students you bring onto campus each fall, as F & M has done, brings up significant budgetary concerns. After all, each additional low-income student you enroll costs a significant amount in financial aid. One estimate claims that a student who requires \$45,000 in aid per year produces a loss of \$1 million from the endowment.<sup>45</sup> And this is an even bigger deal for a school like F & M, which has a far smaller endowment than peer institutions that are also doing this work. Like F & M, Harvard also enrolls 17% Pell students in their freshman class, but they have \$1.5 million in endowment funds per student, while F & M has only \$120,000. Yet F & M is still keeping their Pell numbers relatively high, and keeping the average net price for low-income families under \$10,000.<sup>46</sup>

F & M was able to take on so many more low-income students, and still make the books work, by re-thinking how low-income students are supported financially, in both large ways and small. Starting with the large, F & M shifted the way that they attracted and put to use alumni donations, encouraging alums to give to financial aid efforts.<sup>47</sup> This past year the school raised \$15.5 million, \$4.4 million of which goes into a fund that, in part, goes towards need-based financial aid.<sup>48</sup> In addition to raising money, they also shifted the type of aid that they gave out, from merit-based aid to need-based. Many colleges, particularly after the financial crisis, used merit-based aid both to attract high-achieving students who might not otherwise consider the college, but also to attract students from wealthy families who, aside from the token amount of merit aid, will pay the full freight.<sup>49</sup> F & M, however, went the other way, phasing out merit-aid altogether, and increasing the amount of annual need-based aid from \$5 million to \$11 million.<sup>50</sup>

### *Supporting students*

After getting students to campus, with good financial aid packages, F & M believes they haven't seen any performance gaps because they've surrounded students with a suite of supports to combat all of the obstacles that low-income students generally face. First, they provided low-income students with many advising and academic support touch points, both from faculty and from fellow students. While all students at F & M have on-site advisors in their freshman dorms, low-income students also meet in groups of ten with a professor-advisor, and are assigned a paid student mentor to help them navigate the obstacles inherent in the transition to college life. In addition, F & M started a "Quant Center," the sister to the writing center, to help students in challenging gateway math courses.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> A student from the Detroit Edison Public School Academy Early College of Excellence attended the program this past summer.

But beyond those more standard support measures, F & M also took on a more unique reform by auditing the entire student experience for low-income students at their school, which led to some pretty interesting interventions.<sup>52</sup> The student experience work is led by Donnell Butler, who was hired in 2012 as the senior associate dean for planning and analysis of student outcomes – a mouthful of a title, and a position that you won't find at a lot of other colleges, says Butler.<sup>i</sup>

Because a student's out of class experiences are often just as important as their time in class, Butler analyzes *all* aspects of the student experience. For example, the school invested in the technology to track student ID card-swipes at campus events. Butler wanted to know exactly who was going to these events. Who was getting involved on campus? Was it only the top students? How can we get the other students to take advantage of these same opportunities?

Even more interesting findings come out of the focus groups Butler conducts with groups of students to get a sense of the obstacles they're facing, what they're doing on campus, how they succeed, and how they don't. Butler started the focus groups in place of standard survey instruments because he found he got a lot more actionable data from conversation, as opposed to the open-ended surveys that students got bored with, leaving out the full story.

A couple of really interesting findings and interventions came out of Butler's conversations with students, that have gained national attention as colleges of all stripes re-evaluate how they support low-income students. First, when school officials noticed that low-income students were having problems staying afloat financially, it didn't quite make sense – after all, these students had been awarded a financial aid package to ensure that they *could* stay afloat. When Butler dug deeper into the issue, through individual conversations with students and focus groups, he found that work-study – federally subsidized campus jobs, and a critical part of the students' financial aid packages – was not working out for many students. All of the plum work-study jobs were going to upperclassmen who knew who to contact and where to look.

In light of these findings, the college completely restructured the way they awarded work-study jobs, reserving positions for first-year students so that they were easily placed in the appropriate departments. Previously, roughly one-third of freshmen that were awarded work-study actually got a work-study job, and now every work-study eligible student that wants a job, gets a job. And this is important, because these work-study funds can then be used to defray the day-to-day living expenses that go hand-in-hand with residential college life – grabbing pizza with friends, or going to see the occasional movie. Experiences that, should students be denied them, could lead to the sneaking sense that you somehow don't belong.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Much of the following comes from a conversation with Donnell Butler on July 25, 2014.

Another finding that emerged from Butler's focus groups had to do with how low-income students were spending their breaks from school. While financial aid packages generally cover some average amount of travel, they don't allow for a student from Texas or California to fly home for every school break. So while their classmates were away on break, some students were stuck on campus, with most of the campus services – and most especially the dining halls – closed, leaving students to fend for themselves.

In response to this data – and this is sensitive data, that can really only be gained from having one-on-one or small group conversations – the school organized van trips to take students to the mall, the movies, and to Walmart, got them boxed lunches in lieu of dining hall meals, and invited them all to a Thanksgiving dinner with President Porterfield over Thanksgiving break.

What's most amazing about this data is how specific the problems were, the relative ease of solving those problems, and the potential consequences had those problems gone on unchecked. These are problems that you have to *find*, by talking with students – and the students won't always come to you. And that's the hard part. But the solutions – a little bit of extra spending money, and a sense of community during a time when you might feel lonely or left out – aren't rocket science.

*So what?*

Some may not find the story of F & M too impressive. A critic might say that of course they should be enrolling 17% Pell students, as it's the right thing to do, and of course students should do well and graduate – they're getting all the high achievers. One might be more impressed with Georgia State, who works with a less-skilled group of students, and is also working with a whole lot more of them.

But if we're going to achieve equal educational outcomes for students regardless of income, everyone needs to play a part. We'll of course need the big-city publics, like Georgia State, enrolling over 50% Pell-eligible students, but we'll also need the F & M's of the world to do their part, enrolling and graduating high-achieving, low-income students. Schools like F & M can't just be left for the wealthy and the white, and F & M is now doing their part, which is why it's worth looking at how they strategically reorganized themselves in order to get the job done.

## **Lessons Learned: Franklin & Marshall College**<sup>i</sup>

**Go beyond the data.** Just as was the case with Georgia State, F & M started their efforts around data. However, F & M went a step beyond GSU with the level of specificity in their data. Through focus groups and one-on-one conversations, F & M staff knew not only who was struggling, but precisely *why* they were struggling, and therefore were able to offer targeted supports.

**Small interventions go a long way.** In another repeat finding, we find that the needed interventions are often small. Ensuring students get their work-study and a ride to the mall over break have had profound impacts at F & M.

**Commitment and leadership.** Commitment and leadership again play a major role. Like at GSU, F & M's president, Dan Porterfield, is front and center on the issue of low-income students' access and success, and one of the leading voices on this issue in the nation. In January, Porterfield served on a panel at the White House's summit on access and success for low-income students, in which he told attendees that they needed to attack the myth that low-income students can't achieve, and instead think of the population as a pool of untapped talent.<sup>54</sup>

And sure enough, the first step of the schools' strategic priorities listed on their website is to recruit extraordinary talent; and two of their strategies for doing that are to increased need-based aid, for the talented students that don't come from wealth, and to create more partnerships with high performing school networks and college access programs that serve underrepresented students. Just like GSU, F & M puts their commitment to educational equality – which in F & M's case is also a talent strategy – at the top of their priority list.

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<sup>i</sup> A report written in January of 2014 by the Education Trust tried to tease out the levers of success that were being pulled by universities that had seen a dramatic increase in the graduation rates of Pell eligible students. Two of the factors listed below, leadership and data, were two keys that the EdTrust report focused on as well.

### **Case Study #3: University of Texas – Austin (large, public, research, flagship)<sup>i</sup>**

The University of Texas – Austin (UT) presents another unique case study. UT is the major flagship university in the state of Texas – the equivalent of U of M – Ann Arbor here in Michigan. The difference between UT and Michigan, however, is that while Michigan’s four-year graduation rate is 76%, UT’s is around 50%.<sup>55</sup> This also makes UT an interesting case study, as over the past five years the university has been making strides to get on par with peer institutions like U of M, and they seem to be making some progress.

UT also presents an interesting case study because of their unique admissions policy, known as the 10% law. The 10% law, enacted in 1996 by the Texas State Legislature, states that any high school senior in Texas who falls in the top 10% of their high school graduating class is automatically admitted to the campus of their choice within the UT system (with increased applicants and tighter admissions, the 10% law has now become the 7% law). The law was enacted in response to the ending of affirmative action in Texas, to ensure that UT remained economically and racially diverse, admitting top students from both rich, white high schools, and poor, minority-serving high schools.

And this diversity at UT is evident in their official statistics. 27% of UT freshman are Pell eligible, while a quarter of the class is an underrepresented minority. Contrast that with the University of Michigan, where 16% receive the Pell, and only 8% are underrepresented minorities.<sup>56</sup> By design, the University of Texas welcomes more low-income and minority students to campus each fall relative to peer institutions. The question is, can they achieve the same results as their peer flagship schools, while serving a different set of students?

Historically, UT has struggled in graduating low-income, minority, and first-gen students. The gap in six-year graduation rates between underrepresented minority students and white students is fourteen points, at 68% and 82% respectively. At other elite flagships, like University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill and the University of Virginia, the gap is almost half that.

An internal report by the UT graduation rate task force from 2012 goes even deeper into the data. Analyzing the outcomes for the 2004 cohort, the report finds worse outcomes across the board for low-income, minority, and first-gen students. After 6-years, 25% of the Pell eligible population in the 2004 cohort had either been dismissed or dropped out, while only 15% of the non-Pell population had. 30% of the Black students who started at UT were no longer there, while a quarter of the Hispanic students had also left or been dismissed. And almost 30% of first-gen students were also no longer at the

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<sup>i</sup> Most of information for this section was gathered from *Who Gets to Graduate*, by Paul Tough in the New York Times Magazine, published on May 15, 2014.

school, with just 11% of students from families with two degrees having left.<sup>57</sup> So while UT may be trying to increase graduation rates across the board, it's clear that a more specific area of concern is the graduation rates for low-income, minority, and first-gen students.

### *Impacting mindsets*

A recent profile of UT's efforts by Paul Tough in the New York Times Magazine, titled "Who Gets to Graduate," provides some clues as to how they're trying to work on that problem. In the article, Tough reports on the interventions that are taking place beneath the data, at the intersection of academic support and academic mindsets.

Tough's article profiles the work of David Laude, a former chemistry teacher at UT who was promoted to vice provost for enrollment and graduation as a result of his commitment to student success. Laude's work in student success began when he realized that in his introductory chemistry course, a gateway course for majors and careers in the medical fields, the majority of his 500 students would finish with As and Bs, while a hundred or so students would be at the bottom, just scraping by or failing the course completely. Taking a deeper dive, Laude realized that most of the students who were failing were low-income, and most had below average SAT scores.

Laude, convinced that remedial courses had detrimental impacts on the mindsets of students who may already feel like they don't belong, created a customized program for the struggling students that allowed them to get the support they needed while remaining in the mainstream chemistry course. The program had three crucial components that seem to match the blueprints of most student success programs, with one less-obvious one. First, he broke the 50 or so students who were some combination of low-income, low scoring, or first-generation college-goers, and invited them to apply to their own section of Chemistry 301, titled the Texas Interdisciplinary Plan. Those students, in addition to the small class size, received up to 2 extra hours a week of supplemental instruction, additional contact with advisors, and one-to-one peer mentors – upperclassmen that could work with students and show them the ropes. In Laude's words, they "overwhelmed" the students with academic support.<sup>58</sup>

The less-obvious component of the program was that it was also designed to impact student mindsets about ability and belonging. Laude created the name Texas Interdisciplinary Program to make it sound like the opposite of a remedial program, and had students apply to the program, rather than be placed, to lend it a sense of selectivity. And they focused on delivering the message that the students were not in need of help, but were instead a select group of high-achieving scholars.

The group of students that went through TIP not only ended the course with the same grades as the higher-SAT, higher-income students, but also returned for their sophomore year at rates above the university average, and, 3 years later, graduated at

rates higher than average at the university. Early success in a gateway course may have dictated the rest of their college careers.

This story highlights the importance of two mindsets essential for college success, but that low-income students entering a prestigious university often lack. These mindsets center around *ability* and *belonging*. Students need to feel that they belong in the environment of a prestigious four-year college, and they need to feel that they have the ability to succeed – that they can do the work. As Vincent Tinto writes, “Success depends as much on (students) coming to see themselves as being able to succeed as it does the acquisition of basic skills.”<sup>59</sup> Student mindsets, and how they *feel* about their ability to succeed, may matter just as much as actual ability.

Laude has now been charged with bringing his intervention that worked for an introductory Chemistry course to scale across the entire university. Starting with the data, Laude and a team of experts at UT created a dashboard that takes a bunch of different student characteristics, and turns them into a score, or percentage chance of graduating. The students with the lowest scores, below a 40% chance of graduating (1200 students out of a 7000 student freshman class), then receive interventions targeting mindsets and belonging, in line with the work Laude did in the TIP program. On the ability side, Laude began a TIP program in every department of the university, so that the least likely to graduate all got the experience of small class sizes, supplemental instruction, tutoring support, and individual advising. And on the belonging side, Laude took those at the very bottom of the dashboard, the 500 or so students who fell below a 40% chance of graduating, *and* had unmet financial need, and structured a program that addressed both their financial need and need for community. Those students were invited to apply to a program called the University Leadership Network, in which students participate in service opportunities and attend professional-style lectures on key college skills like time-management. Again, the idea behind these sorts of interventions is not just to offer academic or social supports, but also to impact student mindsets, to make students feel like they belong, to make them feel that they can do the work.

The success of the expansion of Laude’s program remains to be seen. However, the Class of 2017, the first group of students who has benefited from the entire suite of student-support initiatives, has returned to campus at higher rates, earned better grades, and attained more credits than any other class on record.<sup>60</sup>

## **Lessons Learned: University of Texas – Austin**

**Mindsets matter.** The biggest takeaway from the UT case is that the students' mindsets about their *ability* and *belonging* are just as important as any academic or social supports in and of themselves. Research on mindset intervention shows that just small shifts in student mindsets can yield tremendous improvements in academic results, as the shifts begin a recursive process in which *belief* turns into ability and belonging.<sup>61</sup> Again, these shifts in all of the case studies can be incredibly small – having students apply to a program, rather than be placed by college officials at UT; making supplemental instruction available to the entire student body at GSU, to avoid any stigma; or F & M President Dan Porterfield calling the recruitment of low-income students a talent strategy, rather than an equity strategy – but can have significant long-term benefits.

**Proactive use of data.** Once again we see a student success story that starts with the data. Prior to beginning the TIP program, Laude first had to identify the characteristics of the students who consistently failed his core gateway course. He then invited students with those same characteristics into the TIP program *before* the semester began, so that they got off to a good start. Then, when bringing his reforms to scale across the entire campus, Laude and his team generated an algorithm that could predict, based on student characteristics, each student's odds of making it to graduation, so that he knew exactly which students needed support before they stepped foot on campus. The University then surrounded those students with a range of academic and social supports that would all but ensure their success.

**Leadership and Commitment.** UT presents another case in which the reforms start from the top. The school's commitment to increasing graduation rates began when President Bill Powers set the lofty goal of raising the schools' four-year graduation rate from just above 50% in 2011, to 70% by 2016, closer to state flagship peers like the University of Michigan.

Setting a goal like this helps to make student retention and success a campus-wide priority. And just as Franklin & Marshall hired Donnell Butler, UT promoted David Laude to assistant vice provost for enrollment and graduation management, making him the "*the graduation champion for the University of Texas at Austin.*"<sup>62</sup> Again this is an instance of the university showing its commitment to improving outcomes for students through organizational and staffing changes – if you're serious about graduation rates, you appoint a champion.



#### **Case Study #4: Valencia College – Orlando, FL (community college)**

Our final case study, Valencia Community College, is perhaps the most important one. Forty-five percent of undergraduate students nationwide attend a community college, and the students at those community colleges are more likely to be low-income (57% of first-time college students with family incomes under \$32,000 start at a community college), minority, and the first in their family to go to college.<sup>63</sup> If we're worried about improving outcomes for low-income students, community colleges are a key piece of the puzzle.

Unfortunately, however, the completion rates for community college students across the country are terrible: only 22% of community college students earn a 2-year credential in three years, and only 15% of students who start at a community college go on to earn a bachelor's degree in six years.<sup>64</sup> And these numbers aren't due to lack of aspiration - roughly 80% of entering community college students say they want to eventually earn a four-year degree, yet very few do.<sup>65</sup> In short, community colleges need to get better.

One college that is getting better is Valencia Community College, winner of the inaugural 2011 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, given to a leader in the field every two years. This first Aspen Prize was a big deal because historically, not a lot of attention has been paid to the quality of community colleges. As Kevin Carey of the New America Foundation points out, while we can argue at great length about which Ivy League college is best, these conversations rarely happen at the community college level. And it's tough to tell who's "best," because the things we often use to distinguish four-year colleges from one another, "like admissions selectivity, endowment size, and research productivity, don't apply to two-year institutions."<sup>66</sup>

But we can still look at student outcomes, and in this area Valencia is leading the way. While only 22% of first-time, full-time community college students across the country earn a two-year credential in three years, 40% of students at Valencia do.<sup>67</sup> 30% of Valencia students transfer to four-year colleges, trumping the national rate of 20%, with four-fifths of those students going to the University of Central Florida, through a partnership that automatically admits students with an associate's degree from Valencia.<sup>68</sup>

#### *Starting off on the right foot*

Valencia credits much of their success to the focus they place on the very beginning of a student's college career, before she even steps on campus, during the admissions and enrollment process. The school moved application and admission deadlines up, gave adjunct faculty their course assignments a year in advance to avoid hastily organized courses, and banned the practice of adding students to a course after it's begun, even if

the student has only missed a single class.<sup>69i</sup> All students, and particularly those at community colleges, need firm ground to start from, with a good sense of the path they're on, and Valencia took strides to make that happen.

Once community college students across the country get on campus, the majority of students go directly into developmental (sometimes called remedial) coursework, which yield no college credit. Close to 60% of all entering community college students enroll in at least one developmental education course in math or English.<sup>70</sup> While there's significant debate on the value and proper structure of remedial coursework, the major takeaway is that community college students show up on campus under-prepared. Recognizing this fact, and the importance of early success, 40% of Valencia students take part in a student success course, in which they learn college-level academic habits, and get put on a personalized education plan.<sup>71</sup>

The school also takes advantage of "learning communities," in which students take their courses as a cohort. This model is particularly prevalent for students taking developmental courses.<sup>72</sup> One of the ideas behind learning communities is that they help create opportunities to build community on campus through classroom experiences, which, as Vincent Tinto writes, is often the only chance community college students get to build community on campus. Missing many of the co-curricular and residential experiences that mark the experience of full-time students at a four-year college, community-college students need to build their community in the classroom.<sup>73</sup>

#### *Personalized pathways*

A personalized education plan for each student is also something that Valencia considers a key to its success. The college invested heavily in a tool called "life map" that enables students to better match potential career plans with their course plan, so that every student has a defined path, a broader reason for being there.<sup>74</sup> And the school works to connect its graduates with potential employers, contributing to the idea that there's an end-goal to the paths students are on. Defense technology company Northrop Grumman, for example, hires many of their laser technicians out of Valencia.<sup>75</sup>

And for 30% of Valencia students, this personalized pathway involves transferring to a four-year college. These students can take advantage of the DirectConnect program that Valencia started with the University of Central Florida, under which any student with an associate's degree from Valencia is automatically admitted to UCF. The catch is that while many four-year colleges will take transfer students at any point along their community college education after a certain number of credits, students in the DirectConnect program *need* to attain an associate's degree from Valencia before transferring.<sup>76</sup> And UCF has established a satellite location at Valencia, so students don't have to leave Valencia to earn their four-year degree.

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<sup>i</sup> So that students don't miss out on key classes, they moved to a "flex-start" schedule.

The DirectConnect program is a great deal both for Valencia students, and for the University of Central Florida. Starting from the student perspective, the University of Central Florida is a very competitive school, with freshmen coming out of high school with average GPAs around 3.8, and average ACT scores of 26.<sup>77</sup> The DirectConnect program affords a student coming out of high school with nowhere near those scores the opportunity to attend a selective college, and a goal to strive for. And from UCF's perspective, the program offers a steady stream of students that are likely to be successful. A little known fact in the world of college access is that while the transfer rates from community colleges to four-year colleges are low across the country, those that actually *do* transfer are generally successful: the eventual graduation rate for community college transfers is right around 60%, higher than the national average. And for students who finish their associate's degree before transferring, as outlined in the DirectConnect program, the four-year graduation rate shoots up to 71%.<sup>78</sup>

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### **Lessons Learned: Valencia Community College**

**Paths are important.** For community college students, who may enter college more disengaged, and more likely to drop out at the first sign of trouble, seeing their personal path is important. Valencia puts tremendous attention on student paths – what's the end goal, and what is the schedule of courses and supports needed to get there? This seems essential for the community college environment.

**Support is important.** Melinda Mechur Karp, of the Columbia Community College Research Center, wrote a paper titled "They Never Told Me What to Expect, So I Didn't Know What to Do," which nicely encapsulates the gap that exists between what college students are supposed to do to be successful, and what community college students know about what it takes to be successful.<sup>79</sup>

40% of Valencia students enroll in a Student Success course, in which they learn about the behaviors and expectations that will make them successful college students, filling a much-needed gap. Across the entire college landscape, many students show up on campus without the requisite skills, attitudes, and behaviors to be successful, irrespective of their content-based skill. This problem is even more defined at the community college level, where those students that struggled the most in high school, and likely didn't develop the academic skills and behaviors needed for academic success, are overly represented. A student success course, that tells students what to expect, is clearly essential.

**Community is important.** One of the most robust findings in the college retention and success literature is that engagement, or involvement, really matters. It matters if students are involved in campus life, building relationships with peers and professors, and taking advantage of the resources the college offers. Vincent Tinto notes that

community colleges and commuter schools present a unique scenario, because the classroom is the main point of engagement for the student. Where a student at a residential four-year college might also be involved in clubs on campus, and attend guest lectures, the community college student is more likely to head to class, and then head back home, or back to their place of employment. Therefore, the classroom, and the structures around the classroom, represent one of the only chances to engage and involve students.

For this reason, the learning communities at Valencia are critical for student engagement. Taking the same set of classes alongside the same peers gives students the opportunity to form a community and get involved in an environment that does not naturally promote community and involvement.

## Summary of Findings

While each institution studied above is unique, serving different populations of students, and with slightly different institutional goals, it's clear there are some common lessons we can draw:

**Data matters.** All of the case studies start with a story about data. At Georgia State and UT, the school figured out exactly which students were struggling, and in exactly which classes, and started their reform efforts there. At F & M, they went beyond the quantitative data to learn more about the student experience, and figure out the exact roadblocks that were standing in the way of low-income students.

**Be proactive.** Absent from all of these success stories are things like “early-warning indicators” and other troubleshooting systems that colleges use to monitor student success. Those programs are surely necessary, but the schools above focused on the data and resources needed to figure out which students were most likely to struggle, and in which courses, so they could offer supports from the very start, and not wait to intervene.

In addition, many of the reforms above are based on the premise that students aren't going seek out help, but that we instead need to go to them. In light of the fact that many college freshmen struggle to advocate for themselves, it might be wise to remember these reform stories in which the college went to the student, and not the other way around.

**Try new things – then expand.** Instituting campus-wide initiatives sounds intimidating. What's less intimidating is following GSU's system for improvement: try new approaches, analyze the data, and then expand. In all of the case studies, the institution noticed trends, made small changes, and then brought the interventions campus-wide.

**Mindsets Matter.** Another finding that echoes throughout these stories is this idea that student mindsets, and the student experience, really matters: at F & M, extra steps are taken to make sure students feel like they're at home, and President Porterfield is constantly referring to low-income students not as poor, but as talented; at GSU and Valencia, extra organizational steps are taken to ensure that students get off to a good start – that they're supported and have a strong sense of their path from day one, to set in motion a positive, rather than negative cycle of mindsets; at UT and GSU, students participate in supplemental instruction, rather than remedial coursework; and at all the schools, all programs are implemented with an eye out for the potential stigma associated with participation in those programs.

**Leadership, and staffing, matters.** Another common thread through all the case studies is that the president is front and center on the issue of student retention and student success. UT's President Bill Powers set the goal of moving the four-year graduation rate

from 50 to 70 percent in 5 years; F & M president Dan Porterfield encourages his campus, and other campuses across the country, to attack the myth that low-income students need to be remediated to; President Mark Becker of Georgia State seems to write almost exclusively on student retention and success issues on his university blog; and President Sanford Shugart of Valencia College is a leader in the national discussion on how to improve outcomes at the community college level.<sup>80</sup>

Close behind setting that vision for the campus comes changes in staffing. When the schools began to get serious about student retention and success, they made the staffing and organizational changes to prove it: GSU started an office of student retention; UT appointed David Laude as the graduation rate champion; and F & M invented a position for Donnell Butler, to dig deeper into the student experience.

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But more than anything else, this research shows that there are concrete steps that colleges can take to improve outcomes for all students, and particularly the low-income, minority, and first-gen students that are dropping out in droves. While not spelled out in this paper, there is significant room for improvement amongst the colleges in the Detroit metro region, and a lot to learn from these fast-improving institutions, and others like them.

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