

ACCESS TO EXCELLENCE:  
IMPROVING ACHIEVEMENT OF UNDERPREPARED STUDENTS IN AN  
OPEN-ADMISSIONS COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Manchester Community College is an institution in the midst of transition, always moving forward. Not only is enrollment up, but more importantly, the institution is becoming more complex. As an “open admissions” institution offering both credit and non-credit programs, the college has always struggled with the temptation to see its mission as being all things to all people in its quest to provide access to “a broad range of educational opportunities” (as its mission states). Not long ago, the older, working, part-time adult student from the predominantly white suburbs in the College’s fifteen-town primary service area was the typical student at Manchester. The student demographic, however, is in the midst of a transition. With a new campus and rapidly increasing enrollments, now nearly half the student body comes from outside of suburban districts and increasingly from urban areas, particularly Hartford. The minority student population has risen rapidly to 30%. An increasing proportion of current students (both from within the service area and outside of it) are full-time and of traditional college age (under 21). Many indicate a baccalaureate degree as a long-term goal.

Previous planning activities (such as the Task Force on Enrollment and Retention that was formed in April 2000 in response to falling enrollments and represented a truly campus-wide and cohesive effort to address that issue) focused on older, part-time students and did not address the possibility of this changing demographic. The College’s new campus, developed as a replacement for a series of temporary buildings, was planned with the College’s working, part-time student in mind and so does not have as many of the kinds

of spaces baccalaureate, residential colleges have, places for young students to congregate and interact; younger, full-time students tend to spend more time on campus, especially between classes. The challenges of dealing with this change in enrollment patterns include dealing with a population of recent high school graduates who are increasingly under-prepared to meet the expectations of higher education.

Across campus, a number of initiatives have been developed to address the issue of under-prepared students and to assess the outcomes of these efforts. Academic and student affairs have jointly developed many of these initiatives; others have been developed in isolation. Currently, campus-wide planning for improving the success of the changing student body is less coherent and well-developed than the College would like. The leadership and key faculty and staff are aware of most of the initiatives, but many of the rank and file faculty -- including the part-timers who teach over half the courses -- are not. How does Manchester Community College plan for a future where the College as a whole is prepared to meet the challenges it is likely to face in the future? How can that planning develop flexibility to be able to respond, again as a whole, to changes and challenges that it can not yet wholly predict? When the Task Force on Enrollment and Retention reported out, it may not have foreseen as well as it might have how the College's demographic would change. Nevertheless, it made recommendations that were acted upon that improved the College for all students -- for instance, streamlining and coordinating admissions and financial aid. In other words, it was able to make recommendations that meet the needs of future students. Can the College continue to develop a relatively long-term vision to meet the needs of future students so that it can become increasingly inclusive?

Typical of most institutions of higher education, Manchester Community College realizes that not all students who have a high school diploma or G.E.D. are prepared to meet the challenges of college-level academics. Although many departments and programs offer courses designed for students who may not be ready for all college-level work, the Math and English Departments offer pre-college-level courses to prepare students to succeed in college-level courses. For instance, through an assessment process, the English department places students in either college-level reading and writing or any one of three, sequenced, required pre-college courses. The philosophy behind this developmental sequence is to ensure that students are ready to succeed at whatever level they enter the College and that they are not “invited to fail” in courses that present a challenge that they are not ready to meet.

Individual programs at Manchester Community College seek to improve student success. The College has a comprehensive program – including both credit and credit free courses -- to meet the needs of students for whom English is a second language. “Adults in Transition” has been very successful at providing adults who have been away from school with support services that smooth their return to the classroom. One group on campus, the Universal Design for Instruction Team, seeks to understand student engagement and best pedagogical practices to increase that engagement and, ultimately, success. Many faculty members continue to reflect upon their teaching through programs and services provided by a very active Center for Teaching – part of a state-wide initiative.

Many of Manchester Community College’s programs and services are designed to improve student success and to reach students who are most at risk for not succeeding. A number of these efforts are curricular. Besides the English and math developmental sequences designed to foster increased success for these students, a collaborative effort by

members of several departments developed a first year experience course that, although not required, is taken by a number of students enrolled in the lowest levels of developmental math and English. In the past several years, the College has piloted a number of learning communities in which a given group of students takes two to three linked courses in common. In most cases, these communities include a developmental English course and the first year experience course with, in some cases, a content course – psychology or sociology, for instance.

The Center for Student Development (CSD), housed in Student Affairs, and faculty have collaborated in a number of ways to address the needs of under-prepared students. Each semester, English and Math Department instructors of developmental courses give classroom time to members of the CSD for presentations of information about the extensive support services at the Center for Student Development. Further, in 1998, a group comprising faculty and student affairs staff applied for and received a grant to initiate the Summer Training and Academic Retentions Services (STARS) program, designed to introduce students to expectations within the college environment and to allow them to complete college work. The program features intense use of support services – students meet regularly with faculty, tutors, counselors and student development specialists and then continue to make use of support services during the regular semester through the Academic Success Program (ASP). The ASP specifically targets at risk students. Recently, Student Affairs completed the “Struggling Students Project” (SSP). The purpose of the project was to focus on the difficulties students were experiencing in adjusting to academic demands, the nature and causes of these difficulties, possible strategies for their prevention, and the necessary programs that might be developed to ameliorate them. Research is beginning to present a picture of how successful these efforts have been. For instance, data shows that

STARS has been effective in improving student persistence; the persistence rates of STARS students was 27% higher than like developmental students who did not participate in the program. Each year, the College holds a joint student affairs/academic affairs retreat to work on common concerns and goals — this year focused on the new demographic — and one recent initiative is the formation by the College President of a Task Force on Developmental Education that includes members from all affected areas of the College.

One strategy for improving the success of high school graduates specifically has involved working with high schools in hopes of developing model programs that will raise academic expectations for future high school graduates. Through the College's federal Perkins Tech-Prep Grant Program, in which college faculty collaborate with faculty from area high schools, as many as 1000 students a year begin to prepare for and successfully complete some college-level work while still in high school. As an even more in-depth strategy, the College has established a Middle College High School (Great Path Academy) on its campus. Now in its fourth year, the high school, a state-approved inter-district magnet school for which the College has been awarded over \$1,000,000 in grants (including a federal Tech Prep Demonstration Grant and a Gates Foundation Grant), has been successful in its main goals of decreasing racial and economic isolation and increasing the academic success rates of students at risk of dropping out of high school. The state of Connecticut has approved the physical expansion of the school; the design phase is nearing completion and the new facility will open for the fall of 2008. The budget for this project is \$28,000,000. The planned facility will continue the theme of a shared campus and will help to provide some of the types of additional spaces (such as a gymnasium) the College's new demographic needs.

Over the past several years, the College has begun to produce systematic data to measure the success of its programs. For instance, research indicates that students placed into the lowest level of developmental English succeed at a much lower rate than students who place elsewhere in the sequence. However, the College still lacks sufficient data to understand all the factors that account for this difference in success rates. The College is in the process of administering the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSE) for the second time and intends to use the results of these surveys to analyze ways to improve student engagement by expanding student activities and programs on campus to engage more students, as well as community engagement/service learning opportunities, especially for students in developmental programs, as a method for retaining students and giving them a greater sense of inclusion and accomplishment.

**The goal of Manchester Community College's participation in the Greater Expectations Institute is to develop an overall, coherent plan for improving the achievement and long-term academic success of under-prepared students from widely diverse racial and economic backgrounds, especially the outcomes of students who enter at the lowest levels of the College's developmental sequence.** The College will need to evaluate the current models for placement, instruction, and support for developmental education; address learning outcomes; and find new ways of developing student engagement that address the needs of both the traditional working, part-time adult student and also those of the young, full-time student. By developing data on long-term outcomes related to graduation and transfer, Manchester Community College hopes to develop a plan to review other models for developmental education and, where appropriate, use these models to revise the College's current practices. The College believes that any progress that will improve the success of the most at risk students will ultimately improve

the success of all students, holding to the belief that fostering good learning practices on any level contributes to the quality of learning on all levels. Ultimately, Manchester Community College seeks to increase the respect for developmental and transition programs and for the integration of developmental students into the college success/transition process, and to create an environment that fosters collective and cohesive efforts to reach these goals. Most critical, perhaps, is envisioning the future. What will the College look like in ten or twenty years? What challenges will arise and how can the College prepare for them? Can it prepare for challenges that are not yet visible?

The team consists of six experienced and dedicated members of the College community who were personally selected by the President:

The Dean of Academic Affairs, Alice Savage, serves as our team leader and brings with her a wide range of experience from different institutional settings. She also serves on the Governance Board for Great Path Academy, where she coordinates college academic collaboration and as Accreditation Liaison Officer to the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, New England Association of Schools and Colleges.

The Dean of Administrative Affairs, Tom Bavier, brings with him years of experience at our institution and is responsible for the planning and directing of the College's recent \$70M facilities development project. In addition, he serves as chair of our Master Planning Committee and the Great Path Academy Middle College Magnet High School facilities development project. Dean Bavier has been actively involved on campus as a diversity trainer/facilitator for a number of years.

The Dean of Students, Alfred Carter, serves as a leader and active advocate for diversity throughout the college community. His long-term affiliation with the College includes former Assistant Dean of Academic Affairs, Division Director of Social Science

and Human Services, and participant in the AAC&U 1999 institute, Diversity: A Catalyst for Institutional Collaboration. Dean Carter is a member of the National Council on Student Development (NCSD), NEASC Commissioner, and highly respected for his strong collaborative relationships with students, faculty, staff and the community.

English Professor Ken Klucznik currently serves as co-chair for the College's interim accreditation report. He is actively involved in advancing and maintaining the reading and writings sequence in the English curriculum. He contributed to writing the grant for the STARS program and developed the central course for that program which included developmental reading and writing as well as a service learning component. Professor Klucznik also served as a Connecticut Community College System representative to the State Task Force charged with revising the state general education requirements.

Faculty member Sandra Rimetz has led workshops focusing on the characteristics of our changing student population and works with faculty members to facilitate teaching styles that support technological learning approaches in the classroom. Professor Rimetz has helped cultivate group cohesion among the varied members of the faculty body and administrators.

As Director of Transitional Programs, Florence Sheils serves on our team as a past graduate of Manchester Community College and full-voting Trustee on the Board of Trustees of CT Community Colleges. She was a member of the Task Force on Enrollment and Retention and is part of the team that writes, implements, and reports on the State Minority Advance Placement (MAP) Strategic 5-Year Plan. Her commitment to student development is supported through her involvement in the creation of the national award winning STARS program.

In June 1999, five members from the College, including the President, traveled to Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts, spent several days focusing on how to improve campus diversity and were truly transformed by the experience. The results continue to be felt on campus, beginning with the formation of a very active Diversity Committee immediately after the institute to an increasing emphasis on continuing to foster diversity. If our participation in this earlier AAC&U institute, Diversity: A Catalyst for Institutional Collaboration, is any indication, and we trust that it is, we are certain that we will find attendance at this summer's institute to be transformative, both for those who attend and for the College as a whole.