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TEACHING

Building Remedial Ed's Support Structure

It's the help students get outside the classroom that often gets them through a course

By Katherine Mangan | MARCH 05, 2017

PREMIUM

David Wallace for The Chronicle

Anyssa Manuel, a sophomore at Phoenix College, in Arizona, who overcame tough times herself, mentors classmates to keep them on track to graduation.

Last fall, a student sat across the desk from Anyssa Manuel and told her he was falling behind in his remedial-math class and was worried that he might lose his football scholarship. When she asked how things were going outside of class, he confided that his mother was struggling with a drug problem and that he had been preoccupied with trying to help her.

He felt comfortable opening up to her because she was a fellow student who had overcome tough times herself. Ms. Manuel, who had dropped out of high school and had a baby in her teens, is a successful student now at Phoenix College, part of the Maricopa County Community College District, in Arizona.

The paid peer-mentorship program in which she participates is part of a growing number of support services nationwide that are

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aimed at reducing the alarming dropout rates among students who start out in remedial courses.

Nearly two-thirds of students entering community college place into at least one remedial class in math or English, according to Columbia University's Community College Research Center. But only one in five students who are referred to such classes goes on to pass the relevant entry-level college course. Fewer make it to graduation.

Even more so than in the general population of two-year colleges, remedial courses are filled with first-generation, low-income, and older students whose complicated lives often derail their college goals.

The focus of many statewide reform efforts has rested squarely on the courses themselves. Should they be compressed into shorter terms, as they are on a growing number of campuses? Offered alongside credit-bearing classes, as they are statewide in Tennessee? Or made optional, as they are in Florida?

What receives far less attention — and should, according to many experts — are the support programs that serve as scaffolding to the fragile structures that students and their advisers are trying to build.

Such support includes peer mentoring, mandatory tutoring, and lessons in financial literacy and time management, as well as more tangible benefits, such as access to food pantries, textbook subsidies, and bus passes.

"You can have the best faculty and the best curriculum and the best tutoring in the world, but if students can't come to class because a relative is sick or they have to work to put food on the table, then it's all for naught," says Michael A. Baston, vice president for student affairs at LaGuardia Community College, part of the City University of New York.

Mark Abramson for The Chronicle

"It's very easy … to say, 'You know, if you stay continuously enrolled over your lifetime, you may earn $1 million more,'" says Michael Baston (left), vice president for student affairs at LaGuardia Community College. "But if you're hungry, that million dollars seems a million years away."

At LaGuardia, his office oversees the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs, which has significantly increased the graduation rate among participating students. It involves intensive advising and tutoring, priority in course registration, free textbooks, and bus passes.

Much of its success, Mr. Baston says, is based on the life-planning skills that help students identify ways to avoid dropping out in response to a short-term crisis, which is often the default reaction.

Extracurricular interventions are a big part of what makes up the umbrella of developmental education —- a field that too often is seen as simply a gantlet of remedial courses that students pay for, don't get credit for, and stand between them and graduation.

Combining brush-up courses in basic math and English with lessons in topics like financial and time management makes sense, says Hunter R. Boylan, director of the National Center for Dev

Often, when students drop out, it's because they didn't budget for min education at Appalachian State University. For students with little or n quickly deplete a bank account.

What passes as minor headaches for middle-class students can mean the end of college for others.

"When someone's car breaks down and they have to spend $375 for a new fuel pump, they may have to decide between paying tuition and fixing their car," Mr. Boylan says.

Personalized financial-planning tips might avert a situation in which someone blows off a $50 traffic ticket and ends up with a suspended license, missing several days of work, and facing hundreds of dollars in fines.

"Our weakest and poorest citizens don't always make good life decisions," says Mr. Boylan. "They put up with illness until it gets very expensive to treat. They're in a relationship and don't know how to manage it so it doesn't interfere with their studies. We're not doing a very good job with intrusive life-skills counseling."

On the other hand, he says, empathy is important. "We all want to blame it on the students, but we don't have any idea the gritty lives they face. It's easy for us middle-class guys to say, 'Just pay the parking ticket.' "

Many colleges include lessons in life planning in student-success courses or post tips on their web pages.

Grand Rapids Community College, for instance, posted an online exercise to help students determine whether they really had the time to devote to a three-hour-a-week online history course. Students did that by charting out the hours they spend on work, family, and college activities, and calculating the number of hours they would have to devote to homework (usually three to four hours a week for every credit hour the course is worth.)

For students piecing together work and caring for children or other relatives, setting realistic goals and carving out enough time to study and hit the tutoring center are crucial, advisers point out.

But no matter how many support programs colleges offer, they won't work if students ignore them, which too often is the case, says Robin Ozz, director of developmental education and innovation at Phoenix College. "Intrusive" advising can help — reaching out to students instead of waiting for them to come in — but for many colleges, that is an unrealistic goal. Case loads of 1,000 students per adviser are not uncommon in community colleges.

"There are never enough advisers to meet with students to say, 'Why are you dropping the class?' " says Ms. Ozz, who is president of the National Association for Developmental Education. "It's always the push and pull of resources versus best practices."

Assigning students like Ms. Manuel as peer mentors can help. These students, who earn $10 an hour, hold office hours and attend classes, where they model good behavior like taking careful notes and participating in class discussions.

The mentors hand out business cards and share their stories with other students, offering tips for avoiding procrastination. They help classmates make study note cards and urge them to "stop before they drop" by spelling out specifically how dropping a course can delay graduation.

The peer mentors receive an initial 12-hour intensive training program, plus another four hours in dealing with privacy-protection issues. Biweekly training sessions are held after that.

In the case of the student worried about his mother, Ms. Manuel worked with his instructor to let him redo some of the course material, and she urged him to tell his mother that he loved her, but that it was important for him to focus on his college work.

That's one example, she says, of how mentors help students identify boundaries that help keep family needs from encroaching too much into their studies.

Beyond human intervention, technology is playing an increasi while there is still time to salvage the semester.

Learning-analytics software tracks students' online participation and quiz results. The data it uncovers can be used to create personalized pathways that help students stay on track and to alert professors and advisers if they veer off.

Those interventions are crucial in states like Florida, where concerns over the high cost and low success rates of remedial courses prompted the state to pass a law in 2013 that makes such courses optional for most recent high-school graduates. Enrollment in those courses dropped, but the needs of underprepared students didn't.

Indian River State College, an open-access institution that offers primarily two-year degrees, saw a need for more-intensive advising to help students who might feel lost jumping right into college-level classes.

The college is doing it through a combination of technology and a beefed-up tutoring center. Students take diagnostic tests in gateway classes at the start of the semester and are given remediation road maps. They're referred to tutors, who introduce themselves in class. Software tracks whether and how students follow up.

Software also tracks how well students do on quizzes that are embedded in lectures, as well as how consistently they are taking online notes.

In addition, a revamped student-success course, required of all incoming students, teaches time management, financial literacy, learning styles, and other factors that affect a student's motivation to persist.

"We're reaching out to students in a way that may seem a little more intrusive but feels more like we care about them and want them to be successful," says Paul R. O'Brien. vice president for institutional technology at Indian River.

A student who is struggling to pay for a class because her car battery died may be eligible for money from a special fund as long as she's performing well in class.

Since the array of interventions was introduced, success rates in entry-level courses have increased from about 73 percent to 80 percent, college officials say.

Mike Rose, a research professor of education and information studies at the University of California at Los Angeles, would like to see intervention strategies continue beyond a student's first year.

When someone graduates from a two-year program in which she has received intensive support, "there should be some kind of mechanism to address the fact that another big transitional change is about to happen. Every juncture in the pipeline is a huge potential rupture point," Mr. Rose says.

"I come from a poor family and did mediocre until my senior year in high school, when an English teacher turned my life around," he says. "Then I went to a small college as a probationary student and stumbled. If you come from a background like mine, you need multiple points of mentorship and intervention and guidance. You don't just take a shot of Vitamin B12 and be done with it."

One such intervention, for him, was a professor who encouraged him to participate in an "English Society" club where students would meet over beers, or at the professor's home, to discuss writing and literature.

He says he's also a fan of learning communities, in which a group of freshmen take two or more classes together as a cohort. When done well, these programs result in better grades and a more supportive environment for students.

Bunker Hill Community College, in Boston, offers learning community clusters in which faculty members have planned their courses together around common themes, like environmental politics and exploring the immigrant experience. Remedial and college-level courses are taught during the same semester, so students can finish faster.

College officials say students who participate in the learning clusters are more likely to finish their remedial coursework and persist to the next semester.

Research on learning communities has shown mixed results, though, v extend much beyond the first semester. To be effective, the programs need faculty members working together to create a cohesive set of courses.

That kind of planning can be challenging. So can getting a group of students with busy lives on a common schedule.

The benefits, though, can be worth it. Students who get to know one another through learning communities tend to become more engaged both in the classroom and in campus activities, advocates say.

And for students who are the first in their families to attend college, or who, like most community-college students, have been away from the classroom for years, that sense of belonging can make the difference in whether they stay or drop out.

"Many of these students are strangers in a strange land," says Mr. Rose. "And we need to do whatever we can to help them."

Katherine Mangan writes about community colleges, completion efforts, and job training, as well as other topics in daily news. Follow her on Twitter @KatherineMangan, or email her at katherine.mangan@chronicle.com.

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