

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Community Colleges

April 9, 2015

To Improve Retention, Community Colleges Teach Self-Esteem

By Katherine Mangan

As states and the federal government put a greater emphasis on raising college graduation rates, community colleges are moving to help a group of students who often fall behind: those required to take remedial-education classes. Sixty-eight percent of community-college students are required to take at least one class in remedial education, also known as developmental education; only about a quarter of that group earn a degree within eight years, according to the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College.

The Problem: Remedial Students Lack Confidence

Students who are placed in catch-up classes in reading, writing, and math often become discouraged and drop out before they even make it to college-level classes. While the coursework can be a challenge, they often also simply feel like they don't fit in or don't see the practical value in remedial education. Many students in remedial classes are the first in their families to attend college, and without role models, they may question whether they belong in college. If they do poorly in a class, what little self-confidence they have may crumble.

What's more, when academic challenges arise, these students may be uncomfortable approaching an instructor or adviser to ask for help given their self-doubts. And getting help, even if students are willing to ask for it, isn't always easy. Advisers at community colleges can be responsible for as many as 1,000 students, and remedial classes are usually taught by adjunct instructors who don't have office hours and may be juggling two or more jobs.

The Approach: Community Service and Peer Mentors

A project known as [Connect2Complete](#) provides low-income students who are in remedial classes with peer mentors, many of whom have been through the program themselves. During the first few weeks of the semester, the students, mentors, and instructors participate in a service-learning project that is connected to their coursework.

Recently, for instance, math students at Owens Community College, in Ohio, worked at a food bank, charting and graphing the number of boxes that could be filled with the available supplies. At other campuses, English students recorded materials to read to local blind children or helped non-native speakers improve their English-language skills.

Students helped tailor the community-service projects to their interests. The students then wrote about their experiences. One of the biggest benefits, according to an administrator at Owens, is a boost in the students' self-esteem.

"The students who are most likely to be at risk for not sticking around are usually first-generation, Pell-eligible students who are often the recipient of services" like food stamps or subsidized housing, says Krista Kiessling, director of service learning, civic engagement, and leadership at Owens. "Putting them in situations in which they are the ones providing services is empowering in all kinds of ways."

Connect2Complete, which has received a \$3.2-million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, is part of Campus Compact, a national coalition of more than 1,100 college presidents who have pledged to support campus-based community service. The pilot project integrated service learning and peer mentoring into remedial courses in nine community colleges in Florida, Ohio, and Washington State between 2012 and 2014, reaching about 6,500 students.

The approach is somewhat unusual in community colleges because service projects are generally incorporated into upper-level and honors programs, Ms. Kiessling says. "This flips it upside down and introduces community service and community

engagement right from the start."

The mentors, who are called "civic ambassadors," say they also benefit from the program.

"Being a mentor, students are always watching you, so you don't want to mess up," says Major Smith III, who works 20 hours a week earning minimum wage as an ambassador to three English and reading classes at Owens. In addition to attending the service-learning projects, he sits in on the classes and meets with students.

Mr. Smith says he can relate to the students because he started out in remedial English and math himself. His own mentors helped him get over the disappointment of being placed in remedial classes and helped motivate him to earn all A's his first semester.

He expects to earn his associate degree in May. He's already been accepted as a transfer student at the University of Texas at Austin, where he hopes to study law.

The Challenges: Limited Time, Faculty Fatigue

Remedial students with heavy work and family responsibilities may not have time for off-campus activities, and may question how such involvement will help them earn a degree. Scheduling service learning during regular class time, providing transportation to projects, and connecting community-service experiences with assignments help lower these potential stumbling blocks.

Faculty members, meanwhile, may be feeling shades of the "initiative fatigue" that some community-college leaders [have described](#).

In addition, adjunct faculty members who teach remedial classes often need help becoming proficient with service learning. To help them out, the program has created an [online resource guide](#).

Cost is also a consideration. Community colleges must find the money to pay for faculty training and peer mentors. And Campus Compact itself is looking for new funds for Connect2Complete

now that the original commitment from the Gates foundation has ended.

The Results: Better Retention

The combination of peer mentoring and service learning increased retention, according to [a report](#) conducted by researchers at the Center for Youth and Communities at Brandeis University. After six semesters, the persistence rate among participating students was 32 percent, compared with 26 percent in the comparison groups.

At the same time, students became more civically aware, and their confidence levels increased as mentors helped them with courses and connected them with academic support.

Students' career aspirations and sense of connection to their instructors and their classmates also grew, the evaluators found. Peer mentors said they became stronger leaders, and participating faculty members said they were inspired to help the most underprepared students succeed.

"For students who are tentative about being in college or who question the relevance of math or writing courses, having a link to the community as part of the curriculum can engage them by providing concrete examples of how math and writing are useful in a range of settings," said Shana Berger, the national project director of Connect2Complete, in an email.

"Likewise," she wrote, "students who develop a critical view of social issues through service-learning speak more passionately about the purpose of classroom learning and are more motivated to succeed."

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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rick1952 · 2 hours ago

I am happy to see that this initiative to build self-esteem has spread in meaningful ways throughout education. While any strategy can be misapplied or misused, clearly, when properly employed this strategy can make a positive contribution to student success in class and in life.

For several decades in various ways I have worked on building student self-esteem to foster academic achievement. My current role permits me to teach first generation college students during their freshman year, and in addition to the academic demands I place on them in our Learning Community, I put a lot of effort into building their self-confidence. That includes inviting students who were successful as freshmen to work with small groups in current freshmen in a mentor capacity, assisting them in organizing their academic presentations for class, reviewing their academic work and generally helping them make the transition to college. End result: after more than 12 cohorts of first generation scholars have completed the four-year cycle of undergraduate education, we see more than 75% graduating on time, and by the end of one more year (the so-called 5 year plan) we see more than 85% earning their bachelors degrees.

Of course, it is not just about self-esteem, it includes hard work too. But we ignore self-esteem and self-confidence at the students' peril.

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22079340 → rick1952 · an hour ago

Great work! What college?

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



11239383 · an hour ago

Interested in such programming...then you will want to check out the resources offered through the College Reading and Learning Association at www.crla.net. Look at the information in the Certification section of the www page as it pertains to the International Mentor Training Program Certification. It is a parallel program to the CRLA International Tutor Training Program Certification. If your school has a peer mentoring program and/or a tutoring program it should be certified along with the 1,000 plus postsecondary schools that have earned certification. You will also find the association's most recent Handbook for Training Peer Tutors and Peer Mentors. The Association's big tent conference in Portland this November will provide numerous sessions pertaining to these topics.

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22081781 · an hour ago

The merit of this program is that students get the chance to earn their self-esteem, which is the only way people ever get self-esteem. Contrast this program with the stupid K-12 strategy to just telling kids they're great when they're not.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



procrustes · 38 minutes ago

Now that the self-esteem movement has ruined K-12, they are doing their best to destroy what remains of education in America.

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lukedance · 26 minutes ago

I always have a problem with "teaching self esteem" as it were something one gives to another person. I continue to believe that it is something we can help a person self-discover by "teaching" them how to do something well that they can be proud of and own, resulting in positive self esteem. Otherwise I feel we

are looking at self worth was as a commodity.

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