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Focus on Finishing

John O'Brien – Guest Columnist

A handful of powerful ideas are tightly woven into the fabric of American life. One of these ideas is that each of us has limitless potential. Another is that hard work allows us to exchange rags for riches. A chorus of parents and teachers adds a third: going to college is your ticket to success.

When the U.S. led the world both in rates of college enrollment and successful completion of college degrees, no one would argue that college is the key to a bright future. The reality today is more complicated. Now, when the U.S. has lost its lead position, another reality has emerged. After all, college can't change lives and brighten futures when the students don't achieve their academic dreams. In short, too many Americans are starting, but not finishing, college.

This "completion crisis" has not gone unnoticed, and some national leaders believe it's every bit as concerning as the current recession, since the country simply can't compete if we don't produce a knowledge-based workforce. The Gates Foundation, the largest philanthropic organization in the world, and the U.S. government have both set ambitious goals for increasing the number of students who successfully earn the academic award they are seeking.

Across the country, institutions of higher education are responding with creative and aggressive approaches. Minnesota colleges and universities are using a variety of strategies to help students succeed, including enhanced academic support structures, community-building activities, and focused retention programs.

Locally, students at North Hennepin Community College benefit from a number of proven retention strategies.

Increased focus on advising and tutoring, as well as the development of learning communities, has helped to reduce the number of students who fail or withdraw from courses.

K-12 partnership programs for under-prepared junior-high and senior-high students create a more direct pathway to college and make it more likely that students who may not have considered college at all, will not only go to college, but be successful once they get there.

Academic, financial, and personal planning on the part of students is critical to their success. North Hennepin provides a helpful planning tool called GPS LifePlan (Goals + Planning = Success) and offers GPS workshops regularly. When students have a plan to succeed they are more likely to persist even when they encounter obstacles.

On September 14, NHCC will host an event called “Student Success Day.” No classes are scheduled on this day so that all students, faculty, and staff can participate in workshops and other activities that encourage learning, promote academic achievement, and strengthen community.

This summer, the college’s federal Student Support Services/TRIO program received approval from the U.S. Department of Education for continued funding exceeding \$1.8 million over the next five years, focusing on students who are low income, first generation college students, or students with a disability.

Through these strategies and others, North Hennepin and many two-year colleges are determined to do more than offer affordable, convenient, and high-quality college education.

Our students face unique challenges. Over two-thirds of our students are “first-generation” college students whose parents did not attend college, and this is only the most fundamental of challenges. According to a Gates Foundation report, 6 in 10 community college students work more than 20 hours a week, and more than a quarter work more than 35 hours a week. Nearly a quarter have dependent children. And the number one reason students give for leaving college early isn’t that they are bored or unwilling to work hard—it’s the struggle to juggle work, school, and family obligations.

Colleges like NHCC put higher education within reach for these busy students by providing flexible scheduling. At North Hennepin, students can take more courses than ever online, in accelerated formats, in the evening, and on weekends. We even offer an accelerated every-other weekend college program.

The stakes are high. For students, the difference between graduating from high school and earning a two-year degree is around half a million dollars in salary over an average working life. More worrisome, by 2018 experts believe America will fall nearly 12 million students short of producing the number of college-educated workers needed to stay economically competitive.

College continues to be the best way to transform individual lives for the better—now it is also the best way to ensure the continued success as a nation.

Dr. John O’Brien serves as the president of North Hennepin Community College



Fact Checking

US Lags the World in College Completion

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/23/education/23college.html>

Also: <http://hechingered.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/OECD-Data.jpg>

Gates Foundation Focus on College Completion

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/23/education/23college.html>

MN Student Success Efforts

<http://tiny.cc/irug8>

Need for College Educated Workforce – “12 Million Short”

Slide 8 at <http://www.slideshare.net/WCETConference/perfect-storm-or-perfect-opportunity-for-higher-education>

Gates Report “Their Whole Lives” – “the number one reason students give...” (p. 5)

<http://www.publicagenda.org/files/pdf/theirwholelivesaheadofthem.pdf>

“Nearly half a million” Value of AA Degree

<http://www.earnmydegree.com/online-education/learning-center/education-value.html>