Academics Launch New Efforts to Retain Community-College Students

Enrollment in community colleges exploded during the recession, as tens of thousands of Americans sought refuge from a hostile job market by going to school.

But history suggests that most of those students probably won't graduate.

Despite a slight drop in enrollment in the current academic year, there were 218% more students signed up for courses at the nation's 1,200 community colleges in the fall of 2011 than there were in the fall of 2007, the American Association of Community Colleges estimates.

But U.S. Department of Education data from the 2000s show that a whopping 65% of those who start community colleges haven't earned a degree or other credentials after six years.

Community colleges across the country, backed by several big foundations, have been experimenting with ways to keep students long enough to finish a program.

Anne Arundel Community College in Annapolis, Md.—where 70% of the graduates of the county's high schools enroll—set out in 2009 to double the number of degrees and certificates it awarded by 2020 without increasing enrollment.

"We have had thousands over the years who simply haven't finished," says Martha Smith, the college's president. About 27% of first-year students don't return for a second semester.

So the college launched a campuswide campaign to retain students. Remedial math classes were redesigned. The student association asked students to sign pledges to finish their programs and gave out "Get Commitment" buttons. An internal website was created for professors to identify students at risk of failing—the system automatically sends such students an email and suggests an appointment with a counselor.

The school targeted 75 first-year students at risk of dropping out, including those who take two or more remedial classes. The program aims for each student to have contact twice a week with someone outside the classroom—a professional staff member, a student coach, a tutoring center. Among initial participants in the fall of 2011, 83% made it to the second semester versus 69% for other students who took two or more remedial classes.

Overall, Anne Arundel says it is meeting interim milestones toward the 2020 goal. But among community colleges, that has also tried to boost retention rates, independent evaluations find mixed results.

The community college landscape is littered with lost credits that do not add up to student success," says the report of a commission on the future of such colleges, released Saturday at the American Association of Community Colleges convention. It calls for new strategies to cut in half by 2020 the number of students entering community colleges unable to do college-level work and increasing by 50% the fraction who complete degrees or other credentials.

"Employers complain about inadequate student preparation for the job market," said Walter Bumphus, president of the association.

The combination of employer complaints and low graduation rates, he said, "threatens U.S. global economic leadership, contributes to the erosion of our middle class, and calls into question the viability of the American dream."

—David Wessel

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Watch a video about the retention program at Anne Arundel Community College at WSJ.com/PageOne.