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# A 2-Year Start on the Future

## Community colleges put renewed emphasis on helping their students succeed

By ELYSE ASHBURN

Community colleges pride themselves on their open-door policies. For decades, access and enrollment — especially of traditionally underserved students — were their key markers of success. But in recent years, lawmakers, accreditors, and the institutions themselves have begun demanding more. It's no longer enough for community colleges to get students in the door. Now they must get more of them *out* the door with a degree or a ticket to a four-year university.

The shift has created a renewed focus on students. Community colleges across the United States are taking a hard look at what happens to students once they enroll. And they are experimenting with new teaching methods, better advising, and creative financial-aid programs to help more students succeed.

*The Chronicle* spoke with four students who faced a variety of obstacles — poverty, poor academic preparation, the need to work full time — but managed to stay in college. They cited career counseling, financial aid, and nontraditional academic programs, but each also mentioned at least one professor who had been a mentor.

**Jolie Menghetti Rohde, 20**  
**Tulsa Community College, Tulsa, Okla.**  
Graduated: spring 2007  
What helped: financial aid, professors

Jolie Menghetti Rohde was working on construction crews and living in a garage two years ago when she enrolled at Tulsa Community College.

At 18, she'd been on her own for years. She had left home at 14, dropping out of school and essentially living on the streets before she ended up in juvenile detention. She returned home and attended school intermittently over the years, earning a high-school diploma through a state program for dropouts.

She then worked as a construction carpenter, but the work was sporadic and didn't pay well. Soon she decided it was time for a more stable existence and figured that college was the answer.

"I failed everything in high school and always had to take summer school," she says. "And summer school was at TCC, so I knew about it."

Ms. Menghetti Rohde had also heard that financial aid might cover her college tuition. And since she actually read math and science books for fun, she figured she might have some aptitude for those subjects. So she enrolled at TCC.

She then walked there almost every day for the next three semesters, finishing her mathematics degree in a year and a half. She made top grades in just about every course she took.

"Academically, things were smooth," she says. "But getting used to college was a long process."

People were shocked to learn that she was living in a garage. Even at a college where about half of the full-time students qualify for federal grants, she was taken aback by the wealth around her. She couldn't afford to buy food some days, and she still lived in a world where people were just as likely to end up in jail as in college. But she bristled at the notion that she was somehow unfortunate.

"Yeah, you gotta go to the food bank, but at least there's a food bank to go to," she says. "Most people I know just feel bad for themselves. But they're in America. If you're in America, you can get financial aid and you can go to college."

She eventually found her place at Tulsa Community College. She hung out with international students, who, like her, were in a foreign environment. For the first time in her life, authority figures — in this case professors — also supported her. They told her she shouldn't stop at an associate degree, or even a bachelor's.

"When you look at people who are in a position to teach at a college, and they tell you, 'You can do this,' that's just so encouraging," she says.

Ms. Menghetti Rohde graduated this past spring and transferred to the University of Tulsa. There she's studying math in the hope of entering a graduate program in pharmacy. Her tuition, fees, textbooks, and most living costs for the next two years will be covered by a prestigious scholarship from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation.

But the scholarship money hasn't come through yet. So Ms. Menghetti Rohde, who is now married, is living in public housing. But she can picture a world where she and her husband could own a house, maybe even one with a two-car garage.

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**Jaime A. Harris, 30**  
**San Jacinto College, Pasadena, Tex.**  
Graduated: spring 1998  
What helped: a professor, a hands-on program

Jaime A. Harris was born in Honduras and moved to the United States with his family when he was 6. Mr. Harris was the self-described black sheep of his middle-class family. He hated school, but he sure could work with his hands. So in his senior year of high school, he started studying diesel mechanics half-time at San Jacinto College.

In one of Donald Clayton's classes there, he met Rogelio Gonzalez, who had moved to the United States from Mexico when he was in high school.

Now the two are partners in a trucking business, which grossed \$3.5-million last year. Mr. Harris speaks knowledgeably about tax write-offs, contractors, and the advantages of a minority-owned business. He's still pretty good with his hands.

He credits Mr. Clayton with training that talent. The professor taught Mr. Harris and his classmates to work on electronic diesel engines when most working mechanics still could fix only mechanical ones. When Mr. Harris graduated with a certificate in diesel technology, he found companies lined up to hire

him.

But first came graduation day. Mr. Harris had an inkling that Mr. Clayton was a well-connected professor, but it became abundantly clear that day. "People flew in from Detroit, from all over," he says. One company trucked in air-conditioners to cool the campus shop for a graduation barbecue.

"All that just to watch 20 people graduate," Mr. Harris says. "That's how influential he is."

Mr. Harris went on to work for several years as a diesel technician at Cummins Inc., an engine manufacturer. He topped out at about \$50,000 a year and decided to go to work for himself. He and Mr. Gonzalez started a diesel-repair company and eventually moved into trucking. They hope to build the business, J.A. Harris Trucking Inc., in Houston, into the largest minority-owned trucking company in the country.

Mr. Harris still counts Mr. Clayton as one of his three role models, right alongside his father and his former boss at Cummins.

"If I hadn't gone to San Jacinto," Mr. Harris says. "I'd probably be working at Home Depot or something."

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**Dara M. Taylor, 28**

**Anne Arundel Community College, Arnold, Md.**

Graduated: spring 2002

What helped: a professor, an engaging program

A white car rounds a curve and stops beneath an overpass. A guy casually strolls across the road above and drops a drug-filled bag through the car's open sunroof. It's a simple scene, shot at a distance, as if it could be almost anywhere in the United States.

It's from the documentary *Opiated: Life Beneath the Eyelids*, which Daryl W. Gonder, a professor at Anne Arundel Community College, plans to show in his filmmaking class this year. The documentary was filmed and produced by one of his former students, Dara M. Taylor, which is telling in its own way.

Mr. Gonder started the film program at Anne Arundel in 1998. Just eight years later, *MovieMaker* magazine named it one of the best two-year programs of its kind in the country. Ms. Taylor is one of its successful graduates.

By her own account, she "didn't do so well" in high school and assumed that college was not an option. But a year working in a minimum-wage job persuaded her to try a few classes in the fall of 1999. She chose an introductory film class with Mr. Gonder.

"I had always been interested in movies," she says. "And I was like, 'Oh, it's a film class. It's going to be easy.' "

Of course, she was wrong. (One of Mr. Gonder's favorite student critiques said he "eats slackers for lunch.") "His class was the only one that I really loved, and it really changed my perspective on the academic world," Ms. Taylor says.

She went on to take more classes with Mr. Gonder, including several in film and one in English. In 2002 she graduated with an associate degree in general studies and transferred to the visual-arts program at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County. Just before graduation, she decided to apply to graduate school at the School of Visual Arts, in New York City.

She used Mr. Gonder as a reference. And she got in.

Ms. Taylor finished her master's program this past spring and now works as a video artist at a design agency in New York. And this fall she is doing a minitour for screenings of her documentary.

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**Corey W. Campbell, 28**  
**Miami Dade College, Miami, Fla.**

Still in college

What has helped: financial aid, a professor

Corey W. Campbell dropped out of high school. He worked dead-end jobs — lots of them. He's been married and divorced. He's the father of a little girl.

He gave the Army a try. He's been evicted — lots of times. He's taken out payday loans to get by. He's even lived in his car.

Something had to change, he decided in 2005, a year after his father died in an accident and a few years after his mother died.

Mr. Campbell was too old to be an orphan, but that didn't change how alone he felt. "I just had to make a decision about life," he says. "And I decided to go back to school."

He had earned a general-equivalency diploma a few years back, so that fall he enrolled at Miami Dade College. He started working at *The Catalyst*, the student newspaper at the college's Kendall campus, and decided that journalism was the perfect fit. Two years later, Mr. Campbell is editor in chief and freelances for *The Miami Herald's* "Neighbors" section. He is also captain of the college's debate team.

Mr. Campbell says he wants to set an example for his daughter, who lives in Arkansas with her mother. Still, he almost had to drop out this semester. Even working two jobs, at a local bookstore and at Brooks Brothers, he couldn't make his rent. So he went to the dean of students and explained his situation. The dean, Armando Ferrer, was able to give Mr. Campbell a \$900 institutional grant to supplement his federal aid.

"I know that Corey has done a lot for the college, and we had some additional money and could help him during a time when he had additional needs," Mr. Ferrer says.

The money kept Mr. Campbell enrolled, but he still had to move, and now he has an hourlong bus trip to the campus. The newspaper's adviser, Merwin Sigale, has encouraged him to keep up his studies. But it's hard, he says.

His experience illustrates just how fine the line is between success and failure.

"Someone was talking to me the other day and said, 'Corey, there's like a little black cloud hanging over

your head," he says. "And I said, 'Yeah, I even took meteorology, and I still don't know how to make it go away.'"

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