

Recruitment and Retention Research Project



Created By:
Lynnette Wells

Supplemental Research Assistance By:
Jo Sander
Cindy Burman-Woods



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Introduction

This report is a summary of the latest professional research concerning college student recruitment and retention best practices. The research was gathered from peer-reviewed journals, special project reports, interviews with WCC faculty and staff, and through college site visits to five promising Western Washington community colleges. This report is concentrated on underrepresented students, professional/ technical programs, and two-year colleges. However, the information found here can be transferred to a variety of student populations and academic arenas.

The following data highlights educational attainment and shifting demographics in Washington State, as well as the implications these factors may have on community colleges. The following data is for the population aged 25 and older in Washington State:²⁷

- 51% have graduated high school
- 27% have attended some college
- 8% have an Associates Degree (AA)
- 20% have a Bachelors Degree (BA)
- 11% have a Graduate Degree (MA)

Although, this data may not take into consideration those people that have both a Bachelors and an Associates Degree, the low number of AA's awarded is cause for concern. However, community colleges are in a very good position to make the 27% percent of people with some college come back to school and obtain an Associates Degree, thus increasing their current level of 8%.

Within the next five years, the age demographics of the population will shift. There will be a decrease in ages 5 to 19 and ages 35 to 49. There will be an increase in ages 20 to 34 and in ages 50 to 75.²⁷ The implications of this information on a community college means that the "high school age" population will decrease and the adult or "college-age" population will increase. This may shift the focus of recruitment efforts and the types of programs being offered at the community college level. In addition, minority populations are growing, while the majority, or Caucasian, population will soon start declining. By 2050 the majority will become the minority.¹ This may affect college services, instruction, and student programs. The need for culturally competent instruction, services, and diversity initiatives will grow exponentially.

The evolving population, extreme growth in the manufacturing and health care industries, and an emerging global economy are changing the outlook of education. Community colleges, professional/ technical programs in particular, have the opportunity to educate underrepresented students, and get them into high wage and high demand careers. This will not only improve the economy, but enhance the quality of life for the students as well. The following report provides information on how to best educate and serve both current and future students, and best practices in post-secondary education.

A Synopsis of the Research

Factors that Contribute to Student Attrition

All students face many barriers to applying, enrolling, and succeeding in postsecondary education. Community colleges are geographically accessible, have open door admissions, flexible class schedules, small class sizes, and offer the same courses as four-year institutions but at a reduced cost. These qualities tend to appeal to many students that have outside factors, and in many cases barriers, effecting their attainment of an education.²¹

These barriers may include: ¹⁹

- Delayed enrollment
- High school drop out or GED
- Part-time enrollment
- Financial independence
- Declared dependents
- Full-time work schedule
- Academically under-prepared

Seventy percent of community college students have at least one of these financial, academic, personal, or institutional obstacles, and fifty percent have at least two.¹⁹ These factors affect first generation students, students living in poverty, and certain racial and ethnic groups at an even higher rate.

Financial Barriers

Today's students are faced with increasing tuition and living costs combined with decreasing grant awards, and an increasing necessity for loans. The constant increases in tuition, books, and costs of living are far exceeding inflation and the average family income.^{1,19} Today's students are also more likely to be financially independent and thus have grants, scholarships, loans, and out-of-pocket payments as their only options. However, this makes them less likely to continue through education than students receiving assistance from family.^{1,19} These factors generate more pressure for students to work, even though increased work hours have shown to cause a decrease in college performance. Work also conflicts with college schedules and may shift priorities away from academics. The lack of financial aid available to students necessitates an increased need for students to be employed, which decreases the likelihood of student persistence.^{1,19}

Academic Barriers

Many students are not college ready, and are under prepared for the level of work required for a college course. This is seen more often with students in schools with high poverty levels where they were likely to be filtered into general courses and have low test scores.¹⁹

An increase in academic intensity in middle school and high schools leads to an increase in the likelihood of college enrollment and success.²⁵ However, delayed enrollment after high school contributes to a decrease in persistence because students lose their academic momentum.¹ Once in college, part-time enrollment decreases the level of commitment in school. These factors combined contribute to low self efficacy and thus increase drop out rates.

Student Related Barriers

Schlossberg's Theory of Marginality and Mattering states that special populations can feel marginalized, so faculty and staff need to recognize the contributions these students can provide and engage them in their education. These students in particular need to fit in, feel noticed, feel cared about, feel needed, and feel supported.⁴

Role models, or someone for the student to relate to in academics, increases the likelihood of persistence. There is an absence of role models for many students, at college and at home, to provide assistance with applying, enrolling, and persisting at college.¹ The following personal factors are barriers to student success because they inhibit the student's ability to see themselves in college or shift their priorities away from school: ¹

- Little access to professional networking
- Single parent or responsible for any dependents
- First generation college student
- Low income student

Student needs such as financial resources, family support, knowledge of college systems, and academic expectations need to be assessed and addressed upon enrollment.²²

The population of college-age underrepresented students will continuously grow, but are expected to continue to enter college in lower numbers.¹⁹ Although there has been an increase in underrepresented students in college, there has been a decrease in the number of degrees awarded to them.¹⁹ Minority students are more likely to be academically under prepared and to require Basic Skills courses. Minority students face additional financial barriers because they are more likely to be adverse to student loans and less likely to qualify for merit based aid.¹⁹

Parental involvement in students' educational choices increases the likelihood of postsecondary enrollment.²² First generation college students are defined as students who are the first in their family to attend post-secondary education, and they are the students most likely to drop out. This is true even if the students demonstrate high academic ability, because first generation students are less likely to be exposed to college, they have a lack of college role models, have trouble navigating the college system, and they may not view education as a priority.^{1,22} These students have a more difficult time negotiating or balancing home culture with college culture, consequently they are less likely to engage in college social experiences. They also have difficulty applying coursework as it relates to their lives.²⁴ First generation students are less likely to get help from their parents, but they are not more likely to get assistance from the college.²²

Institutional Barriers

Students are unable to navigate the college system and may not receive assistance from the college. Many college systems actually inhibit student success: course schedules may not be set up with students in mind, instruction may be inconsistent, there is a lack of supplemental education, or there may be a lack of culturally competent education. A lack of culturally inclusive education or a racially hostile environment can lead to student drop out rates, especially in underrepresented students.^{1,10,13}

Best Practices: Recruitment

Students need to feel that the recruitment process was made especially for them, it needs to be personalized.¹ Before creating a recruitment plan, successful colleges hold focus groups with different populations to find out which modes of communication and recruitment practices work best.¹ Establishing relationships and connections with prospective students is key, they need to get the sense that the college “just feels right” in order to choose it.¹ It is most effective when students, faculty, administrators, alumni, and community members help with presentations. For example, Highline, Tacoma, Clark, and South Seattle Community Colleges have Student Ambassador Programs. These students assist with presentations on and off campus, assist with events, and make phone contact with potential students. This increases the connections students need to build relationships and identify possible informal mentors in order to attend school.¹ Partnerships with various educational levels are essential to facilitating transitions. Including the transition into postsecondary education and the transition to a four year institution.¹

Outreach

Outreach is most effective when done in a variety of settings using a mixture of communicators sharing one voice and one message.² Outreach should focus on different populations in distinct ways. Possible outreach venues include: middle and high schools; career or college fairs; community gathering places; and local businesses. Bringing the prospective students on campus makes them more likely to see themselves there. Hosting open houses, displaying classrooms, labs, sporting events, advising, financial aid, the career center, and the learning center show students the opportunities colleges can offer.² Personalizing all communication with students and having timely follow-up with any correspondence makes the student feel like the college cares about them as an individual. For example, Highline Community College has a phone campaign that calls all students who requested information within two weeks of the initial request. This is done to ensure that the student’s received the information and to answer any questions.

Exposure to College

Increasing the exposure of college to middle school and high school students increases the student’s likelihood to consider college as an option.¹ Including advising, financial aid, and student support information into the recruitment process allows the students to see college as a more attainable goal.¹ For example, Highline Community College has a *Students of Color Opting to Reach Excellence* (SCORE) Conference each year for high school students. They come to campus and learn about their post-high school options. This is highly successful due to the involvement of many staff, community, and student mentors at the event.

Summer bridge programs and educational camps are fun and interactive ways to expose adolescents and teens to the college environment as well as increase their interest in learning.¹ Mentor and cadet programs also increase the connections and relationships that students need to go to college, and provide the students with role models.¹ Colleges need to partner with high schools to offer more academically intense coursework that is available to all students in order to adequately prepare them for college.²⁴ Having weekend or evening “fun” academic events such as fields trips or research projects get students interested in learning and increases their self efficacy in academics.¹ Interactive research projects in middle school and high school have demonstrated an increase in student self efficacy, and have been shown to improve academic goals.¹ When working with prospective students, it’s important make a relevant

connection between the educational path and the career path.²⁴ Outreach coordinators can go into the schools to provide both academic and social preparation for college.²² They should provide three different presentations that discuss: college information and advising services; academic motivation and college information centered around goals; instructional services that increase college preparation.²²

Marketing

With the ever increasing age of technology, an engaging website is crucial. The website is the top source of information used in the college search.²⁰ The goal is not only to make the student want to come back to the site multiple times to gather as much information as possible, but also to familiarize themselves with the campus. For example, Western Washington University and Lewis & Clark College use blogs describing all aspects of college life, from classes to sporting events. This gives the prospective student a student's perspective on what college is really like. Revolving pictures, stories, and events on the website introduce students to true campus life and increases their interest in college. The website also needs to have a student "voice," having quotes, student blogs, or success stories that speak to prospective students. These are some of the most effective ways for students to view themselves at college. The website needs to be easy to navigate and have dual functions: to accommodate people that are not familiar with the college, as well as a functional website for current students and staff.^{2,20}

Print materials are still an integral part of marketing. Rather than providing one large view book, create several smaller brochures developed by staff and students that each focus on a different aspect of the college.²⁰ Lower Columbia College has four different brochures geared toward different demographics with interchangeable leaflets to send out at different times throughout the year. It is necessary to supply culturally competent materials when disseminating things like newsletters, information packets, view books, and any other promotional materials. Overall, marketing must be part of an integrated scheme that serves the overall strategic goals of the college and communicates the message or image.¹¹

Strategic Planning

It is essential for colleges to create recruitment committees with the outreach team, faculty, staff, and even students. Any strategic planning needs to ensure that the college plans are complimentary to student goals. Recruitment processes need to center around the students and appeal to their needs. Holding focus groups with current students including high school, non-traditional, underrepresented, and transfer students is an easy way to discover effective ways to deliver your message.² The planning team and the college need to make a long term commitment to any outreach and recruitment activities. The college needs to identify what they want to be "known" for and select the image that best represents that concept.¹¹ It needs a two-fold recruitment and retention plan in order to optimize college success.¹

Best Practices: Retention

Student Services

Students are retained best when they feel connected to the campus. The most effective way to do this is to provide them with strong relationships and campus involvement.²³ Student Services are integral to student persistence. These services include:

- Counseling
- Advising
- Academic support
- Career planning
- Financial aid.

They should be in a common area with similar planning and supervision. The separate systems must each meet the needs of the student, such as belonging, self actualization, self esteem and self efficacy, in addition to offering extended services, including study and life skills workshops and lessons or family counseling.^{1,22} Mandatory advising for first time enrollment will help students visit these offices, learn about services, and increase the likelihood that they will be used again.¹ Colleges with TRIO Student Support Services, such as Tacoma, Highline, and South Seattle Community Colleges offer certain populations expanded student services including laptop computer loans, text book exchanges, “intrusive” advising, and other intensive one-on-one services. Their retention rates are up to 97% and their graduation rates are typically three times that of the average community college population.

Colleges centered on student success hold information sessions with career counseling, financial aid advising, and academic advising. They are interconnected with other retention strategies on campus and use faculty, administrators, and students to assist with their efforts.⁷ To increase student success, colleges need to provide a structured first quarter with intense involvement from advisors on admissions and course selection.²² Assessing student skills and placing students in appropriate courses helps them succeed because they are not taking classes above their academic abilities. A comprehensive and fun student orientation can make the difference in student success. It should display campus services, show students how to get around, provide workshops on student success, highlight professional/ technical programs, and give information about transferring.^{1,7} Lower Columbia Community College has a new student orientation every quarter that includes an introduction to campus services, a campus tour, food, highlights on student government and student clubs, and a fun activity. This has not only made students more involved on campus, but the school also invites the community so they can get to know the college as well.

Mentoring

Mentoring is one of the most effective ways to ensure student success, as it fulfills many of the needs student have in order to be successful (a connection to the school, established relationships, role models, and a support network).^{1,21,26} Mentors promote communication skills with regular meetings and social interactions.²⁶ They enhance professional leadership skills by involving students in professional organizations, demonstrating effective ways to deal with authority, and sharing of professional experiences. Mentors also enhance student success by guiding, inspiring, advising, encouraging positive habits, and fostering career development.²⁶ Highline and Clark Community Colleges both have successful mentoring programs for their nursing students. Highline’s program includes a two credit developmental course for the mentors where they learn communication, leadership, and delegation skills. Clark’s program is less formal, students and mentors choose each other at a large mixer.

Although the program is set up to take very little time commitment, it has shown to be highly effective in building much needed student relationships.

Instruction

A college's focus should be on educating the student, not on retaining them.²³ Interaction in the classroom is a key element to student retention because even the busiest or least motivated student that will never use any campus services will be in class.^{2,23} Colleges should promote faculty success to keep faculty and staff motivated and engaged so they are able to engage and motivate the students.² Teaching strategies should be varied in order to reach as many students as possible and to enhance the learning experience.² South Seattle Community College has faculty learning communities, where each year they have a different theme, and by the end of the year each member must have a deliverable to share with the other faculty members for professional development. Professional development helps maintain instructors' currency in their field, so it is extremely important that Adjunct faculty also participate in professional development in order to keep up with current expectations and practices. Curriculum revision is necessary to integrate diversity in courses and programs that do not currently have a cultural component.²

Students need to be challenged in order to raise academic intensity and raise students' expectations of themselves. Student reflection and engaged learning enables students to see what they have learned and empowers them to bring experiences into the classroom but to also apply content into other areas of their life. Instructors should incorporate active validation by drawing on student experiences as a teaching/ learning tool. This empowers the student. Research projects in college increase content knowledge, but they also increase the student's educational self esteem. Student clubs based on educational programs help students stay connected to the campus and create a support network with other students.¹ An increase in online learning and extension sites enable the college to reach more students where they are at, and increase the likelihood that they will stay in college.² Creating and enforcing student attendance policies ensure that students are accountable for their education and receive as much instruction as possible.²

Pre-college programs help students build self efficacy and prepare them both academically and emotionally to take college level courses. "College 100" type courses allow the student to become familiar with the campus and navigate the college system. They can increase their studying and learning skills, and educate them on the student support services that are available to them on campus. These type of introductory courses also foster connections among peers and with faculty and staff.¹⁵ Highline Community College has topic specific College 100 series which are co-taught with 30% faculty, and 70% student services staff. The courses are half content specific and half student success strategies and college orientation. These courses have higher enrollment rates than other college success courses because of the focused topics.

Students need to be supported beyond the classroom in order to supplement instruction and increase student success. This can be accomplished by providing educational case management, offer study groups, tutoring, access to computers, and academic strategy seminars.¹⁵

Learning Communities

Learning Communities show high levels of student persistence and success with up to 97% retention rates.^{12,15,21} They restructure students' time, credits, and learning experiences for them in order to increase their success. Using the cluster approach allows more time for students to do more intense projects, field trips, seminars, films, and guest lecturers.¹⁵ Learning communities increase group work, discussions, collaborative research projects, critical reading skills, analytical writing, persuasive speaking, computer skills, and problem solving skills.²² Because of this, students have an increase in learning capacity and service learning. Learning Communities use cohorts, which foster student support and relationship building, which in turn, provides supportive peer groups for students.²² Integrated teaching enhances the level of education that is provided by drawing on the experiences and expertise of multiple instructors. The increase in engaged learning and skills application increases the likelihood of student retention by encouraging the students' sense of self efficacy.

Innovative Financial Assistance

Financial barriers can often be overcome by government and state grants and loans, or through scholarships. However, institutions can also offer additional support. The following three examples are innovative ideas that local community colleges have put in place to provide additional financial assistance to students. The Lower Columbia Community College Student Support Services Program has the Personal Enrichment Project where students are encouraged to come up with a project that will help improve their quality of life. They must create a proposal, have it approved by their program advisor, do the project, and then compose a reflection about their experiences. Upon successful completion, they receive up to \$400. The South Seattle Community College Foundation sets aside a special emergency fund for tuition for students in financial crisis. They also have a payment plan, giving the student an option to pay their tuition throughout the quarter based on financial need. There is a \$15 enrollment fee and the students can pay online with monthly payments.

Diversity Initiatives

In order to be successful, diversity initiatives must be implemented institution-wide. It is important to have a campus climate that is conducive to welcoming diverse students and supports all students with systems already in place. The campus physical environment must also be welcoming with signs and art that reflect different cultures. It is essential to emphasize that diversity encompasses everyone, not just special groups, and everyone needs to have dialogue and interactions. For example, Highline Community College has recently reorganized their Student Services departments focusing on partnerships and collaboration, and all campus programs are viewed as multicultural and social justice programs. The programming that is done is not focused on ethnic events, but rather celebration through education and building awareness around equity issues. They do not do special cultural programs, but incorporate a cultural element into every campus event. It is also important to recognize the significance of support networks and family for diverse students. Clark Community College has a Latino Parent Conference for first year students which is also open to the public and includes daycare. The conference consists of educational workshops and career options, cultural performances, information on ESL classes, and community resource information.

Institutional Initiatives

Institutional barriers, obstacles put in place by the college system, often inhibit student success by having unobvious systems or less-than-visible processes for assistance. Colleges need to make an intentional move away from automated voice services to increase the number of student contacts and plan offices in logical locations to ensure students can get around easily. Many colleges visited had one-stop buildings for student services, with a visible information desk to direct students. This enhances the students' ability to navigate the college system, and be more likely to seek out services, thus increasing chance for persistence.² Increased cultural competency in the classroom, administration, and student services will also provide better services for all students and make them feel more comfortable in the college environment.^{1,9} Early intervention and warning systems need to be in place to increase student success and intervene with students before the point of no return. They provide students with needed assistance in order to encourage them to continue. For example, Highline Community College's remediation program catches struggling students early in the quarter. If a student drops below a certain standard, their credits are limited and they must see an advisor. This has proven to be an effective strategy and once the student is off probation for one quarter, they are given a certification of recognition for their efforts.

Partnerships both on and off campus are essential to facilitating student transitions. Partnerships with other institutions are important for transfers and alternate program offerings for the students. Clark College has a co-admissions agreement with Washington State University- Vancouver that guarantees transfer into specific courses after completing requirements at Clark. The two colleges also work together in creating blended degrees to ease the transition to a four-year college. Community partners are useful to build mentors, apprenticeships, internships, and practices to enhance the student experience. Partnerships with high schools can also help to increase levels of academic intensity in high schools so students are more academically prepared. Colleges need a presence in the schools to familiarize students with the systems so they can make more informed decisions.

Strategic Planning

As with recruitment efforts, retention initiatives are best planned by a retention committee. College retention committees should look at academic planning, goal setting, identifying and removing barriers, monitoring student progress, and facilitating both career and educational transitions.¹⁵ The college should have a retention team or institutional committee with a visible leader, and members that include staff, faculty, and even students from all institutional levels. The committee should be broken into three subcommittees: Student Support Services, Faculty Development, and Diversity.⁸ Student feedback is extremely valuable to see who leaves, who persists, and why. This can be done with focus groups, surveys, and student follow up.¹⁵ South Seattle Community College has students call other students who have dropped out to discuss their reasons and brainstorm ways to get them back into college, or services they can seek if they do come back. The students follow a script and ask questions to gather data, thus increasing the effectiveness of the phone call. This works well because students are more comfortable talking to other students. The team should evaluate and assess student goals and plan programs based on this. The goal may not be a degree; so the focus should be on attainment of student-driven outcomes.^{16,18} Expansion goals and assessment goals must extend beyond first to second year retention.

Because of their high graduation and retention success rates, Student Success Services TRIO programs which serve first generation, low income, and students with disabilities, are being

looked at by some schools as pilots for services to offer to the general student population. Planning pilot programs around under served populations is more effective because they can be transferred to the general student population.¹ This is not as easily applicable the other way around.

Policies can help provide regulations and incentives to increase guidance as well as facilitating the measurement of intent versus outcome as a success tracking meter.¹⁷ Evaluation should be performed with three components in mind: Short term focus on course completion, grades, and certificates and degrees; Long term focus on transfer rates, employment, wage increases, and an increase in quality of life; and implementation assessment looking at cost, process, and faculty performance.¹

Whatcom Community College

Student Attrition

The following barriers were identified by professional/ technical program coordinators:

Students have trouble with medical documentation, texts, and terms and they may be unprepared for the level of coursework.

Many of the students face language barriers and have a hard time keeping up with the pace of the material.

Some students demonstrate unprofessional behavior during community visits or practical experiences.

Many students face financial issues and the scholarships deadlines don't line up with program dates and deadlines.

Students that work show less commitment to school and are often more stressed.

The majority of the faculty are adjunct and they can't deal with issues in a private place, and they don't have time to deal with student issues.

The program coordinators or directors don't know their students and receive little feedback from faculty because there are few communication opportunities.

Current Strategies: Recruitment

College wide

Information cards are available to prospective students at all presentations and events. They are used to gather contact information and the student's educational interests. Upon completion they are entered into a database and the Outreach Coordinator follows up with mailings about important announcements and information relevant to their interests. The coordinator has established an email marketing system to send prospective students reminders, information, announcements, and invitations to events. To supplement this, she is creating information sheets to promote the professional/ technical programs, and give prospective students the next level of information they need beyond the brochures. The Outreach Coordinator has also been actively seeking activities and opportunities to reach local high schools. She has non traditional and underrepresented students assisting with outreach events and presentations. She was also able to increase college exposure in the community through community advertising and marketing at local businesses and on public transportation. The college has also hired a professional crew to make informational videos and new printed materials.

Professional/ Technical Programs

Each professional/ technical program has an informational web page available through the main WCC web site. Many of the professional/ technical programs work closely with local business partners to identify and recruit potential students. All of the professional/ technical programs provide info sessions where prospective students can learn about the program offerings, the admissions process, and the profession itself. All of the professional/ technical programs also have colorful informational brochures to market their program. Many of them take advantage of career fairs to market their programs to potential students in addition to network with industry professionals. The Massage Therapy Coordinator used the student intent codes from registration to follow up with new students interested in the program. He used the opportunity to welcome them, provide academic advice, provide insight to the massage therapy profession, and build valuable connections with the students. The Worker Retraining Program welcomes new students with personal emails.

Current Strategies: Retention

College wide

Whatcom currently provides assessment and placement testing to ensure students are taking classes at the appropriate level. There is also a remediation process to follow up with students placed on academic probation, which includes a counselor contacting the student to put together a success plan. Whatcom also has a strong student services programs and a learning center for student success. The college's Educational Services department combines entry advising, academic advising, disability services, and financial aid advising. Whatcom Community College's Learning Center includes a Math Center, a Writing Center, as well as one-on-one tutoring for any subject.

Professional/ Technical Programs

The professional/ technical programs also have additional retention initiatives apart from the rest of Whatcom Community College. Many of the professional/ technical programs have student clubs to encourage student involvement in the program and at the college. All of the programs provide hands on learning and practical experiences to address a variety of student learning needs. Most of the professional/ technical programs include student cohorts. This offers the student additional support and increases the likelihood that students will form the necessary relationships and connections to succeed in school. The programs also enforce strict attendance policies to ensure students attend class and get as much exposure to the material as possible.

There are several retention strategies utilized by the Business Administration Program. There is a Business Bridge, which teaches ESL and ABE students the basic skills and knowledge needed to increase their interest and abilities in business. The Business Administration program calculates grades mid-way so students have the opportunity to get help before its too late. They also have an alumni network to help with networking and recruitment of new students.

The Nursing program relies on evaluations during and after courses to collect student demographic information, ensure student learning, and to assess the program's curriculum and lab practices. They also track and report on student success at graduation and their employment after graduation. Additionally, the Nursing program has an early intervention and remediation system built into their policies. Once a student falls below 78% immediate action is taken and the student must follow a very strict set of guidelines intended to increase their performance and ensure their success.

For allied health programs, there are two pathways as well as a new program that provide additional support to students. I-BEST provides additional classroom support as well as student support classes to facilitate success with students interested in Medical Assisting. Health Bridge teaches ESL and ABE students basic skills and knowledge needed to increase their interest in health careers. The Pathways Program offers academic support to students interested in or currently enrolled in health career training programs. This program offers supplemental academic services, education and career goal setting, teaches study and organizational skills, and one on one mentoring and academic coaching.

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