

STATE OF THE COLLEGE
April 11, 2012

State of the College

A Speech by Montgomery College President
Dr. DeRionne Pollard

Good afternoon!

Welcome to those of you in this room – and a big welcome to all of you watching this over the Internet. I am so pleased to be hosting my first *virtual* State of the College.

This new format is all about flexibility and relevance! It's about meeting you where you are – adapting to your needs at the moment.

That is actually what our College's vision statement is all about:

quote “*With a sense of urgency for the future, Montgomery College will be a national model of educational excellence, opportunity, and student success. Our organization will be characterized by agility and relevance as it meets the dynamic challenges facing our students and our community.*”

Sense of urgency. National model. Agility. Relevance. Dynamic Challenges.

Today, as we virtually gather together to discuss the State of our College, I want to talk about the ways in which we can actualize our vision – and make real how we operate as an organization. I also want to put name to an initiative that will be essential to our future: the Common Student Experience.

Ultimately, the Common Student Experience is a set of truths that each and every student can come to expect from Montgomery College, regardless of campus, major, professor, credit or noncredit, or any of the other different starting places. These are deliverables that we will provide each and every one of our students. Our students attend Montgomery College, not Rockville College or Germantown College or Takoma Park/Silver Spring College or Workforce Development and

Continuing Education College. They attend Montgomery College. And our goal must be to have our services live up to that reality.

Today, I want to dig deep into what the Common Student Experience means—as defined by the students, faculty, staff, and administrators who formed our Common Student Experience Task Group. The group members came from every area of the College—a truly representative process. I appreciate their courage to think critically about a system that some of them may have thought worked just fine. Many of them are joining us here in person –and also online. They deserve a collective thank you for a job well done.

50 States, One Country

Using groups to shape major decisions for our College's future—and making sure every area of the College has a voice in those decisions—is the embodiment of the democratic process.

But democracy can sometimes be challenging.

For instance – our country's constitution deliberately creates a system with built-in tensions, especially between the state and federal government.

These tensions are evident almost every day in your newspaper or on the news. Look no further than the continuing debates over health care, education mandates, and budget funding. These national issues illuminate a constant, reoccurring challenge that we also face at the College: when should individual entities be

left to function on their own—50 states or, in our case, **three** campuses **and** WDCE—or when it is best to function as a single organization—one country, one College.

Even through there are 50 states, each with their own important issues, there are times when we must approach issues as a single country.

For our College, this is one of those times.

This is our moment.

We need to be intrusive...even if it means sometimes making our students—and ourselves— uncomfortable.

We need to be in their faces, ready to take whatever action is necessary for their success.

We need to go to them, not wait for them to ask us for help.

But before we talk about how we move forward, I want to talk about where we have been...

How Did We Start?

So let's go back to the beginning of community colleges.

As World War Two came to a close, our country began to focus on how education could best serve our veterans. The resulting report found that if education was **not** available to everyone, it may in fact exacerbate, not ameliorate, race and class distinctions.

I quote:

“It is obvious, that free and universal access to education, in terms of the interest, ability, and need of the student, must be a major goal in American education.”¹

¹ <http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/courses/eol474/sp98/truman.html>

To me, that sounds like a movement.

I recently heard someone say: “higher education was a movement before it was a set of institutions to be managed.”

I would contend that we need to go back to that model— back to the root of how we began—one College, united in a common purpose.

This is our movement.

How Did We Get Here?

One faculty member recently told me that we need to slow down what we are doing. That we are doing too much, too soon.

It is natural to resist change—I know many movements face resistance in the beginning.

But my response is that we have been taking *little* steps for *too long*. How many students have we failed to reach? Can we really

lose more because we are hesitant to face the fear and the discomfort that accompany change?

That is why we jumped right in 21 months ago—launching initiatives to build the foundation necessary to truly become one College.

No matter what role you have played—whether you contributed formally or informally—**thank you all** for helping our College reassess and become stronger.

- We have articulated our **plans for our future**.
 - We have embarked on a major **Strategic Planning Initiative** to craft the College's 2020 Strategic Plan, including formulating 3-year, 5-year, and 7-year benchmarks and determining resources needed to actualize the plan.

- In order to support our succession planning, we have realigned our **fiscal and administrative units**.
- But we have not planned in a vacuum. Representatives from every area of our College—students, staff, faculty, and administrators— have dedicated time to build the foundation. Believe me, I have heard the questions and felt the collective eye rolls -- “there’s yet *another* task force?”
- But **participation and engagement** from you is the only way to deconstruct our current approaches – keep the good, improve the imperfect, and reconstruct a better plan.
 - That is why we have designed an inclusive **governance** structure to ensure every group at the College has a voice. To date nearly 2-thousand members of our community have made their voices

heard and voted for our College's new governance leaders.

- And it is because of your feedback that we renewed our **classification** study to fix and build an equitable system.
- We also have taken a good look at how we can better **align** our institutional architecture.
 - To better serve our students, we have reconstructed **Student Services**, including moving functions from a campus-reporting line to a collegewide one.
 - **Academic Affairs** is also starting its own renewal, which Paula Matuskey introduced prior to her retirement, and which will evolve under the new leadership of Dr. Donald Pearl.

I am pleased to have him join us here today.

We will implement collegewide oversight of academic disciplines and create measures and benchmarks for collegewide planning and attainment of goals.

- This realignment is essential if we are to live up to the third part of our new mission statement: we are **accountable** for our results.
 - We are in the process of our **Middle States** five-year periodic review, which requires taking a hard look at our institution and addressing potential compliance problems raised by our accreditors.

- We have created a new **Office of Compliance** to ensure we are complying with the county, state, and federal laws.

- Compliance is in fact what prompted us to reinvigorate our athletics program, which ultimately led to the selection of **new College colors and a new mascot – Go Raptors!** Known for outstanding vision, intelligence, and agility to respond to its immediate needs, Raptors indeed have the same traits as a community college.

- The colors and mascot initiative is a symbolic manifestation of the underlying purpose behind every single one of these recent initiatives: becoming One College united around a Common Student Experience.

Today's We

So I've recapped how we got to where we are today...

But where are we?

Or perhaps it is better to put it this way: *who* are we?

Today, our students are more diverse than ever.

Racial Diversity

68 percent of our student body identify as Black, Asian, Hispanic or multi-race.

And our diversity will continue to grow.

According to the 2010 census, in Montgomery County, more than 30 percent of families speak other languages at home.²

Academic Diversity

But, when I say diversity, that definition too is changing.

There is academic diversity.

² http://planning.maryland.gov/msdc/census/cen2010/sf1/sumyprof/MarylandSummary_2010_DP.pdf

Our College is a place for the academically challenged and the academically talented.

Many of our students come to us looking for help—this fall, 71 percent of our new students needed some form of preparatory coursework.

Yet, simultaneously, every semester, we have hundreds of our students engaged in some level of honors work.

Economic Diversity

There also is economic diversity.

Our students, just like our county residents, are becoming increasingly financially strapped.

A 2012 report found that, in order to make ends meet in

Montgomery County, a single parent with one preschooler and

one school-age child must make an average of \$77,933 annually.³ Yes, that's right, nearly 78-thousand-dollars!

It is no wonder our financial aid applications at the College have increased by 80 percent over the past five years.

Nearly a quarter of students receive Pell grants, meaning their average family income was less than \$23,000.

The Millennials

And then there is the age gap in our student population.

Two-thirds of our credit students are 24 or younger. As millennials, they post questions on the College's Facebook page and expect quick answers.

This is drastically different from the one-third of our credit students who are 24 or older. They may be more in line with you: baby boomers who thrive on contributing to others or Gen

³ <http://www.selfsufficiencystandard.org/docs/Maryland2012.pdf>

Xers who are motivated by self-reliance and being in the here-and-now.

Diverse Worlds

These diverse worlds all collide in our classrooms. A one-size-fits-all approach to education will *not* reach all of our students and will *not* boost our completion rates. It is imperative that we adapt to better serve the needs of *all* our students. We must usher them through a College experience that addresses their unique needs in a clear, consistent, and concrete way. In other words, we must create a Common Student Experience.

Disclaimer

I know some of you are saying we cannot let these external factors change the education we provide. I can hear those conversations now: “why are we changing what has worked? Don’t all students want the same thing—to learn?”

I hear you. I understand. Having returned to the classroom this year to teach a WDCE seminar called Conversations of Consequence, I am reminded of the diversity of our students in every way.

It has made me realize that we cannot expect our students today to fit into yesterday's expectations about the College.

Rather, I would offer that we rise up to meet our students. We must engage them by being relevant to their lives.

I applaud and thank faculty members who already have done heavy lifting to revamp their courses and programs in hopes of redefining outcomes and adapting to the needs of our students today. For example, faculty members from every campus who represent the distinct disciplines of the business degree program recently gathered together as a single group—the first time ever

in recent history. In fact, some never even felt a part of the business A.A. degree program.

But Instructional Dean Patti Bartlett says the members *enthusiastically* gathered together to discuss their broad views of the business program, examining current outcomes, and formulating new goals. There were concessions. There were compromises. And there maybe were even some tense times. But, I am happy to report that they now have a stronger program in place.

While each campus has retained its own department structure and disciplines, faculty members now see themselves as part of a single, collegewide business program. I should also mention, all the members remain on speaking terms!

They know—and I know— change is hard.

But that was their moment. Just as this is our moment.

This is our movement.

As I mentioned on my inauguration, we cannot play small. The stakes are too high. The outcomes are too critical.

The How

So now, you're saying DeRionne, how in the world are we going to do this?

My answer: the common student experience.

I want each of us to be able to tell our students: "we know you have expectations so I am going to tell you what you can expect from us."

Probably the biggest outcome of the Common Student Experience Task Group is the realization that the structure and services we have in place, in hopes of meeting our student's

matriculation needs, are actually *frustrating and even creating some confusion* along the road to student success.

Seven Truths

To fix this, the Common Student Experience Task Group spent months articulating truths that our students can expect from the College.

So let's get into the nitty gritty: the seven truths.

These truths are commitments to our students. They are not just suggestions or ideas that we may take or leave. They are what our students should expect from us, and for which they can hold us accountable.

Let me stress I know that all of our faculty and staff are deeply committed to our students and we already are doing many of these ideas—and doing them quite well.

But I want us to be phenomenal.

Truth One

Truth One: Start Smart.

Montgomery College will help students start smart with a successful introduction to college work.

Part of our reality—and challenge—is that many potential students have dozens of obstacles preventing them from making it to college.

With real life demands and challenges, access to our College cannot be yet another burden.

Meet Isaiah.

ISAIAH VIDEO

For our students, we must provide maximum accessibility and minimum barriers to enrollment. The Common Student Experience Task Group suggests providing every student with

simple, step-by-step enrollment information, with a knowledgeable point-of-contact for questions and troubleshooting.

But that is not enough. As the task group found, we must clearly articulate the process before a student enrolls, by focusing our outreach efforts on helping all communities *understand* how students *can* attend college and access supportive resources.

The key word is – understand.

A new beginning, like starting college, is a daunting, overwhelming idea. We need to take steps to demystify the process—to take away, not add, stress.

I just experienced this when I received my son Myles' kindergarten orientation packet. Even for a college-educated family like mine, this packet was overwhelming and intimidating. And this is kindergarten!

I can only imagine how our parents and students feel when they struggle to understand information about how to start the college admissions process.

Truth Two

And once the student has enrolled, there is a whole new set of expectations.

That brings us to **Truth Two: Maintain a Foundation of Support Opportunities.**

Montgomery College will support success by ensuring that College faculty and staff provide a foundation of the best possible support opportunities to students.

I remember my very first week on campus when a student asked me why she had access to certain software at one campus and not another. I did not have an answer.

And I also met students who asked me why one campus offers a certain kind of tutoring support, and another does not. Again, I did not have an answer.

And then there are students turning to our College Facebook page for answers.

One student writes about **Internet access issues** quote:

“It’s been going on since the beginning of this semester and despite leaving voicemails about it (from many students), no one seems to be doing anything about it.”

I am fully aware that the students are not blameless in these complaints and can complain about even the most perfect systems. Still, the statements do indicate some sort of a disconnect between the services our students need and the ones we provide.

The Common Student Experience Task Group has centered this truth on guaranteeing our students have access to technology, resources, and facilities that foster student success.

This truth includes providing the following:

- Updated and accessible technology and software, including 100% wi-fi coverage on all of our campuses and locations;
- Knowledgeable College personnel who are up to date on college programs and information, as well as faculty and staff who are proficient in the use of hardware and software;
- An accessible, informative and user-friendly website and internal portal, which includes access to library resources, online forms, virtual computer labs, and more.

Truth Three

Allowing students to easily interface with the College is a critical piece to **Truth Three: Get Connected.**

Montgomery College will encourage students to get connected by engaging in the College experience and utilizing the wealth of resources available.

I wholeheartedly agree with our task group that we should synergize student engagement opportunities among courses and student clubs— as well as organizations, families, and community agencies— to facilitate the power of connection.

The best chance we have at empowering our students to change their lives is to engage them on an emotional, visceral level.

Studies show that meaningful engagement in the college experience has a direct impact on student success.

Renowned New York Times columnist David Brooks wrote about this very issue in his book *The Social Animal*. Though fiction, the book includes real-world findings about what makes

us tick. He recently said that “most of our thinking happens below the level of awareness.”

Below the level of awareness. We act based on our heart rather than our head.

So let’s make an emotional connection with our students. Let’s teach them how to empower themselves in the classroom, in the working world, and beyond.

We must be about more than just the right number of credits to graduate. It is part of our social contract with our community to be intrusive in the lives of our students in order to instill them with the necessary skills to thrive and contribute to our community.

How?

We need to get their parents involved and engage them. That is why planned restructuring calls for adult student and

parent/family services on *all* of our campuses. If we do this right, not only will parents be invested in their child's success at the College, but they also may choose to turn to the College themselves.

To our students, and their families, our College should be more than just a place to study.

It should be a community, a family.

There may be no better example than Tierra. Originally, she selected a historically black college, thinking being with students of her same background would be the best way to form a college community.

VIDEO- TIERRA

Even after transfer, Tierra remains committed to our College. To her, we are a community, not just a college. This brings us to...

Truth Four

Truth Four: Build Community.

Montgomery College will build community by ensuring students experience an equitable, respectful, inclusive, and caring environment, where everyone matters.

We are a community that works with students to cultivate and grow the seeds of intellectualism.

Every day, I love turning on the local NPR station because it literally feeds my mind. Its tagline is: “the mind is our medium,” and it is so true! I feel like I go to bed a smarter person than when I woke up. I want our College to feed the minds of our students inside and outside the classroom.

Let’s encourage it through student life.

Let's build blocks of time into schedules where nothing occurs on campus except cultural events.

Let's encourage international study when feasible.

Let's build a curriculum around the cultural experiences occurring on campus so our students have that extra incentive to participate.

We must build communities within communities—not only so students are free to find themselves in their own comfort zone, but also so we can more easily keep track of their ups and downs.

Communities within our College, like our own Boys to Men program, can help alert us to completion challenges faced by our “at risk” student populations. It is unacceptable for us to have significant achievement gaps among our African American and

Hispanic/Latino students. It is, in fact, hypocritical of us to tout our diversity, yet at the same time not talk about the achievement challenges in these populations.

Truth Five

But, making our students feel part of the community alone is not enough. We must make their classroom experience resonate.

Truth Five: Enhance the Classroom Experience.

Montgomery College will enhance the classroom experience—whether in a non-traditional or classroom setting—to ensure all students receive the best possible education.

Whether credit or noncredit, in person or online, our instruction should not be confined to classroom boundaries.

To Michelle Queen, our TechLeap program through WDCE has meant having her own personal career headhunter who helps connect her educational and professional pursuits.

VIDEO- MICHELLE

The Common Student Experience Task Group stresses that the classroom experience should be one that fosters learning beyond the classroom.

Let us take a very real look at the courses we offer and whether they truly are serving our students in the best way they can.

Let's look at how the students of today learn. We have redesigned our math curriculum in this vein. I encourage our entire faculty to pursue innovation fund dollars to take risks.

Speaking of innovation, let's continue to look at the environment in which students learn in new ways. We have designed both the Science Center at Rockville and the future

Germantown Bioscience Education Center to promote student learning.

One engineering professor recently commented that having pods where small groups of students can converse has been hugely beneficial in stimulating student understanding.

Our facilities team is adopting a *common* approach to planning, programming and designing labs and classrooms for all campuses.

We also should consider formalizing peer-to-peer collaborative learning—having students who have completed courses help their fellow students. We could consider paying them. As I mentioned earlier, having students be engaged with our community outside the classroom only furthers the odds of student success.

Truth Six

This brings us to **Truth Six: Encourage Student Success Every Step of the Way.**

Montgomery College will encourage student success at every step of the student's educational journey.

Let's be honest: students sometimes get lost in our system. They end up in the wrong classes. They end up without mentors. They end up giving up.

We need to empower our students to know what educational options they have available.

When Phu Cao moved here from Vietnam, he already had a bachelor's degree in robotics and automation technology. He came to our College to learn English. But once here, he realized how much more our College had to offer him.

VIDEO- PHU

Phu was able to chart a new course. But not all students understand how to get started on fulfilling their goals. I agree with the Common Student Experience Task Group that we must help students understand the direct impact their assessment scores have on the courses they can enroll in at the College. We must make sure they understand up front the time it will take to complete their goals and the costs involved.

On our Facebook page, students want more accurate information. For instance, one student writes about the financial aid process quote *“I have been told two different things.”*

The information our students receive cannot be ad hoc. Each and every student must receive the same information, tailored of course to his or her specific needs.

If we know the First Year Experience has a direct impact on student success, why do we not require it?

If we know our first year students have a hard time navigating our campuses, why don't we mandate orientation?

If we know filling out a FAFSA form is confusing for our students, can we complement our face-to-face service by providing personal, online support filling out this form?

The new student services system will make fulfilling these goals possible with collegewide advising services, counseling services, First-Year Experience programs, and New Student Orientation. Welcome centers will help students navigate the pathway to success from the instant they enter our College.

Truth Seven

This brings me to our final truth.

Truth Seven: Plan to Cross the Finish Line.

Montgomery College will help students develop their own plans to cross the finish line and complete college.

In the words of the task group: “students will engage in and receive guidance from a comprehensive advising program that includes the development of an educational plan with advising from faculty counselors and the faculty advising cadre members that assists in the development of identifying career, transfer, and academic goals.”

That language is important – our students are guided. We do not wait for them to ask us for guidance.

I propose we provide a GPS for our students. But, instead of a Global Positioning System, we provide each of our students with a College Guidance Path System that a user cannot disable...from the minute they apply to our institution. A student can alter her own path but there will be constant support to any destination.

And our student's GPS will not stop until they cross the finish line.

I agree with the task group idea for what I call momentum point recognitions—moments in a student's experience at the College when we automatically check in on their progress. When our students achieve a certain credit level, they must meet with a faculty counselor. Additionally, students who have not updated an academic plan in two semesters of college-level courses will be required to receive advising.

We must meet our students before they hit slippery spots and sputter off course. There are many spots where they can go off track and we must provide constant support along the way.

We need to get involved with that first failed assignment. If they have a low midterm grade, how can we help them boost that without putting all the pressure on the final? We do a great job at Early Alert for students who exhibit emotional issues, so I welcome the Common Student Experience Task Group suggestion to institute academic alerts that monitor student progress for those students whose grades are fluctuating or are not progressing.

I also would suggest we look into our institutional policies and practices that stand in the way of academic success. We should consider doing away with late registration—even if there are practical, logistical reasons for it. This policy sends the message

that the first two weeks are throwaway weeks. Every single day needs to be meaningful.

Let's look for innovative ways to accommodate students who have to start classes late, perhaps providing variable sections where some courses begin later in the year, but meet for longer class sessions.

Same But Different

So there you have it, our seven truths.

Having truths that students can expect from every single campus does not mean becoming an institution where every campus follows the exact same cookie cutter mold. Campuses must retain their unique traits while also being Montgomery College at their core.

This reminds me of my sister. To this day, Dawne and I are still the "Pollard girls." We are two distinctly different women;

Dawne, the lovely singer you heard at my inauguration, is a banker, single, tall and thin. Despite our differences, the core of who we are is the same. There is a core set of values that guide us. At the end of the day, I am DeRionne Pollard and she is Dawne Pollard, but we are both Paul Pollard's girls.

At the end of the day, whether Rockville, Germantown, Takoma Park/Silver Spring, online, or a satellite Workforce Development & Continuing Education location, we are all Montgomery College.

Need your help

And as such, we all need to work together to ensure our future success. I am going to need your help in making these truths reality.

This State of the College is just the beginning.

Our next step will be actualizing and implementing these truths.

Over the coming days and weeks, I will be coming to your campuses to hear your ideas.

Starting in the fall, our new governance representatives will be conduits—the connective tissue—among all the different levels of the institution to ensure there is a connection between our ideals and our realities.

Please share your ideas how you can breathe life into these truths, through your individual role, or your department, or on your campus.

Mutuality

I would argue that we all have an obligation to be involved.
Where one part of our College succeeds, we all succeed.
Where one fails, we all fail.

Our destiny as a higher-education institution is inextricably linked to the destiny of each of our parts.

There is mutuality to our narrative.

Perhaps there is no better orator of this concept than the great Martin Luther King Junior, who, in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail, wrote:

“We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial ‘outside agitator’ idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider.”

Let me put it in this way: anyone who lives inside Montgomery College can **never** be considered an outsider. We cannot put ourselves into silos— whether by campus or department or job title. We cannot otherize those not in our own sphere. We cannot otherize the students of today in a way that pushes them away from our classrooms.

And we cannot wait.

Dr. King and the civil rights leaders often heard that they should be patient. Wait. Do not stir the pot. In hindsight, we all know that pot was already overflowing...

It was their moment.

It was the country's movement.

Conclusion

In higher education today, we stand at a crossroads...

We owe it to our students to push forward.

Over the past 21 months, we confronted our own vulnerabilities.

We have confronted our own biases.

And I would argue, the state of our College is all the stronger for it.

This is our moment.

This is our College's movement.

As Phu, the student whom I told you about earlier, says: "if you are to knock on the door of opportunity, Montgomery College will answer."

We must embrace this pivotal moment in our College's history so we are ready to answer each and every knock.