



President's Report to the Board

March 2014

Education is the great equalizer of society. It can change a life. In fact, [reports](#) show it can increase life expectancy and civic involvement. It can lift an individual, and a family, out of poverty. A recent [article](#) in *The Washington Post* studied wealth by zip codes and found a direct correlation between wealth and education. In 650 “Super Zips” across the country, the average household income is \$120,000 and 68 percent of the adults have college degrees. Contrast that with the 24,000 other zip codes, where household income averages \$53,962 and only 27 percent of adults hold degrees. In the DC area, more than a third of our zip codes rank in the top five percent for income and education, but they are clustered essentially on top of each other. This means that the have nots—individuals without degrees—are quite literally in the shadow of the haves. Additionally, statistics show that educational attainment still remains segregated along demographic lines—with groups typically underrepresented in higher education failing to complete at the same levels as the rest of the student populations.

With the goal of eradicating the achievement gap, the College established the Closing the Achievement Gap Task Force (CAGTF), comprised of more than 80 members from all areas of our College. The task force recently provided me with a report of its recommendations. In this month's report, I will convey some of the overarching findings of the CAGTF and some of the innovative and proactive ways the College is working to eliminate any demographic-related gap in achievement.

Defining the Achievement Gap

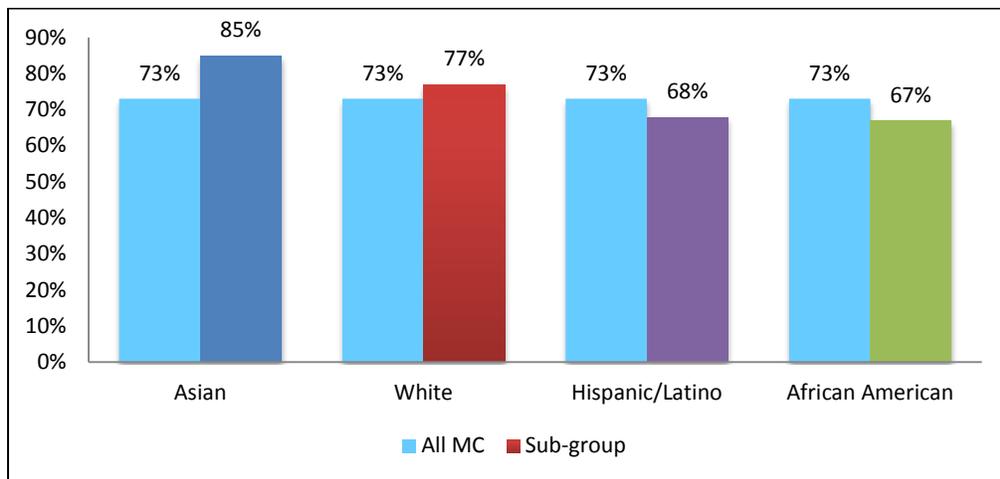
The CAGTF defines achievement gaps as “disparities in educational performance between high- and low-performing student groups.” Typically, it finds disparities based on race—Asian or white on the high-performing side, and black or Latino on the other—as well as on income level—higher-income versus lower-income



students. Both internal and external data indicate that the primary achievement gap that remains today is between African American and Hispanic/Latino students and the rest of the student population. In fact, just a few weeks ago President Obama launched a new campaign, [My Brother's Keeper](#), “a collaborative, multidisciplinary approach to build ladders of opportunity and unlock the full potential of boys and young men of color.”

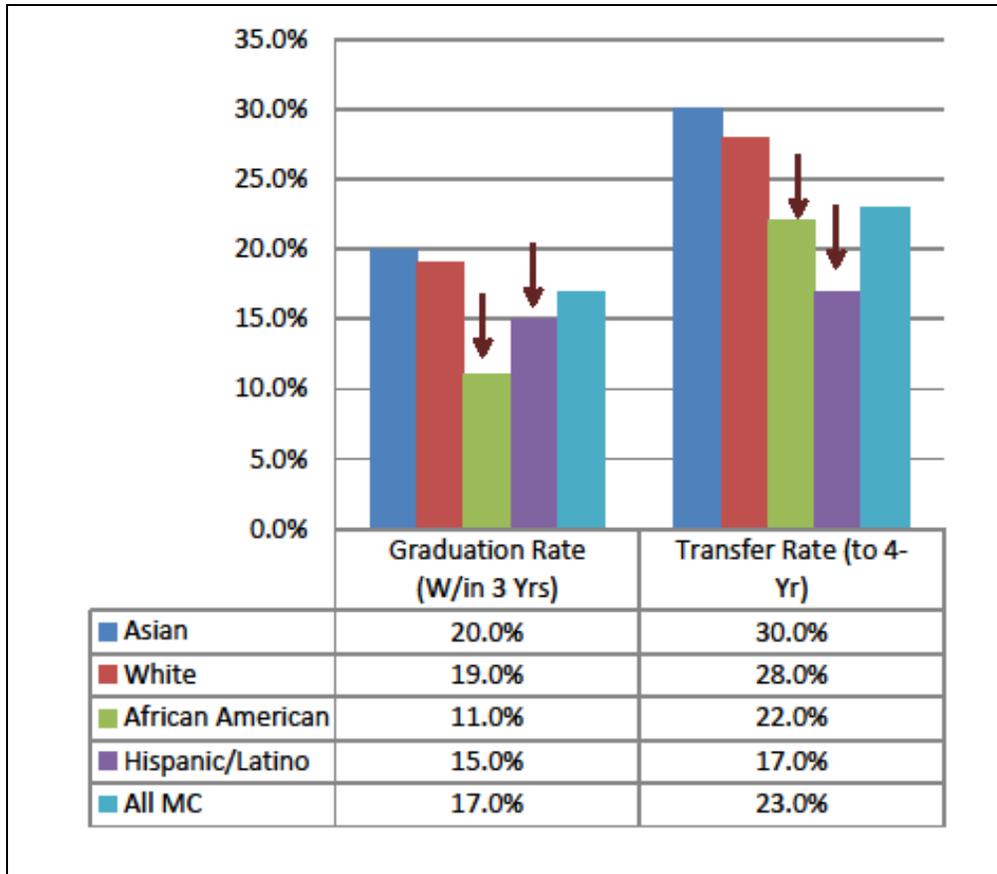
We have seen an achievement gap at the College. In the latest group of students that the College followed, we had a 73 percent success rate among all students, meaning they graduated, transferred, completed 30 or more credit hours, or were still enrolled at the College after four years. When the Office of Institutional Research and Analysis breaks down this number based on race, we find that the only two groups of students that fell below this average were students who identified as African American and Hispanic/Latino (see Chart One).

Chart One: College Completion Data



The same pattern exists in the 2012–2013 statistics from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) for graduation and transfer rates of full-time degree-seeking students three years after entry to our College (see Chart Two). The arrows indicate the two groups, African American and Hispanic/Latino, which fell below the collegewide average.

Chart Two: IPEDS Completion Data



Eliminating the Achievement Gap

Eliminating the achievement gap poses a number of challenges, primarily because it requires, as articulated in CAGTF’s report, “improving the performance of all students, while accelerating the performance of low-performing subgroups so they catch up to their higher performing peers.” The solution will not be found solely in classrooms, or in counseling offices, or in the library. That is why the report suggests the creation of “an office to help lead and



oversee implementation” of the various services required to close the achievement gap. To be sure, every area of the College will be touched as we embark on a multifaceted, long-term plan.

As such, CAGTF tasked smaller groups to conduct research, identify best practices, and provide recommendations for specific areas, specifically Montgomery College students; teaching and learning—curriculum—inside the classroom; student involvement outside the classroom; civic engagement; counseling and advising/financial aid, grants, and scholarships; and measurement—outcomes and benchmarks. These recommendations not only include new College initiatives, but also incorporate the existing College programs that currently are and will remain essential to broadening student success. I encourage you to read the complete CAGTF report to see each group’s specific recommendations, but I wanted to touch on recommendations from each of these specific subgroups in a holistic way.

It is important to examine the macro-level data and know where we stand, which can serve as the starting point from which to drive success. A number of the CAGTF recommendations center on the idea of data-driven decision-making. For example, the report suggests that the College “regularly collect, racially disaggregate, and widely share Montgomery College achievement data that is clearly delineated and differentiated by student populations.” Likewise, the recommendations suggest that the College consider allocation of “resources for data analysis and coordination of Latino and African/African American student matriculation.” The task force also recommends collecting more micro-level data, such as targeting “courses that are roadblocks for substantial numbers of African American and Latino students for interventions” and “intervention with developmental non-completers utilizing non-cognitive predictors of student success.” The third tenet of our mission statement—we are accountable for our results—depends upon us having detailed data that truly illuminates how our students and how we are doing.

But to close the gap, we also must go behind the numbers; we must get to know these students on a personal level. That is why many of the recommendations throughout the CAGTF report focus on creating an intrusive educational environment. For example, the report suggests we “make nonacademic support intrusive,” “adopt an intrusive advising approach,” establish “a comprehensive and collegewide mentoring program,” and develop “special collegewide programs to specifically address the academic success, retention, and completion of African



American and Latino students.” We already have successful models in place:

- The Boys to Men program targets African American male students and is intrusive in their lives both inside and outside the classroom. Of the 37 students enrolled in the program last spring, 25 of them have returned to our College this spring. That is a 76 percent retention rate. Compare that to the total population of black male students at our College: of the 3,628 black male students enrolled last spring, 1,880 returned this spring. That is a 60 percent retention rate. So, we can see on a small scale that intrusive programs like Boys to Men are working.
- The College just launched a similar mentoring program for women called The Mentoring Project for Women at MC, which is a cross-cultural and intergenerational community of female administrators, faculty, and staff that will help shepherd students during their first year at the College. This includes working one-on-one with students to help identify their goals and needs, connecting them with appropriate resources, and having candid conversations about their own doubts and insecurities. The program is intrusive in students' lives, with six critical mentoring points for a student's first semester, and four to five contacts during the second semester. The Mentoring Project for Women at MC began this past fall with 25 mentors and mentees on the Rockville Campus. Preliminary data suggest that the program is having a significant impact on the lives of women at MC.

Both of these programs are phenomenal places to start, but they are focused on single campuses. We need to scale up these types of initiatives to expand them collegewide. Empowering underrepresented students requires providing services that resonate with their experiences. The CAGTF suggests that we “enhance the cultural competence of faculty to welcome students of diverse ethnic backgrounds.” Helping these students succeed depends upon a College community that recognizes and appreciates diverse cultural backgrounds. This may mean altering grading criteria and deliverables to be more sensitive to cultural norms. For instance, a student may not challenge a professor or speak up in class not because he or she does not have the requisite knowledge and skills, but because doing so is not a traditional part of how he or she was raised.



In addition to making sure our employees are sensitive to the unique cultural needs of our students, we must make sure we have employees who reflect the diversity of the student body. In describing ways to close the opportunity gap, the task force suggested that we “increase the percentage of African/African American and Latino full-time faculty as well as part-time faculty to enhance the applicant pool for full-time faculty searches.” I was struck by the CAGTF finding that between 2010 and 2012, there was a decrease in the number of Hispanic faculty and administrators, as well as a decrease in the percentage of African American administrators. Specifically related to Latino faculty, staff, and administrators, there is a significant gap between the number of students and College employees. At least 12.5 percent of MC students characterize themselves as Latino, yet there is a smaller number of Latino employees: only four percent of MC faculty members, most of whom are part-time; nine percent of MC staff; two-and-a-half percent of administrators or College leaders. Many of the underrepresented students who we are trying to reach may not have family members or friends who pursued education after high school, or even through high school. As such, they may not see themselves as fitting in at a higher education institution. They may not have an educational role model. It is imperative that we create those models for them here.

We must make sure that all of our students have access not only to academic knowledge, but to institutional knowledge as well. For instance, CAGTF suggests including “a mandatory financial aid plan that is done prior to new student orientation (currently underway at some high schools), as part of the overall mandatory education plan.” Additionally, the task force recommends working to “build partnerships with community organizations to support African American and Latino students and increase their awareness of scholarship and service opportunities beyond campus.” We already have phenomenal partnerships in place that are exposing students typically unrepresented in certain disciplines to those subjects. For instance, thanks to a grant from the National Science Foundation, the College has been able to expand the demographic of students in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) disciplines through On RAMP to STEM Scholarships. This is a targeted effort to expose a cohort of low-income students to an emerging and dynamic life sciences field. The grant not only provides scholarships; it also introduces students to fields that most have never heard of, let alone studied. Because this program is relatively new, and the grant impacts a relatively small number of



students, we have limited results as to its efficacy. But what we do know is that it is increasing diversity in the STEM programs.

I often stress that students who feel part of a community will thrive. The CAGTF agrees, and suggests we can boost student involvement in part, by creating “more ‘college-community building’ activities to increase school pride/spirit.” Along those lines, the task force recommended that the College “engage in a consistent and intentional dialogue with key community leaders and organizations to help identify systematic changes to better serve these student populations” and to “engage the student community through technology (for example, social media) to foster a sense of connectedness, community, and belonging to the College.” Feeling like part of a community, like there are people, even strangers, who support you, is powerful.

Conclusion

I thank the CAGTF members for their time and dedication and for creating a thoughtful, thorough, and honest report of the institution's current achievement gap, and how we can work to eliminate it. We will be forming an implementation group this semester to start evaluating what recommendations we can begin to actualize immediately, and how we can prepare ourselves to achieve additional recommendations in the long term. Additionally, I will work with the senior vice presidents and other College leaders to determine which ideas to incorporate into the initiatives of the strategic plan, in order to ensure alignment with Montgomery College 2020.

Our mission as a community college is to empower the members of our community to shine and emerge from any shadows that arise from disparity. Race, ethnicity, place of origin, gender, or any other difference should make a student unique, not more or less likely to succeed. I am excited about the work of the CAGTF and am confident that with such an engaged group of students and employees, Montgomery College can be at the forefront of closing the achievement gap crisis in higher education.



Monthly Discussion Questions¹

1. **Institutional needs.** What kind of change, if any, does our institution need?
2. **Context and competition.** Do we understand our institution's competitive position?
3. **Consequences of no change.** What are the consequences if we do not engage in a change process?
4. **Leadership capacity.** As a board and as individual board members, are we able and willing to work with our president to bring about positive change?
5. **Change process and players.** Based on this discussion, what is the right role for the board to play at this time?

¹ Adopted from MacTaggart, Terrence J., *Leading Change: How Boards and Presidents Build Exceptional Academic Institutions*, AGB Press, 2011 (pp. 21–22).

