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Community-College Students Mobilize on Campus to Improve Graduation Rates

By Jennifer Gonzalez

Heather N. Thomas understands how an unplanned pregnancy can derail college plans. It happened to her.

Pregnant at 15, she soon realized that the demands of parenthood would make it difficult to attend college. She eventually earned her high-school-equivalency diploma and spent the next two decades working various jobs, mostly in the restaurant industry, before enrolling at Mesa Community College, in Arizona, in 2008.

Ms. Thomas, now a 39-year-old mother of six, has told her story to countless high-school and college students as part of a project she created to educate students on how unplanned pregnancy can disrupt their educational goals and how they can prevent it.

Since President Obama made college completion a centerpiece of his higher-education agenda, there has been no shortage of projects, by foundations, college administrations, nonprofit organizations, and even state legislatures, designed to increase the number of degree and certificate holders in the United States. But one group has been conspicuously silent on the issue—students.

That changed with the creation of the Community College Completion Corps, a student-led project to raise awareness of the importance of college completion, not only for students but also for colleges and the communities they serve. The corps is spearheaded by Phi Theta Kappa, the international honor society at two-year colleges, but it is the honors students who design and carry out projects on their campuses.

The projects run the gamut, including Ms. Thomas's effort, a summit about campus resources, and one-day pledge drives (students sign a pledge to get their degree or certificate). The plan is not to create one-time projects but rather to enmesh them in campus culture.

"Often, the voices of student advocates can spark the beginning of a college's transformation," says Rod A. Risley, executive director of Phi Theta Kappa.

Making It Personal

Nationally, 22 percent of first-time, full-time community-college students earn a credential within three years. That figure must change drastically in order to meet the Obama administration's goal that the United States have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020. To reach that mark, the U.S. Department of Education projects, the proportion of college graduates must increase by 50 percent nationwide by the end of the decade.

The honors students, like Ms. Thomas, are making that push personal. Ms. Thomas says she felt compelled to help create Project HOPE (Healthy Outcomes through Prevention and Education) on her campus, where she is president of the Phi Theta Kappa chapter.

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The statistics she shares with other students are sobering. Sixty-one percent of women who have children after enrolling in community colleges fail to finish their degrees, according to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Many community-college students arrive on campus already juggling work and family. An additional child, especially if the pregnancy is unplanned, presents a significant hurdle on the way to completing a degree.

It took Ms. Thomas nearly two decades to finally enroll in college, and she laments the poor pay she has earned over the years because she didn't have a degree. She doesn't want other students to wait as long as she did to enroll. Ms. Thomas, who adopted four children with her husband and also has a stepson, first enrolled at Mesa three years ago to brush up on her computer skills. She is now working toward an associate degree from Mesa and a bachelor's degree in business, with a focus on technology management, from Northern Arizona University.

She works full time in the technology department of a high school in San Tan Valley, Ariz.

Mesa's Project HOPE has proved so successful that the grant that supports it has been extended through the end of the year. Key measures, Ms. Thomas says, were survey feedback, the high volume of traffic on the project's Web site, and the large number of people reached through high-school and college visits.

Moving Up From the Bottom

At Hillsborough Community College, Margel Lamb, 27, says students got the idea for a series of events after they saw research showing that students at the Brandon Campus weren't using the campus's academic resources.

Hillsborough ranks in the bottom five among the state's 28 community colleges in terms of the number of students it graduates. Only 26 percent of its students earn a degree within three years.

Students on the college's Brandon Campus thought the low use of support services might be a big part of the problem, says Ms. Lamb, president of the Phi Theta Kappa chapter at Brandon. They mobilized to create library seminars, which acquaint students with the various resources they can use to conduct research and write papers.

"Too many students use Wikipedia," says Eric Hartman, 31, a Phi Theta Kappa chapter officer at Brandon. "We want to do away with that."

The students also held what they called a Scholarly Summit, in February. Scholarships, sponsored by the district's trustees, were awarded, and the event provided information about campus resources such as financial-aid counseling, tutoring, and academic advising. Students were given a tour of the Academic Success Center, which includes a writing center and math lab.

Both the library seminars and the Scholarly Summit will continue at the Brandon Campus.

Colleges can't just get students in, Ms. Lamb says, and "leave them flopping in the wind."

Similarly, Phi Theta Kappa students at Snead State Community College, in Boaz, Ala., initiated the creation of a Student Success and Career Center to meet the academic and career needs of all students. Prospective students are guided through the college-enrollment process; academic-advising and tutoring services are available for current students; and career services, such as résumé writing and building interview skills, are offered to graduating students.

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The Transfer Is Not Enough

Other students' projects are focused on ensuring that their peers walk out the door with the degree or certificate they earned. Community-college students sometimes transfer to four-year institutions without getting their associate degree, even though they have enough credits to receive the credential.

Reasons vary, but commonly, students are unaware of the process to get the diploma or don't recognize its value in the work force should they not get their four-year degree. In that case, the student doesn't bother to fill out the necessary paperwork.

At Snead State, 85 percent of students transfer to four-year universities, but they don't always receive their associate degree, says Robert J. Exley, the college president. Mr. Exley would like to see that change. Community-college leaders, he says, must become more vocal not only about the value of an associate degree but about the fact that "it is worth every effort" to obtain one.

"Every student who starts a degree should complete one," says Mr. Exley.

At the Kingwood campus of Lone Star College, in Texas, students are pushing their peers to complete their associate degrees before transferring. Many have the necessary credits and simply don't apply for the degree.

Danielle M. Thorp, the incoming Phi Theta Kappa president at Kingwood, pushed for the effort after noticing that students pursuing associate degrees in teaching were transferring to a four-year university without earning their credential.

Ms. Thorp works as a coordinator for a joint teacher-education program run by Kingwood and the University of Houston-Downtown.

The associate degree shows employers that an applicant is qualified, she says, unlike a transcript that only shows that you've earned 60 credits. "Life happens," she says. "You never know if you are going to be able to complete that bachelor's degree."