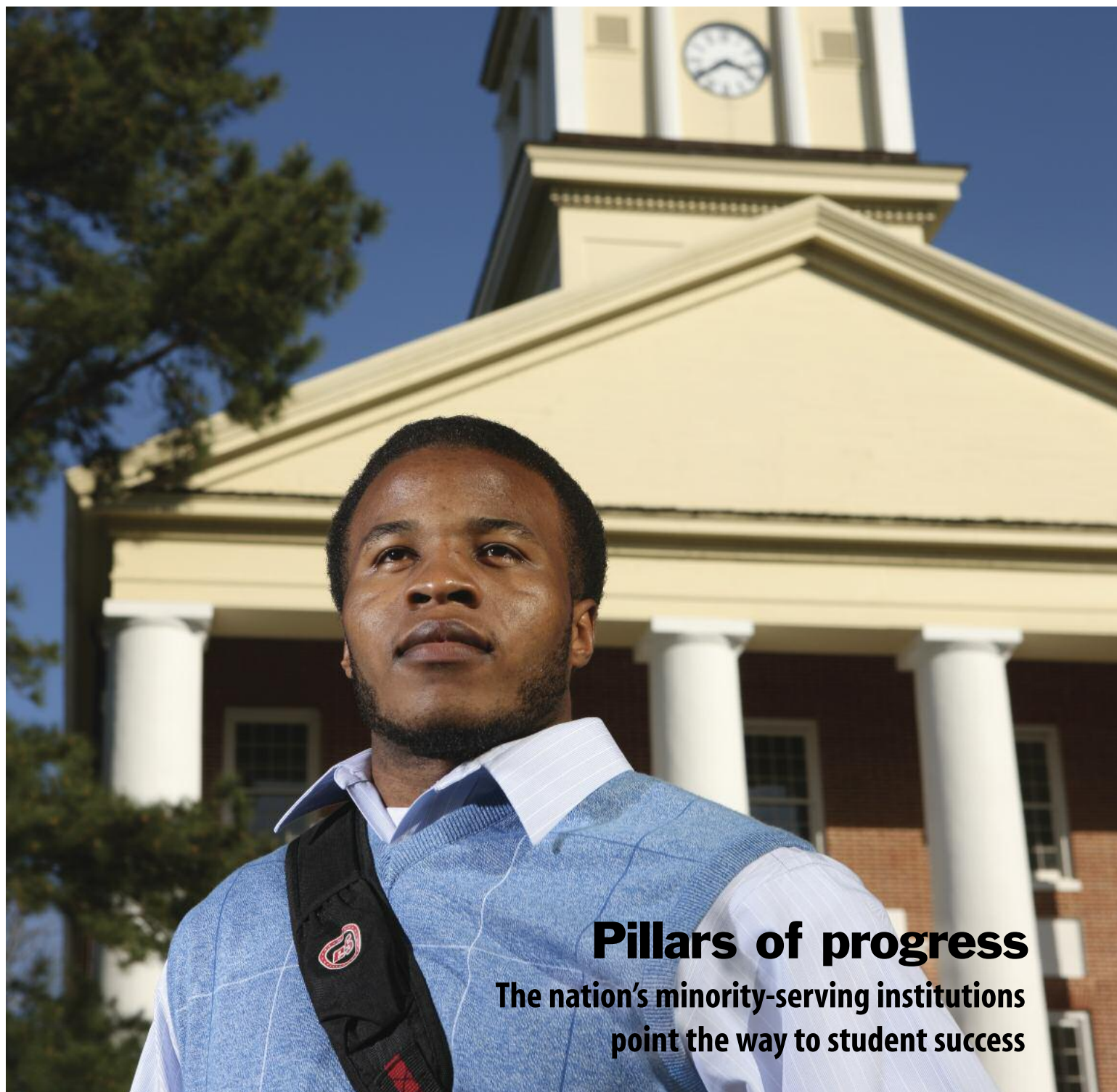


LUMINA FOUNDATION

FOCUS™

Spring 2008



Pillars of progress

**The nation's minority-serving institutions
point the way to student success**



At the University of Texas at El Paso, the border is no boundary: Page 2



Northwest Indian College connects tradition to tomorrow: Page 10



Alcorn State University takes a holistic approach to student success: Page 20

Learn more about the nation's minority-serving institutions

To find out more about MSIs, visit the Web sites of the following organizations:

HBCUs

- The National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education (NAFEO): www.nafeo.org
- The Thurgood Marshall College Fund: www.thurgoodmarshallfund.org
- The United Negro College Fund: www.uncf.org

HSIs: The Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU): www.hacu.net

TCUs: The American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC): www.aihec.org

Also, the three major MSI associations (NAFEO, HACU and AIHEC) have formed a coalition called the Alliance for Equity in Higher Education. Managed by the Institute for Higher Education Policy, the Alliance promotes collaboration and cooperation among MSIs and advocates for the shared policy concerns of all TCUs, HSIs and HBCUs and the students they serve. For more information about the Alliance, visit: www.ihep.org/programs/the-alliance.cfm.

Recent publications by these and other organizations contain a wealth of information about MSIs and their students. Here is just a brief sampling of the most recent reports:

- *Contemporary HBCUs: Considering Institutional Capacity and State Priorities*. This research report, by James T. Minor of Michigan State University's College of Education, provides a current view of the roles played by public HBCUs. It also presents data-driven reference points and comparative analyses in the hope that this information can drive a thorough re-evaluation of state policies that affect the funding of HBCUs. It is available at: www.msu.edu/~jtminor/.
- NAFEO released two Lumina-funded publications in March: *2008 Profiles of Member Institutions, Presidents and Chancellors* and *The State of America's Black Colleges, 2008*. These publications provide the most current facts and a wealth of background material on the nation's historically and predominantly black institutions. To obtain these publications, contact NAFEO at (202) 552-3300 or visit: www.nafeo.org.
- Also in March, the Institute for Higher Education Policy released a major evaluation report — plus eight individual briefs that provide hands-on tips for practitioners — all related to the Lumina-funded Building Engagement and Attainment for Minority Students (BEAMS) initiative. The report, titled *Increasing Student Success at Minority-Serving Institutions: Findings from the BEAMS Project*, and all eight briefs are available at: www.ihep.org/Publications/whats-new.cfm.

On the cover: Vernon Dandridge traded a troubled youth in Chicago for a bright future, thanks to his advisers at Alcorn State University. Dandridge, a senior at the Mississippi university, is considering graduate school.

In student-success efforts, 'minority' rules

This issue of *Lumina Foundation Focus* magazine examines a group of institutions that embody the finest attributes of American postsecondary education.

The nation's minority-serving institutions (MSIs) — colleges and universities that enroll large populations of students of color — have a proud and vital tradition. For more than a century, they have built a legacy of inclusion that has transformed tens of millions of individual lives — a legacy that, in many ways, has made our system of higher education the envy of the world.

The very act of creating colleges specifically to provide access and opportunity to those who have systematically been denied it — which is true of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) — reflects our best impulses as educators and as human beings. That same deep commitment to justice and fairness is reflected today in the ongoing work of all MSIs, including the nation's growing number of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs).

There is a wealth of evidence to demonstrate the immense value of MSIs, not only to the individual students they serve, but to the entire nation. Consider these facts:

- MSIs educate more than 2.3 million students, or about one-third of all American students of color — and these numbers are growing rapidly.
- Sixty-three percent of the nation's Latino undergraduates are enrolled in MSIs, with fully half of these students in HSIs specifically.
- MSIs confer nearly half of all teacher-education degrees awarded to African-Americans, Latinos and Native Americans in the United States.

Clearly, minority-serving institutions help meet a huge national need, a need that is growing rapidly as our nation becomes more diverse. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, total minority undergraduate enrollment grew 146 percent between 1984 and 2004, while enrollment of white undergraduates increased just 15 percent. Demographic projections show that, by the year 2050, people of color will make up the majority of the U.S. population.

In light of these trends, it is clear that MSIs must be recognized as a leading voice for the students who represent the backbone of our future workforce. These students find that MSIs offer unique educational experiences that foster cultural values and traditions, promote civic and community responsibility and produce citizens who are attuned to the increasingly diverse country in which we live.

For decades, MSIs have been serving the students who typically face the most significant barriers to

college success — often with far fewer resources than are available at mainstream institutions. And, while doing this work, MSIs have learned valuable lessons that should be broadly shared and replicated. In other words, these institutions should be seen as sources of knowledge and inspiration — as fertile ground for ideas that can improve student success at all colleges and universities.

In fact, some of those ideas are brought to life in the pages that follow. For instance, in this issue of *Focus* you'll find inspiring stories from each of the three major types of MSIs.

- In the Southwest, you'll learn about the data-driven effort to improve student success at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). It's an effort pushed inexorably at this HSI by President Diana Natalicio, and it has given vital support to UTEP students such as 22-year-old Daniel Fuentes and 23-year-old Alma Ochoa, both residents of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico.

- In the Deep South, you'll visit Alcorn State University (ASU) in Lorman, Miss., the nation's oldest historically and predominantly black land-grant institution. Since its founding in 1862, this HBCU and its graduates have been proving that, as current Graduate Studies Dean Donzell Lee says, "demography isn't destiny." Among the many support programs at ASU, you'll read about the university's Pre-Professional and Pre-Graduate

Program, which has helped ASU double the percentage of its graduates who go directly to graduate school.

- In the Pacific Northwest, on the 12,500-acre Lummi Indian Reservation near Bellingham, Wash., you'll learn about Northwest Indian College (NWIC), where ancient tribal traditions are an integral part of the learning experience. Such traditions, including a deep respect for what President Cheryl Crazy Bull calls the "ancestral memory" of community elders, are the cultural connections that help keep students on track.

In all of these examples, and at MSIs in hundreds of other communities around the nation, dedicated individuals and organizations are working hard to improve college access and success among underserved students. We at Lumina applaud their efforts, and we're proud to showcase their work here in *Focus* — not merely to celebrate it, but to hold it up as an example for others to follow.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. P. Merisotis".

Jamie P. Merisotis
President and CEO



For 20 years, President Diana S. Natalicio has made sure UTEP does all it can to help students reach their goals. "These are such talented young people," she says. "They don't deserve mediocrity; they deserve the best."

In engineering student success, the border is no boundary

By Christopher Connell

From its architecturally distinctive campus a few hundred yards from the Rio Grande, the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) straddles more than two countries and two cultures. In higher education, it straddles the worlds of opportunity and high achievement, or "access and excellence," as longtime President Diana S. Natalicio calls them. With 14 doctoral programs and eight more on the way, UTEP is the nation's only doctoral-research university with a Mexican-American majority. Not only are 73 percent of its 20,000 students Hispanic, but an additional 9 percent are Mexican citizens who cross the border from Ciudad Juarez each morning to pursue engineering, nursing and other degrees in the United States. While the nation wrangles over immigration policy, Texas rolls out the welcome mat for college students from Mexico. In 1987, the Texas legislature extended in-state tuition rates at UTEP (and later at other public universities) to Mexican students with demonstrated need.

UTEP, founded in this desert redoubt in 1914 as the Texas State School of Mines and Metallurgy, has become one of the nation's most prolific producers of Latino scientists and engineers. In 1995, the National Science Foundation designated this Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) as one of six Model Institutions for Excellence in producing minority scientists and engineers. That recognition has been a boon for UTEP's reputation and research budget.

Natalicio has guided the university on this journey for two decades. She is realistic but not daunted by UTEP's formidable challenges. El Paso County is the fourth-poorest county in the nation. Eighty percent of UTEP's students come from this desert valley, and most attended its hard-pressed public schools. For many, college is a financial and academic struggle. Only 4 percent of first-time, full-time freshmen who entered UTEP in Fall 2000 graduated in four years, 17 percent in five years, and 29 percent after six.

Still, most students keep at it — some for 10 years or more. And UTEP is finding ways for more students to beat the odds. The university long has been celebrated for graduating science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) majors (it awarded 441 STEM bachelor's degrees in 2005, up 41 percent from a decade earlier). But today it is drawing national attention for its work on speeding students through developmental math and reading and for providing classroom supports that keep students engaged from semester to semester.

UTEP first created a special program back in 1997 to help first-year science and engineering students adjust to the demands of college life. Administrators soon realized that all new students and transfers could benefit from extra support, advice and encouragement. The centerpiece of the Entering Student Program, launched in 1999, is a three-credit seminar called *University 1301* that engages students in critical thinking while showing them the ropes on campus. In 2006-07, almost 2,900 new students took the course, which is taught in tandem by

an instructor, a librarian and a student peer leader who address topics from race and the environment to how to succeed as an entrepreneur. An academic adviser is also assigned to each section. *University 1301* is credited with boosting retention from semester to semester and year to year. Another key is placing scores of students in meaningful, part-time jobs in laboratories and as class assistants and peer tutors.

Natalicio herself is a first-generation college graduate, a grandchild of German immigrants. After six weeks at a switchboard after high school in St. Louis, she re-engineered her life by enrolling at St. Louis University, where she says the Jesuits "turned me around. They made me love learning." After a Fulbright scholarship to Brazil and a doctorate in linguistics at the University of Texas at Austin, Natalicio came to UTEP in 1971 as a visiting assistant professor and rose through the ranks. "But my life was a cakewalk compared to what some of these students are doing here," she says. "Legions of our students are doing amazing things: working, taking care of a disabled parent, helping raise younger brothers and sisters, volunteering. ... These are such talented young people. ... They don't deserve mediocrity; they deserve the best."

A community partnership

Early in her tenure, Natalicio took the lead in forming the El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence, which brings together the leaders of the university, the El Paso Community College District (EPCC) and the public schools to work in concert on behalf of students and their future. This partnership has paid repeated dividends, most recently in addressing the need for remedial work before students can take a full college-level load. With 25,000 students at five branches, EPCC is one of the nation's largest community colleges and has been a participant from the outset in Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count, a national initiative aimed at increasing success rates among community college students. EPCC President Richard M. Rhodes, a former certified public accountant, shares Natalicio's passion — and embraces Achieving the Dream's requirement — for basing strategy on hard evidence.

Rhodes thought 75 percent of new EPCC students needed remedial math. "We were astounded to find it actually was 97 percent," he says. Students fresh from El Paso high schools weren't much better than adults returning years later. Rhodes shared the disturbing results in November 2005 with community leaders, including the superintendents of El Paso's largest school districts. Anticipating their disbelief, he also loaded the math placement test onto computers and invited anybody who felt like pointing fingers to step across the hall and "see how many of us place into developmental math."

No one took him up on the offer. But two superintendents stood up and declared publicly that the results were unacceptable. Four months later, they were testing their own seniors to see who was ready for college

What is an HSI?

The U.S. Department of Education defines a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) as any accredited, degree-granting institution whose full-time equivalent undergraduate enrollment is at least 25 percent Hispanic.

The federal government maintains no official list of HSIs, but the professional organization that represents and advocates on behalf of these institutions — the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) — claims more than 200 HSIs as members.

HACU-member institutions are located in 14 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico.



Jennifer Taylor, a doctoral student in psychology at UTEP, with her mother, Hilda Taylor. The elder Taylor, a native of Mexico, earned her own UTEP doctorate in 2004 and is now a biology professor at El Paso Community College.

math. All 12 area public-school districts now use Accuplacer tests, and they test juniors so there is still time to sharpen their math skills before college.

"There's a tremendous rustiness factor," explains Richard S. Jarvis, UTEP's provost and vice president for academic affairs. "You can get students who've done calculus in an AP class and place into developmental math because they mess up fractions or goof up a simple quadratic equation."

UTEP is moving on several fronts to reduce the time spent catching up on the fundamentals. "We changed our summer orientation and put in a six-hour math refresher course — two hours a day for three days," says Jarvis. After that refresher, 48 percent of students

improve their placement score enough to avoid at least one developmental course, and almost a third avoid developmental math altogether. That is music to any administrator's ears.

Stephen Aley, associate provost for academic affairs and an associate professor of biology, is charged with making other intervention efforts. Aley, a graduate of Cal Tech and Rockefeller University, was a research professor at the University of California-San Diego before joining the UTEP faculty in 1995. He directed a project funded by the Howard Hughes Medical Institute to increase student success in the sciences. Now, as associate provost, he oversees the experiments that are minimizing the time students spend in developmental math. For students who got all A's and B's in high school, it's demoralizing to walk onto campus "only to be told, 'You don't know enough math to be in college.'"

Aley and like-minded colleagues are tweaking the process of identifying who needs to spend a full 12 weeks in developmental math. Using this new process, UTEP diverted the top third of 1,000 students slated for remedial algebra into college-level math and gave them an added lab. They were just as successful as the other students. Now the university is trying this same

A Q&A with the president

Visit our Web site for an expansive interview with UTEP President Diana Natalicio:
www.luminafoundation.org/publications/natalicioQandA.html.



At age 21, senior biology major Denisse Leony has already had two papers published in science journals. She hopes to earn master's and doctoral degrees and pursue a career in cancer research.

approach with the next third. Ben Flores, associate dean of UTEP's College of Engineering, admits that some of what is taking place in labs and classrooms almost sounds too good to be true — but he has seen the proof.

A key to UTEP's success in producing more scientists and engineers has been its Research Experience for Undergraduates program, which gets students working in labs on real science projects early in their careers. Ninety percent of these students graduate, and many go

on to graduate school as well. That's "the icing on the cake," says Flores, who says his own participation in research as a UTEP undergraduate put him on the path to his Ph.D.

Flores, current director of the Model Institutions for Excellence grant from the National Science Foundation (which has poured \$22 million into UTEP since 1995), is himself a native of Ciudad Juarez. He won a goodwill scholarship to UTEP in 1981; *El Programa de Asistencia*

Estudiantil (PASE), the in-state tuition program, wasn't in existence then. Also, his single mother, a telegraph operator, borrowed money to send him to the university across the border. He keeps her telegraph key on his office desk as a reminder of his mother's sacrifice, and he crosses the bridge each Sunday to visit her.

Jennifer Taylor, now a doctoral student in psychology, also had a strong role model at home: her mother Hilda, who was born in Juarez and enrolled in remedial classes at El Paso Community College when Jennifer entered first grade. Mother and daughter graduated from UTEP together in 2004 — Jennifer with a bachelor's degree, and Hilda with a doctorate in environmental science and engineering. The elder Taylor is now on the EPCC faculty as a biology professor.

'The talent is out there'

Denisse Leony, a senior biology major, is speeding through UTEP after getting her start at EPCC in the Border Bridges to the Baccalaureate Program — an effort funded by the National Institutes of Health to help minorities pursue careers in biomedical research. Leony, who has had two papers published in scientific journals, aspires to earn both a master's and a doctorate and do cancer research. "I want to stay here because I know

"I want to stay here because I know that El Paso has a future, and I want to be a part of it."

Denisse Leony

that El Paso has a future, and I want to be a part of it," says the 21-year-old.

Despite the region's poverty, UTEP attracts a large share of El Paso's best and brightest. Howard Daudistel, dean of the College of Liberal Arts, says: "The talent is out there. It's all over the place. It's just that, historically, people haven't been given access to the opportunities to cultivate that talent."

Provost Jarvis, a British-born geographer, notes that 700,000 people live in greater El Paso while 1.5 million live on the Juarez side, where there are four universities. Yet none of the four has the size or scope of UTEP, and some actually are more expensive for Mexican citizens than going to UTEP and paying the PASE

tuition rate. These students face serious logistical challenges to attend college in the United States.

Two who cross the bridge each morning to attend UTEP are Daniel Fuentes, 22, a senior economics and finance major, and Alma Angelica Ochoa, 23, a sophomore who intends to major in chemistry. Both live in Juarez. To make classes, they factor into their commutes 60- to 90-minute waits for inspection by U.S. Customs and Border Patrol agents. The return trip only takes five minutes.

"It's difficult to do that every single day, but I'm sure my education is worth it," says Fuentes, who hopes to



Alma Ochoa and Daniel Fuentes, both of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, are among the approximately 1,800 students who cross the border each day to attend classes at the University of Texas at El Paso.

"One Saturday I said, 'OK, this is my last day cutting hair.' On Monday I went to EPCC, registered late and started two weeks later."

Angelica Molix

earn an MBA at McGill University in Montreal and return to this valley to work on regional development. "I'm very grateful for the opportunity to be a UTEP student." Fuentes, who serves in the student senate, recently shortened his commute by using earnings from a campus job to purchase a pass allowing him to use dedicated commuter lanes at the bridge. Mexico charges commuters \$300 a year; the U.S. fee is \$127 for five years.

Ochoa is following in the footsteps of her brother, a 2004 UTEP graduate who is a systems engineer for Honeywell. UTEP "is a little bit harder, but...there are more options for us if we learn English very well and if

we come from UTEP," she says. "The people are very nice here. The only thing would just be the bridge. The immigration officers, sometimes they are hard. I understand it's their work to check everybody, (and) it's a border — but sometimes they are not so nice with us."

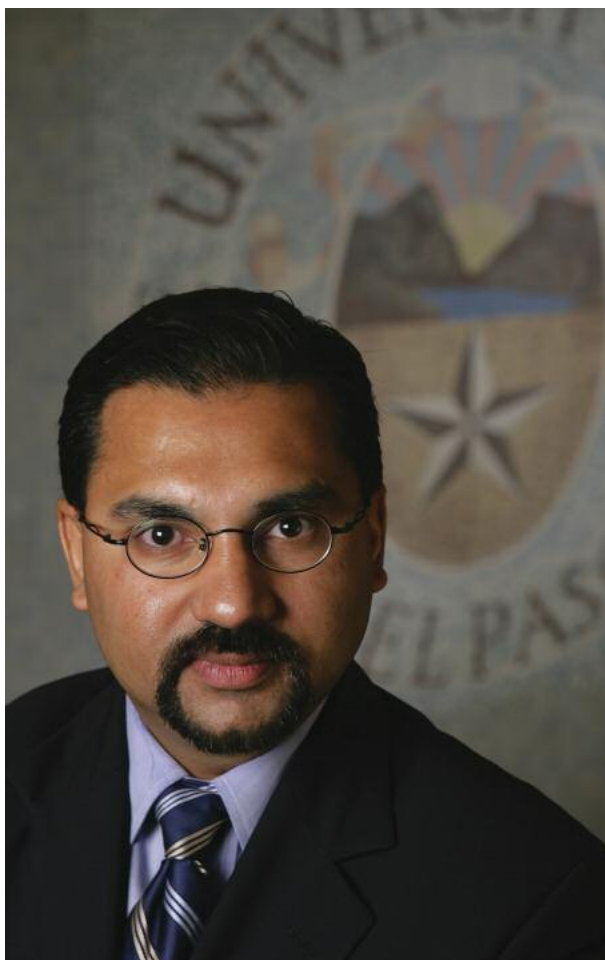
Natalicio believes the usual way graduation rates are calculated makes her urban university look less productive than it is. She estimates that fully 70 percent of the 2,400 UTEP students who earned undergraduate degrees in 2006 were never counted in any entering UTEP cohort of first-time, full-time freshmen. More than 2,000 students transfer into UTEP each year, many as sophomores or juniors. When they earn their degrees, they do not count toward UTEP's official, six-year graduation rate.

Roy Mathew, director of UTEP's Center for Institutional Evaluation, Research and Planning, looked at the group of students who entered in Fall 1999 and found that, after six years, almost 57 percent either had graduated or were still enrolled at UTEP or another university in Texas. Mathew and his research colleagues, with support from Lumina Foundation, are also digging into the data from UTEP's Student Success Project to build statistical models that will help them identify and understand the factors that put students at risk for failure. They identified 23 factors, from age and family income to hours worked and ACT scores. They confirmed that rank and GPA in high school serve as good proxies for success in college. But their work also suggests that it is possible for students who were not engaged in high school to become so during their first year at UTEP.

"The next phase of our research focuses on untangling the complex factors that determine student engagement," said Mathew. When students fail a course, the researchers want to find out why. "They don't just wake up on a single day and fail a course; it happens over a period of time," he said.

Admirable persistence

Despite the risk factors, persistence is a hallmark of UTEP students. Aileen Kalt earned her bachelor's degree in nursing in August, two weeks before her 40th birthday. A native of El Paso, she first enrolled in UTEP in 1985 after her high school graduation, but quit after getting married. Kalt became an emergency medical technician and a technician in a hospital emergency room while raising two children — by then as a single



Roy Mathew, director of UTEP's Center for Institutional Evaluation, Research and Planning, is looking closely at the factors that affect student success.



Peer Leader Blanca Guerrero (center) works with UTEP students Kyle Kinas and Priscilla Muñoz during their *University 1301* course, a three-credit seminar designed to orient and engage new students.

mother. When she returned to the university in 2002, she was allowed to retake several classes in which she had gotten mediocre grades as a teenager. This time she earned academic honors. Daughter Krystal, 20, will earn her nursing degree through the same program in 2008, and when the medical school opens in 2009, Kalt hopes to enroll and fulfill a girlhood dream of becoming a physician.

Angelica Molix, 39, also took a circuitous route to the UTEP education degree she received in May. Molix was born in Mexico. Her father gained U.S. citizenship after enlisting in the Army and moved his family to El Paso when she was 4. Angelica, the oldest of five, was a drummer in high school, and UTEP's band director offered her a partial scholarship. But her father told her: "If you want to go to college, first you work with your hands, and then you pay your own way." She became a hairdresser, married and had four children, then decided in 2002 she wanted to do something more with her life. "One Saturday I said, 'OK, this is my last day cutting hair.' On Monday I went to EPCC, registered late and started two weeks later," she says. Two years after that, she had an associate's degree.

Maggie Smith, dean of University College and vice provost for undergraduate studies, says UTEP bases all of its strategies for student success on data, "and we're constantly reassessing them." University College operates from offices in several campus buildings to give new students academic guidance, help with admissions and financial aid, and academic support. That support includes a cadre of Peer Leaders — UTEP students who themselves have overcome hurdles and are therefore best situated to help others.

Juarez-born Blanca Guerrero, 22, is one of those Peer Leaders. She began at UTEP as an accounting major, but switched to literature and secondary education and hopes one day to teach high school seniors to love Whitman and Chaucer as much as she does. "I've been helped so much by everything that UTEP has to offer," says Guerrero. "It's just amazing how you can go anywhere and there's a support system there to help students."

Christopher Connell is a freelance journalist based in Alexandria, Va. He is a former education reporter for the Associated Press who also served three years as assistant chief of AP's Washington bureau.

Tyson Oreiro (left), Patrisha Lane and Santi Alston gather on the porch of the student center at Northwest Indian College. Oreiro, who grew up on the Lummi Indian Reservation and left a mainstream university during his sophomore year, will soon graduate from the tribal institution and plans to attend medical school.



Honoring tradition while preparing students for tomorrow

By Stephen Giegerich

Tyson Oreiro has a very clear vision of the future and the path he'll take to get there. Step one: Earn a bachelor's degree from Northwest Indian College (NWIC) on the Lummi Indian Reservation near Bellingham, Wash. That's a goal Oreiro abandoned 10 years ago, when he left the Pacific Northwest for a casino job in Palm Springs, Calif. Step two: Leave the reservation again, but this time to attend medical school. Step three: After med school, train in cancer research, specializing in childhood oncology. Oreiro's plan has one more specific step: Use his skills to help Native American children suffering from cancer.

Supremely confident, 27-year-old Oreiro outlines the coming years with the certainty of a pilot plotting the coordinates of a flight plan. And he's equally resolute about his requirements for the postgraduate institutions that will help him along the way. A sound academic record is just the half of it.

"I expect (the school) to honor us, somehow and in some way," Oreiro says. In many ways, Oreiro echoes the voice of every Native American knocking on the college door, and postsecondary institutions hoping to serve this special population would do well to listen.

Honor the Native identity with heritage, spirit and family, the voices say, and you'll be able to build a foundation for student success. "The avenues of academic success travel through the culture and the support systems," says Cindy Dodd, dean of student life at NWIC.

Justin Guillory, dean of the college's Extended Campus and a doctoral candidate at Washington State University, says colleges and universities can demonstrate their commitment to Native American students in the admissions phase, particularly during the initial campus visit.

Like most Native people, the Lummi adhere to the principle that wisdom trickles down from tribal elders. The belief is so entrenched in the culture that the philosophy is set forth in the NWIC course catalog: "Our strength comes from old people," it reads. "From them we receive our teachings and knowledge and the advice we need in our daily lives."

It makes sense, then, that Native Americans visiting a college campus will seek a depth of education that transcends the classroom. Whether the elder is a gray-haired member of the faculty, a wise member of the school administration or even an upperclassman isn't the point. What does matter is the presence of elders who have already trod the unfamiliar path to higher education and are capable of showing newcomers the way.

"It's one thing if an institution says it is diverse or that it honors our traditions," says Guillory, a descendant of Idaho's Nez Perce tribe who is also part African-American and Hispanic. "But, quite frankly, I trust my own. I want to have a conversation with someone who can help me answer the question: 'This is where I'm from, now how can I connect the academics to my culture?'"

'Far, far away'

That's not what Oreiro encountered during his initial experience with postsecondary education. Never mind that the school he attended, Western Washington University, is barely nine miles from the 12,500-acre Lummi reservation.

"Even though it was close to home, it still felt far, far away," Oreiro recalls. He saw few faces on campus that looked like his, and, though 'most students were welcoming, few seemed able to appreciate or even understand the connection to ancestry, earth, sky and the other influences that had so profoundly shaped Oreiro's life.

Without elders to provide wisdom and guidance, Oreiro, admits, he "crashed and burned," partying his way out of Western Washington before the end of his sophomore year.

"I can't explain the pull of our culture and the need of Native Americans to attach themselves to it," says the normally articulate Oreiro. "It defies explanation."

NWIC President Cheryl Crazy Bull speaks up to fill the gap. "It's ancestral memory," she says. "It's an embedded experience."

A member of the Lakota tribe, Crazy Bull moved west from North Dakota nearly six years ago to lead the school. She has seen NWIC through an unprecedented period of academic, spiritual and physical growth, overseeing work on the Lummi campus as well as six satellite sites — four along Coast Salish (the Native name for the Lummi's ancestral home), one in Eastern Washington, and one in Idaho. The combined enrollment on NWIC's seven campuses is 1,200.

NWIC is a Tribal College, one of 35 postsecondary institutions within the borders of the United States that are owned and operated by various tribal nations. Generally situated on reservation lands, these institutions fill a critical need. According to the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (the professional association encompassing these schools): "Tribal Colleges are unique institutions that combine personal attention with cultural relevance in such a way as to encourage American Indians, especially those living on reservations, to overcome the barriers they face to higher education."

Those barriers are formidable, and they usually occur in combination — with geographical isolation, low income and poor academic preparation among the most common. Because of these barriers, success rates for students at these institutions are often low. For example, in 2006, NWIC's main campus had a graduation rate of 19 percent, and the graduation rate on the outlying campuses was 9 percent. The term-to-term retention rate during the 2006-2007 academic year was just above 60 percent for students in NWIC's degree and certificate programs. In Fall 2007, however, the fall-to-fall retention rate among these students was just 30 percent.

These figures, particularly graduation rates, can be a bit misleading because they tend to measure success

Continued on Page 15

Defining Tribal Colleges and Universities

America's Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) are those institutions that have been chartered by one or more of the American Indian tribes recognized by the federal government. They are located on reservations or in communities with large populations of Native Americans.

TCUs are located in 12 states (as well as in Canada), but they are most numerous in three contiguous states: Montana and the Dakotas. These states contain a total of 15 Tribal Colleges.

Source: U.S. Department of Education

Northwest Indian College



Justin Guillory, dean of NWIC's Extended Campus and a doctoral student at Washington State University, says Native students want to answer the question: "How can I connect academics to my culture?"

Northwest Indian College



NWIC President Cheryl Crazy Bull is also president of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, the professional association and advocacy organization for the nation's Tribal Colleges and Universities.

Continued from Page 12

with a yardstick that often doesn't apply to NWIC students, many of whom have no intention of earning a degree. Crazy Bull points out that many NWIC students take courses solely for job enhancement, adding: "I think that's something policymakers don't often understand." Still, she and other NWIC officials acknowledge there's room for improvement in student success, and they're working to close that gap. Across all of NWIC's campuses, students are starting to see the benefits of a college-wide emphasis on data-driven learning. At the same time, early-intervention programs are beginning to offer help in everything from financial aid to academic tutoring.

Officials are especially enthusiastic about a "family education model" that NWIC has adapted from a tribal college in Montana. Using this approach, the college encourages a student's spouse, children and siblings to be part of their loved one's education by joining field trips and participating in family-oriented, on-campus social activities.

Crazy Bull calls course-completion rates the jumping-off point for improving student success. (In 2006, those rates ranged from 50 percent to 75 percent in class categories ranging from degree programs to distance

**"If you put
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Cheryl Crazy Bull

learning.) To help keep students engaged and on track, NWIC has instituted an early-warning system that alerts faculty members when a student misses too many classes. The college is also encouraging faculty members to visit students in their homes.

"If you put in the work with students, they'll know," says Crazy Bull. "And if they know, it makes their educational experience more meaningful."

A daughter's dilemma

Crazy Bull's professional perspective is shaped by her tenure in K-12 and postsecondary education and by her position as president of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC). But she also has a personal perspective, one shaped by her own experiences as a

Native student and, more recently, as the parent of such a student.

It's been some years now since her daughter, then a freshman at the University of Wyoming, called in tears to relate a story that Crazy Bull says resonates to this day. In a first-year writing course, her daughter was asked to compose a story inspired by the mental image of a woman standing beneath a tree. Drawing on her background, the girl wrote about "vision quest," a



Under the watchful eye of Professor John Rombold, Tyson Oreiro works with a fish specimen as part of an animal biology class at NWIC.

"It didn't matter how far we had to go, my mom always found a way to find a tribe...to meet people, to make contact, to keep the connection to our traditions."

Patrisba Lane

Native rite of quietly withdrawing in spirit and prayer to seek introspection, guidance and understanding.

When the essay was shared, classmates and instructors alike were confounded by the subject, its inspiration and its meaning.

"They accepted it, but they didn't understand it," recalls Crazy Bull. An already-homesick student, separated from her traditions and suddenly feeling more alone than ever, reached out to her mother. Crazy Bull knew which buttons to push. Next morning, she was back on the phone to Wyoming, asking the university's multi-cultural center to intercede.

"It's an experience lots of our children have when they go somewhere," says Crazy Bull.

The NWIC president is a realist. She knows it is human nature for people of all colors and heritages to seek out worlds beyond their own. Crazy Bull also recognizes that some educational paths, such as the one Tyson Oreiro has plotted, must extend beyond the reservation borders.

But at the risk of sounding like a "separatist," Crazy Bull wonders aloud why Native Americans who have a symbiotic connection to the culture nonetheless choose academic environments that are indifferent to Native customs. It's counterintuitive, she suggests, when a person yoked to Native rituals and traditions enrolls in a non-tribal institution. "Tribal people don't want to mainstream," says Crazy Bull. "I think it's tied to our tribal ancestry, our tribal blood."

NWIC freshman Patrisba Lane can't remember a time when she wasn't drawn to her heritage. An Army brat, Lane says she attended no fewer than 10 public schools around the country between kindergarten and high school graduation. In a nomadic life that took her family from town to town, sometimes as often as twice a year, there was one constant.

"It didn't matter how far we had to go, my mom always found a way to find a tribe, even if it was two or three hours away, to meet people, to make contact, to keep the connection to our traditions," says Lane. Now 21, Lane herself feels the same pull.

When it came time to act on a longtime ambition of attending college, Lane enrolled this January at NWIC, a school that fits squarely in the "comfort zone" of a young woman who, unlike many NWIC students, has experienced the world beyond Bellingham.

"We re-create the family experience for our students," Crazy Bull explains. "We recognize that our students

have prior knowledge and a different view of the world. We see the world differently."

The reluctance of Lummi to abandon the culture is driving a long-range expansion at the main NWIC campus in Bellingham and its satellites. It also helped nudge the school toward its recent decision to offer a four-year degree. Oreiro, the son of an NWIC administrator, earned a two-year degree here in 2007 and is now one of 12 students in NWIC's new baccalaureate program. One of the things he likes about the program — and something he would like traditional colleges and universities to emulate as they reach out to Native American students — is that NWIC integrates tribal traditions into the social fabric of the campus, and even into the academic curriculum.

Culture in the classroom

With the guidance of the school's cultural and heritage arm, the Coast Salish Institute, those tribal traditions abound at NWIC. Along with the course selections found at mainstream universities, the NWIC catalog includes courses such as *Bone Game Drum and Song*, Native languages and *Introduction to Indian Canoe Racing*. Next year, students will be able to enroll in clam digging, one small part of the Lummi's heritage of aquaculture — a heritage that formed the basis for the college's first field of study in 1974.

The clam-digging course "will let students know what is known to us as tribal people," but it won't stop there, explains William Jones Jr., a college recruiter, retention specialist and the son of the school's founder. "It will also show them the science. Then all they have to do is carry it over to other science classes like biology."

Everywhere on the Lummi campus, one sees the link between past, present and future. It's what led four-year student Lora Boome to the traditional plants that form the basis for her "Herbal First Aid Kit" (contents include yarrow powder to staunch bleeding, a "trauma balm" comprising arnica, St. John's wort and cayenne for aches and pains, and "Smooth Move" capsules for constipation). Boome now sells the kit to raise funds to combat diabetes in Native communities. Upon graduation, she plans to use her herbalist skills to create and market natural remedies. Likewise, it was NWIC's emphasis on tribal culture that inspired second-year student Talia London to combine the Native storytelling tradition with 21st century technology through videography, digital recording and podcasting.

Northwest Indian College



William Jones Jr., son of NWIC's founder, is also a student recruiter and retention specialist at the college. He says tribal institutions are doing much to preserve Native culture and traditions, adding: "This replaces what was taken away from us."

Northwest Indian College



For Nancy Dutton (left), here with site manager Gaylene Gobert at NWIC's Swinomish campus in LaConner, a beading class at the college proved to be the first step on her path toward an associate's degree.

In many ways, says William Jones Jr., modern tribal higher education has stepped into the breach to rescue Native culture. These institutions preserve and promote tribal traditions that have been decimated by the displacement of Native nations and by the dilution of tribal life through government-sanctioned programs that once dispatched young people to Western-style "boarding schools."

The modern tribal college "engages kids who normally wouldn't come to college," says Jones. "Many of these traditions used to be taught by grandparents and parents.

This replaces what was taken away from us."

At 53, Nancy Dutton may no longer qualify as one of the "kids" Jones refers to. Still, she is emblematic of the NWIC student who is hooked on learning because of a course honoring her culture. Dutton's initial foray into higher ed began and just as quickly ended following her graduation from high school in 1975. Her major was nursing, the institution a community college.

"There weren't enough Natives," she says. "I just didn't feel like I was in the right place."

The years grew into decades. Dutton, a member of the Swinomish tribe who lives in LaConner, about a half hour south of Bellingham, gravitated into the field of accounting, working as a clerk. Then came the work-related accident that, in effect, ended her career. "A filing cabinet fell on me," Dutton says with a rueful smile.

In 2002, she returned to school at the NWIC satellite campus in LaConner, where she enrolled in a beading class. Now located in two rooms at the Swinomish tribal center, the LaConner campus is scheduled to move this summer into a three-classroom facility modeled after a traditional Native long house.

Her education delayed again so she could care for her aging parents, Dutton returned in 2004 to pick up classes in history, math, science and other disciplines. It was the beading class, though, that transformed Nancy Dutton's life. She is now on track to receive an associate's degree in science in 2009.

"I made it this far, now I need to finish it out," she says.

Dutton's success also affirms an important component of tribal education. Though Native people recognize the value of postsecondary learning, there is reticence to move outside the comfort zone offered on the reservation. The only way to provide access, tribal colleges have found, is to quite literally bring education to Native people. Without the NWIC campus serving the Swinomish in LaConner, it's safe to say that Nancy Dutton would not be a college student. "I would be scared to go outside," she acknowledges — a perspective that President Crazy Bull describes as "a common theme, a common experience," particularly among older Native students. As it happens, Dutton has no plans to continue her education beyond two years. Should she change her mind, though, NWIC is working diligently to facilitate what Cindy Dodd, dean of student life, describes as the "gentle handoff of transfer students."

Smoother transitions

For its part, Western Washington University also has been working hard to improve that handoff — the type of exchange that clearly wasn't as gentle as it needed to be in Tyson Oreiro's case back in the late 1990s. Since the early 2000s, Western Washington has offered a special orientation program for students transferring from NWIC. Emphasizing the university's connection to the Lummi culture, the program links the transfer students to other Native Americans on campus — in particular, to faculty, staff and fellow students who live on the

Lummi reservation. "Sometimes it just takes someone to answer a question," says Joan Ullin, an academic support coordinator with Western Washington's Student Outreach Services.

Once they begin classes, NWIC transfer students who are struggling are directed to a course designed to help at-risk students navigate the academic and financial road ahead. Called *Education 108*, this course helps these students "get a sense that they are not alone and allows them to meet people, in a positive setting, who are challenged in similar ways," says Ullin. Upon completion of the course, she adds, *Education 108* students are monitored by people in her department who are ready to intercede with one-on-one academic and financial counseling, if necessary.

Justin Guillory believes Western Washington's newfound success with Native students can be pegged to the two words that materialize in nearly every conversation about Native Americans and mainstream education: honor and culture.

"For many years, higher education saw Native culture as a barrier," he says. "But the research is now showing that, far from being a barrier, being connected to the culture is a persistence factor."

Guillory should know. The title of his dissertation is "Native American Student Success and the Concept of Giving Back."

Perhaps, a few years from now, Guillory will include an addendum on Tyson Oreiro and his efforts on behalf of Native American children stricken with cancer.

For now, Guillory and others at Northwest Indian College are keeping a close eye on Oreiro and the 11 others on track to be the first to

receive a four-year NWIC degree.

As he ponders the step on his academic path, Oreiro is leaning toward the University of Washington's School of Medicine in Seattle. But he's open to other possibilities.

One thing is certain. Whether he's checking out UW or another institution, step one will be to seek out the elders. And, with typical assuredness, Oreiro says that the elders' guidance won't benefit him alone. He will pass along their wisdom, for that is the tradition.

"My grandparents told me a long time ago that we are literally a path," Oreiro says. "We make it easier for those who come up behind us."

Stephen Giegerich, a staff writer for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and a former education writer for the Associated Press, is a frequent contributor to "Lumina Foundation Focus" magazine.

"For many years, higher education saw Native culture as a barrier. But the research is now showing that, far from being a barrier, being connected to the culture is a persistence factor."

Justin Guillory

Alcorn State University biochemistry major Renada Scott works in the lab with Troy Stewart, chairman of the chemistry department. "Renada has overcome every obstacle," says Stewart, Scott's faculty adviser.



Focus on freshmen, engagement activities put students on the path to success

By Patricia L. Brennan

Twenty years ago, Sugar Ditch Alley was a poverty-stricken neighborhood in Tunica, a river town in Mississippi's northwest corner. Rundown houses, many without running water or electricity, were the norm, as was a drainage ditch that pumped raw sewage throughout the Sugar Ditch area. When Jesse Jackson visited Tunica in the mid-1980s, he referred to it as "America's Ethiopia."

For Renada Scott, 20, it was once home.

Growing up in a single-parent household just a few miles from the river, Scott says her high school years were a balancing act. Rather than socialize after school with friends, she hurried home to take care of her two siblings, cooking and cleaning while their mother worked from 3 p.m. to 11 a.m. as a hostess at a local casino.

"Basically, my mother was at home while we were in school and then went to work when we got home," Scott says.

Far from bitter, Scott says the experience taught her a valuable lesson: She wanted more in life for herself and her family, and she knew that college would help her reach those goals.

When it came time to decide on an institution, Scott drew inspiration from a relative who was attending Alcorn State University in Lorman, Miss. — another Mississippi River town about 220 miles to the south.

"My cousin became pregnant in her freshman year," she explains, "and she was prepared to drop out of school. Her mentor and guidance counselor showed her a way so that she could stay in school with her child and still graduate. She's now in her last year of nursing school. I thought: 'If they could help her, they can certainly help me.'"

Like all incoming freshmen at Alcorn State (ASU), Scott was assigned a mentor and faculty adviser as part of the school's College for Excellence program. It serves as a concentrated learning center for the university, with the sole focus on increasing student success.

Professor Troy Stewart has worked at ASU for 34 years; he is Scott's faculty adviser and chairman of the chemistry department. "Renada has overcome every obstacle," Stewart says. "Failure is not a possibility in her world."

Stewart is a pied piper on campus; students are drawn to him because he clearly is invested in them. He advises about 80 students and continues to teach chemistry classes for freshmen. "If I stop teaching, then I am going to retire that same week," he says with a laugh. "Students are my only concern for being here; without them, I have no business at Alcorn."

Making connections

ASU has worked hard to connect with students, particularly during their first year. In 1997, 33 percent of the students who enrolled went on to earn a college degree. Determined to improve its retention rates, the university developed an "academic reform agenda," which included a series of retention programs and student-engagement initiatives. One of those programs was the College for Excellence.

As an entry point for freshmen and transfer students, the College for Excellence provides individualized academic work plans for students. Depending on their needs, students may receive academic remediation, counseling, goal-planning help, mentoring, tutoring, career placement, internships and testing services — all of which are intended to encourage and motivate students to progress through college and graduate.

The College for Excellence not only strengthens relationships between students and faculty, it also has been

instrumental in improving ASU's graduation and retention rates. According to figures from the U.S. Department of Education, the six-year graduation rate for entering freshmen at Alcorn State is 45.3 percent. In the 2006-2007 academic year, the fall-to-fall retention rate for freshmen at ASU was 63 percent and has been as high as 74 percent.

University officials continue to look for ways to enhance students' experiences. The College for Excellence recently added a program that will electronically monitor class attendance, allowing faculty members to intervene earlier and get students back on track academically.

"For many reasons, a growing number of today's students arrive at college unprepared for college-level work," says Edward Vaughn, dean of the College for Excellence. "The earlier we can get to these students and build not only their academic skills but also their confidence, motivation and self-esteem, the more likely it is they will succeed."

The presence of comprehensive academic programs such as the College for Excellence can have a major impact on student success, and it's what sets some Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) apart from others, according to Dwayne Ashley, president and CEO of the Thurgood Marshall College Fund.

"Success is measured in several ways: graduation rates, retention, fundraising success and enrollment growth. The highly successful HBCUs all possess several common characteristics of success, including at least one high-profile, signature academic program that helps attract the best and brightest students to the institution," he says.

For Renada Scott, the support and encouragement she received via the College for Excellence has made all the difference. As a freshman, she benefited from the math and science tutorials. Now *she* does the tutoring, helping other students with their studies. When she graduates next fall, this biochemistry major with a 3.54 grade-point average will be the first in her family to earn a college degree. She sees medical school in her future and hopes to become a pediatrician.

"ASU gave me the foundation for my life," Scott says. "I did the work, but the people here showed me the way."

"ASU gave me the foundation for my life. I did the work, but the people here showed me the way."

Renada Scott

A prescription for student success

Getting students on the right path is how Vernon Dandridge, a senior majoring in broadcast journalism, describes his ASU experience.

Dandridge's journey to college was a rocky one. He grew up in a low-income area of Chicago where crime and gang violence were rampant. His parents divorced



Edward Vaughn is the dean of the College for Excellence at ASU, a comprehensive program focused exclusively on giving students the support and the tools they need to be successful.



Chicago native Vernon Dandridge talks with Sherlynn Bird, one of two advisers at Alcorn State whom Dandridge says pushed him to succeed at the HBCU.

when he was 12, and he says that breakup ushered in years of youthful rebellion. After graduating from Englewood High School, Dandridge went to work in a fast-food restaurant. By his own admission, he was going nowhere fast.

"I knew that wasn't the life I wanted, but I didn't know how to get where I needed to go," he recalls.

As fate would have it, ASU did.

Like Renada Scott, Dandridge is a first-generation college student. He says ASU welcomed him when few other institutions did. "My grades and my attitude

weren't in the best place," Dandridge admits. "And I still wasn't sure if college was for me."

The College for Excellence assigned Dandridge two advisers, Wanda Stanwood and Sherlynn Byrd. He credits these women for pushing him to succeed when, on many occasions, failure was his preference. Dandridge contends the support from tutoring to internships to conferences showed him that anything is possible. Only a few years ago, higher education was an afterthought for Dandridge, now, graduate school is in his future.

Alcorn State University

"I come from a family of six brothers and sisters. A lot of people didn't expect me to go to college, let alone graduate. Now, my younger brother sees what I did, and he plans to go to college, too."

For some students, Alcorn State serves as a second family. When Darya Shlapak left Ukraine to attend ASU, she was overwhelmed by what awaited her in rural Mississippi. The College for Excellence offered a refuge. A mentor from the program took Shlapak under her wing, helped her navigate the unfamiliar campus, introduced her to other students, and made sure she got to classes on time and kept up with her studies.

Connecting with peers is an important part of college for all students, but especially so for international students such as Shlapak. The ASU campus is isolated from shopping malls, movie theaters and other places college students typically gather. The nearest stoplight is seven miles from the main campus. The Center for Student Services and Outcomes helps integrate students into campus life at Alcorn. The program offers a

variety of opportunities designed to engage students outside the classroom and promote academic and non-academic skills.

For example, learning labs offer after-hours instruction in all subject areas; they're held throughout the campus and in the residence halls. Other efforts, such as the International-Multicultural Program, present activities to enhance students' appreciation of diversity and develop a better understanding of their role in a global society.

"When a student comes to us, our first task is to create a 'prescription' for them," says Regina Rankin, director of Student Support Services at ASU. "Much like a job description, we give them a work plan that addresses any obstacle — academic or personal — so they can envision a picture of their future and what's required to get there."

The personal interest in students is the rule, says Elena Dobrynina, 35, who in 2002 transferred from Russia to Alcorn State's Natchez campus for her MBA



Elena Dobrynina (far right), who helps recruit international students at ASU, meets with Russian and Ukrainian students (from left): Oxana Sagaydachnaya, Darya Shlapak, Evgeny Dmitriev and Artem Filiptsov.

degree. "I thought I would be a number," Dobrynina says. "It was just the opposite. From the time I arrived, teachers made themselves available. They put me at ease and were ready to offer whatever help I needed."

Today, Dobrynina works in the university relations office on ASU's main campus and serves as an International Student Recruiter for the university.

A rich history

As the oldest historically and predominantly black land-grant institution in the United States, Alcorn State University is steeped in history. (See box.) Remnants of that past are still evident on ASU's main campus, which features a cemetery containing a handful of tombstones marking the graves of individuals once associated with the university. The Rev. Jeremiah Chamberlain, founder and first president of Oakland College, is buried here.

All around the cemetery, however, are visual links to the present and the future. In the past decade, the university has undertaken more than \$100 million in renovation and construction projects on both its main campus and in Natchez.

ASU's physical facelift mirrors its academic improvements. In the past five years, the institution has achieved these milestones:

- **Diversified its student body.** For three straight years, the university has maintained a rate of non-black student enrollment of 10.5 percent, making it the first and only Mississippi HBCU to meet the enrollment criteria established in a \$503 million plan to settle a 1975 desegregation lawsuit.
- **Increased graduation rates for athletes.** The rate has increased from 25 percent to more than 50 percent, one of the highest among all universities for black athletes.
- **Excelled in nursing education.** In 2007, students in ASU's School of Nursing achieved a 99.9 pass rate on the state licensing exam.

Alcorn State has its roots in the mid-19th century

Alcorn State University in Lorman, Miss., is located on a site once occupied by Oakland College, a school for white men that was founded in 1830. At the beginning of the Civil War, Oakland College closed its doors, and the property was sold to the state of Mississippi.

Following passage of the Morrill Land-Grant Act in 1862, the institution became the Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College. In 1974, it was renamed Alcorn State University.

Initially, only men attended Alcorn; women were admitted in 1895. By 2007, women outnumbered men 64.3 percent to 35.8 percent.

ASU's Pre-Professional and Pre-Graduate Program is an integral component of the university's student-success effort. Now in its fourth year, the program gives students a road map for next steps beyond their undergraduate experience. All courses and activities in the program are non-credit enrichment activities designed to increase the number of minorities who apply to, enter and complete professional or graduate school. Among the program's components:

- **Saturday College:** Informal bimonthly meetings link researchers and business professionals with students and faculty to discuss a variety of subjects, including professional and graduate school admissions, financing post-baccalaureate education, ethics, current research, time and stress management, and study and interviewing skills.
- **Honors residence halls:** Students are housed in living quarters that are conducive to learning and career planning, with study rooms and regularly scheduled tutorials held in lounges and lobby areas.
- **Standardized test reviews:** Students receive tutoring assistance from the Princeton Review Foundation, a professional test-preparation organization, to help them prepare for professional and graduate school entrance examinations.
- **Summer research internships:** Students gain real-life experience at renowned institutions in Mississippi and throughout the country to develop skills in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines.

ASU's Pre-Professional and Pre-Graduate Program has clearly had a positive effect. The percentage of students who go on to graduate or professional school immediately after earning an undergraduate degree has more than doubled in just three years — from 25 percent in 2004 to 51 percent in 2007.

The idea that hard work and perseverance can overcome the impossible is more than a mantra at Alcorn State, says Donzell Lee, dean of Alcorn's School of Graduate Studies. It is the foundation on which Historically Black Colleges and Universities were built.

"For so long, HBCUs have been in the business of helping students who would have been forgotten elsewhere," he says.

"Demography isn't destiny. As educators, it's our job to let students know they are competing with the whole world," Lee says. "Whatever we do to take ordinary students and give them a sense of self worth, hope and direction so that they get to the next level is what we need to do."

Lee recalls an incident involving a former student who had turned in a paper with one particular word misspelled throughout the document.

"I called the student into my office the next day," Lee says. "And I was very tough on her. I told her this was not what we were aiming for at Alcorn. Effort matters, whether you are a student at this school or anywhere."

Alcorn State University



Darya Shlapak was overwhelmed when she left her native Ukraine to attend Alcorn State, but she says the help and support she received on campus have made all the difference.



Donzell Lee, dean of the School of Graduate Studies at Alcorn State, says adherence to high standards is a key to student success. "Effort matters, whether you are a student at this school or anywhere," he says.

A decade later, Lee received a letter from the same student. She had written to thank him for "being tough, because it made her a better student and better person."

Lee's commitment to help students succeed is the norm among faculty members at ASU. Professors and staff are personally invested in students. They greet them on a first-name basis, supply them with their home, office and cell phone numbers, and know what's going on in their social lives. They genuinely want students to dream bigger and do more.

Facts and figures about HBCUs

In 1965, in Title III of the Higher Education Act of 1965, Congress officially defined an HBCU as, among other things, an institution whose principal mission is the education of black Americans, is accredited, and was established before 1964.

HBCUs graduate far more than their share of African-American professionals. While the nation's HBCUs represent just 3 percent of American institutions of higher learning, they graduate nearly one-quarter of African-Americans who earn undergraduate degrees. Put another way, HBCUs graduate 75 percent more of their African-American students than do other schools.

Source: The United Negro College Fund

A gateway to opportunity

In some ways, this holistic, personal approach to student success is another fundamental aspect of all HBCUs. Prior to the Civil War, access to higher education for blacks was virtually nonexistent. Following the abolition of slavery, HBCUs became an avenue for blacks to attain an education that the mainstream institutions would not provide. The first HBCU, Cheyney University in Pennsylvania, was founded in 1837. Today there are more than 100 HBCUs in 22 states, and they are divided fairly equally between private institutions and state-supported ones. About 90 percent of the nation's HBCUs are four-year institutions.

HBCUs have always done more with less, educating disproportionate numbers of low-income and first-generation students, says Lezlie Baskerville, president and CEO of the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education (NAFEO).

"Still, HBCUs graduate 30 percent of black students who persist to graduation; 40 percent of blacks who obtain degrees in science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields; and 50 percent of individuals who become professors," she says.

Despite these successes, HBCUs continue to face uphill battles on many issues, including securing state funding. According to James Minor, a professor at Michigan State University and an expert on HBCUs, these institutions often have been the victims of state funding policies that are, in large part, based on formulas that perpetuate inequities in higher education. Simply put, most of the state money is going to public institutions with comparatively small minority

Alcorn State University

enrollments. At the same time, institutions most likely and able to serve minority students receive significantly fewer public funds.

"If the goal of higher education is to produce more citizens with postsecondary degrees, does it make sense to dedicate a larger portion of funding to institutions where the majority of students are overrepresented in public higher education?" Minor asks. "This way of funding perpetuates the degree-attainment disparity."

Minor uses North Carolina as an example. In that state, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and North Carolina State University both individually receive more state appropriations than all five North Carolina HBCUs combined. North Carolina A&T State University (NCA&T), an HBCU in downtown Greensboro, enrolls twice the number of African-American students as the other two universities combined, but it received less than one-tenth of their combined state appropriations in 2007 — \$88 million for NCA&T to a total of more than \$900 million for UNC-Chapel Hill and NC State. Examined another way, UNC-Chapel Hill and NC State received about \$15,700 in state appropriations for each student in 2007; NCA&T and Fayetteville State University (another HBCU) received \$7,800 per student, on average.

"The greatest education disparities today are among Latino and African-American students. The institutions most willing, most capable and most able to serve these groups are minority-serving institutions," Minor says. "From a public policy standpoint, it seems more reasonable to appropriately fund a sector of institutions that has a 100-year track record of educating African-American and Latino students."

Funding for HBCUs is also being pinched at the federal level. For instance, the White House budget proposal for 2009 seeks to cut \$85 million from the Strengthening Historically Black Colleges and Universities program. Michael L. Lomax, president and CEO of the United Negro College Fund (UNCF), calls that proposed cutback "disappointing," characterizing it as "a limited investment in an area that has been shown to produce such substantial returns as HBCUs." Lomax adds: "These schools are educating the teachers, health care professionals and public servants and scientists that every community needs and that will keep our nation globally competitive."

Minor echoes those sentiments.

"One of the most fascinating things about HBCUs is their philosophical approach to students. Worthiness isn't based on a GPA or a test score. Their philosophy is: 'We believe in human potential no matter what. If given the opportunity and the resources, you can be as successful as any person produced at any higher education institution.'"

Alcorn State University's Regina Rankin believes this philosophy, as well. It's her passion, she says, and it is the reason she remains tireless in her efforts to ensure



Regina Rankin, director of Student Support Services at ASU, insists that what she does to help Alcorn State students is more than a job; it's her motivation and her passion.

that every student who enters her office leaves believing just a little bit more in his or her potential.

"Our expectation is simple," Rankin says. "A student at Alcorn is going to do better than the general student population. It's our job to be signposts for students, to show them the way to maximize their worth and dare to dream."

Patricia L. Brennan is an Indianapolis-based writer and editor with nearly two decades of communications experience related to education.

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