

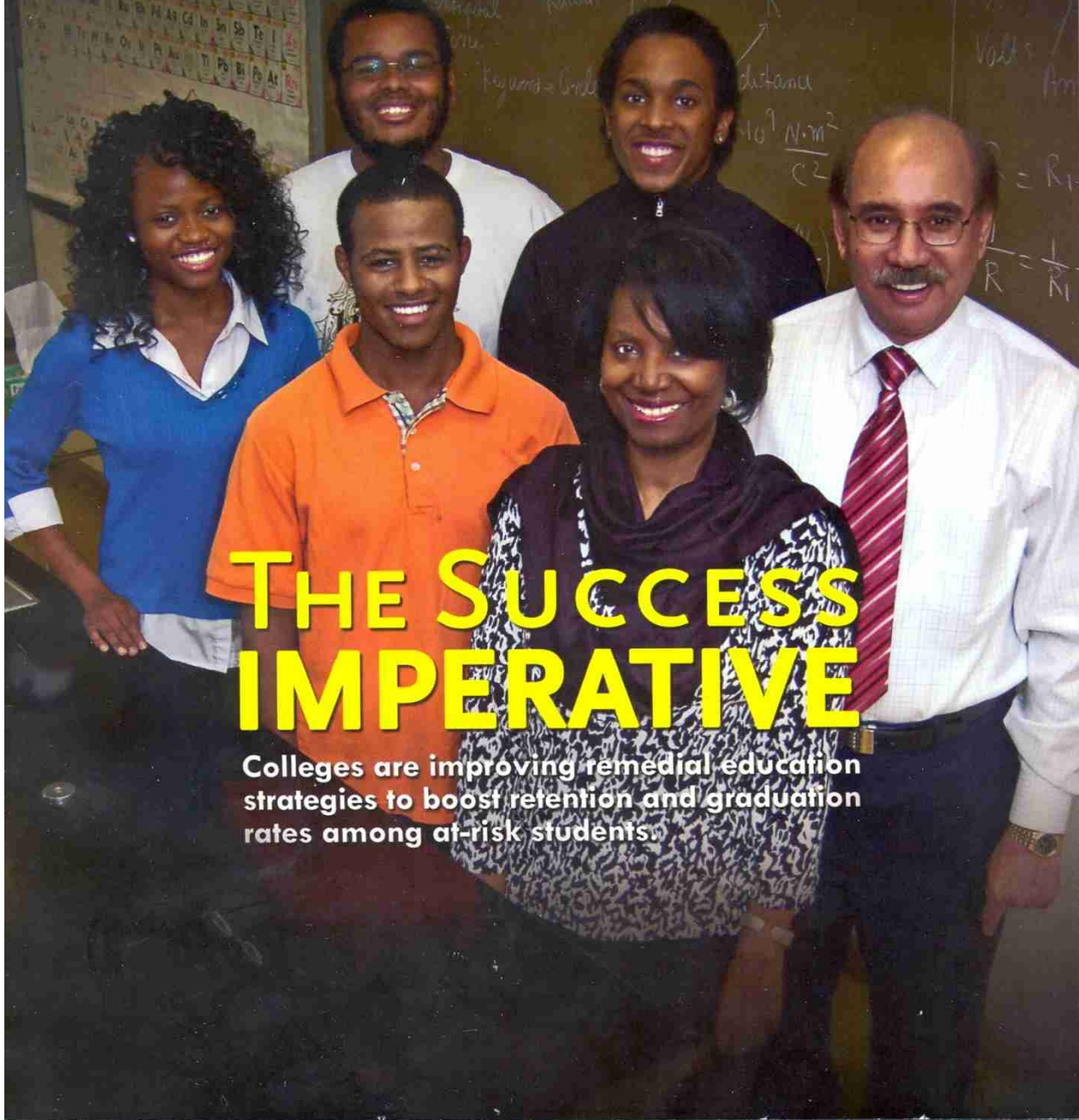
SPECIAL REPORT RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

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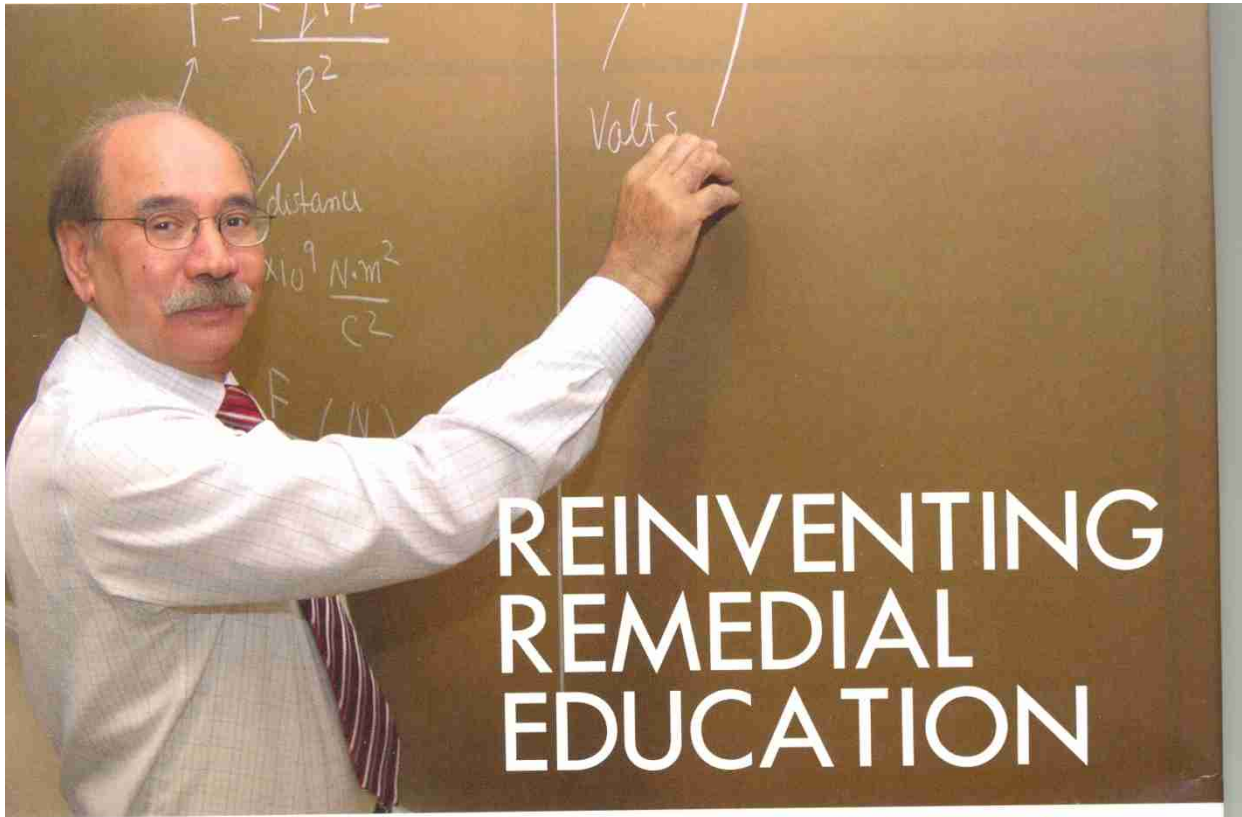
ISSUES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

October 15, 2009 • Volume 26, No. 18  
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## THE SUCCESS IMPERATIVE

Colleges are improving remedial education strategies to boost retention and graduation rates among at-risk students.



# REINVENTING REMEDIAL EDUCATION

Pushed to go beyond providing access, colleges refocus on developmental education to improve retention of at-risk students.

BY REGINALD STUART

**W**hen Kafayat Olayinka graduated from Spingarn High School in Washington, D.C., with a 3.5 grade point average, she was certain those kinds of grades would help her zip right through her college years.

Sure enough, Olayinka received a letter of acceptance from the University of the District of Columbia, along with a request that she take a battery of tests given all freshmen. Soon, though, she realized something was wrong.

"I couldn't solve problems in basic math," Olayinka says, recalling the summer of 2007 when she took the placement exams. "I was surprised. I thought I was going to pass the tests."

Despite the disappointing experience that made her doubt her readiness for college, Olayinka was notified she had been accepted into a special eight-week pre-college program at UDC called the Gateway Academic Program, or the GAP.

It wasn't until the end of the GAP, when Olayinka was tested again, that she learned her true academic story. She and her cohorts selected for the GAP had actually posted the lowest scores in English and math of all entering freshmen who took the original placement tests. By the end of the eight weeks of rigorous class-

room work aimed specifically at the deficiencies found in her first tests, she was tested again and her performance on the second tests cleared her to enter the school as a full-fledged freshman.

"By then it was too late to quit," Olayinka laughs, when asked why she didn't toss in the towel after learning how far behind she was at her college's starting gate. Today, the 21-year-old junior majoring in physics says she's doing "wonderful" in English and math and set to graduate in the traditional four years. Her grade point average is 3.0, and she's got the knowledge to prove it.

A decade ago, Olayinka would more likely have been another number among the thousands of students who enter college each year, only to drop out after learning they were not prepared for college work. Their schools — not all but far too many — were not prepared, or seriously interested, in bringing them up to speed and retaining them. Access, not success, was the operative phrase in past decades for many two- and four-year institutions. Remedial

**Left:** Dr. Daryao S. Khatri, a physics professor at the University of the District of Columbia, is the creator/coordinator of the school's Gateway Academic Program (GAP) for remedial education.

education, although widely used and disguised with other names, was rarely talked about for it could tarnish a school's reputation, if widely discussed.

Today, more and more colleges and universities are ditching the old stigma associated with remedial education, reinventing their remedial education and retention programs and, in the process, helping shore up America's higher education system.

Foundations are beginning to pour money into innovative remedial or developmental education programs. Evolving federal policy will hasten the change even more, educators say, if President Barack Obama's ambitious education goals for the next decade are to be met.

"Colleges never saw remedial education as their mission," says George R. Boggs, president of the American Association of Community Colleges and former president of Palomar Community College in California, echoing the sentiments of other educators. "They felt their job was giving an opportunity. If the student succeeded, great! Higher education has never been rewarded for the success of its students, only enrollments. A few years ago, starting with community colleges, we decided to change that paradigm."

### A Demand To Meet

There are several important factors behind the growing movement to enhance higher education's focus on remedial education as part of its core mission, advocates say. They range from the changing demographics of the college population, including an increasingly older population returning to college with math skills that need updating, to a job market that today requires better trained employees in math, language and technical skills than was the case a generation ago. There are a lot more people in college these days who can't do college work.

For sure, the need is there.

The American Association of Community Colleges estimates approximately 60 percent of students coming out of high school each year are not ready for college level work. "The American Freshman: National Norms for 2008," a widely respected survey of more than half a million entering freshmen, found 31.6 percent saying there

was a very good chance they will get tutoring help in specific courses." The survey is conducted annually by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles.

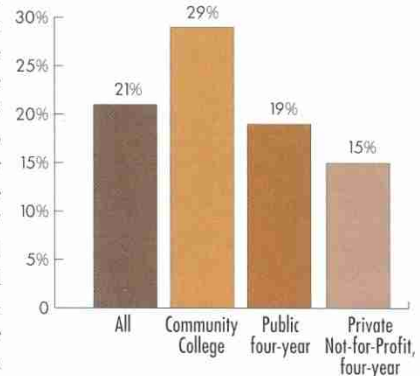
A narrower one-state study drives the point home. As part of its application process for admission, the California State University system requires all eligible students (those graduating in the top 33 percent of their high school class) to take placement exams that measure their "proficiency" in math and English. The 2008 freshman class tests results found 47 percent of the students needed remedial English and 37.2 percent needed remedial math. For example, a California State University system freshman would have to be able to perform math above the Algebra II level to take regular math 101. Students have one year to demonstrate "proficiency" for college-level work.

As important, people with a high school education or less are finding it close to impossible to find work that produces enough income to support themselves and their families, analysts say. The economy of the nation, and world, has changed to the point where nearly every kind of work — from auto mechanic to astronaut — requires higher levels of proficiency.

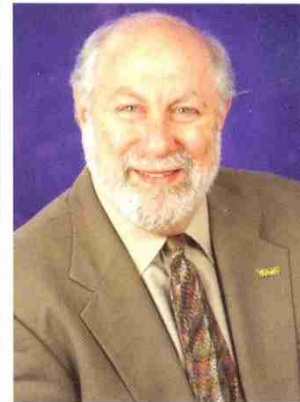
"No longer are we looking at ways to weed people out," says Jennifer Keup, director of the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. "Helping is becoming much more of the norm."

"We can't afford to not do anything," adds Carol Lincoln, national director of Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count, a nonprofit North Carolina-based organization that focuses on helping boost graduation rates at community col-

**Percentage of beginning postsecondary students who reported taking remedial courses in their first year, by control and type of institution: 2003-04**



SOURCE: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS, 2003/04 BEGINNING POSTSECONDARY STUDENTS LONGITUDINAL STUDY, FIRST FOLLOW-UP (BPS.04/06). NOTE: DATA REFLECT SELF-REPORTED REMEDIAL COURSES.



**Top left:** Carol Lincoln, the national director of Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count, says higher education institutions can't afford to not address the need for remedial education. **Top right:** Howard Shapiro, assistant vice president for undergraduate programs at Wayne State University, says just because remedial students are underprepared doesn't mean they aren't talented. **Left:** Jennifer Keup, director of the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, says helping remedial students is becoming more of the norm at U.S. colleges and universities.

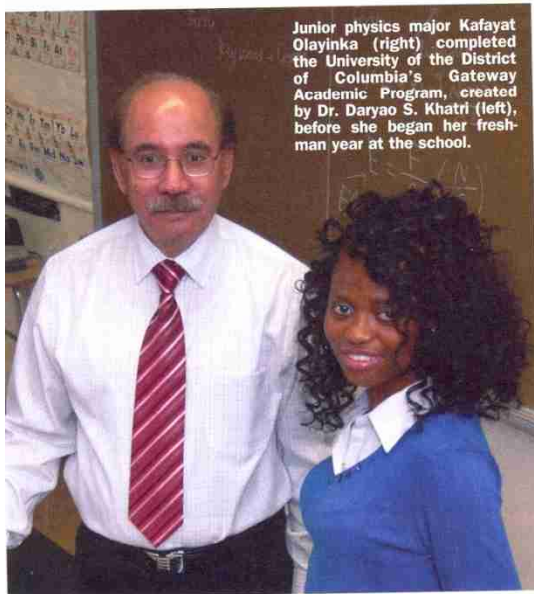
leges across the nation, particularly among low-income students and students of color.

Since its organization six years ago Achieving the Dream has rallied nearly two dozen foundations to pour million of dollars into projects at community colleges around the nation aimed at improving remedial education. Starting with the

**Percentage of degree-granting institutions offering remedial services, by type and control of institution: 1989-90 through 2007-08**

| Type and control of institution | 1989-90 | 1992-93 | 1997-98 | 2002-03 | 2007-08 | Change from 1997-98 to 2007-08 |
|---------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------------------------------|
| All institutions                | 76.6    | 78.5    | 76.7    | 72.5    | 72.4    | -4.2                           |
| All 4-year                      | 69.6    | 71.5    | 72.5    | 67.6    | 67.2    | -5.3                           |
| All 2-year                      | 87.2    | 88.8    | 82.2    | 79.5    | 80.9    | -1.4                           |

SOURCE: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS, 1989-90 THROUGH 2007-08; INTEGRATED POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION DATA SYSTEM; "INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS SURVEY" (IPEDS-IC 89-99), AND FALL 2000 THROUGH FALL 2007.



Junior physics major Kafayat Olayinka (right) completed the University of the District of Columbia's Gateway Academic Program, created by Dr. Daryao S. Khatri (left), before she began her freshman year at the school.

Indianapolis-based Lumina Foundation, which has invested more than \$60 million since 2002, the roster of key supporters has grown to include the Kellogg, Kresge, the Houston Endowment and Winthrop Rockefeller foundations, among others. In June, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation joined the crowd, announcing \$16.5 million in grants to 15 community colleges and five states.

### Intervene Early and Often

Remedial education has failed to maximize its potential in the past for an assortment of reasons, Boggs and other educators say. Most remedial education was redundant, taught much the same as repeating a high school class without a

larger game plan for success in mind.

Also, only recently have educators begun to realize remedial, or developmental, education is more than teaching the subject in which the student is deficient. These students need help in developing study, note taking and time management skills and need to learn the basics of why and how one goes to college. In the case of many older students, it's coming back to school with outdated skills that need to be updated or totally re-taught.

Advocates for remedial education seem to have identified the key elements for any school's efforts to teach underprepared students and retain them beyond their first year of college:

- Early intervention, before the freshman year begins and certainly during the freshman year, is essential to retention, educators agree. For example, a study by the California State University system of the 36,000 students who entered the system in the fall of 2001 found 70 percent of those who did not complete their remedial work during their first year of college never graduated. By comparison, 69 percent of those who did take remedial courses during their first year did graduate.

- Providing a student help in specific areas where they are lacking is more produc-

tive than simply teaching a whole course over. "These kids aren't blank slates, they bring information," says Dr. Daryao S. Khatri, a physics professor at UDC and one of three teachers who run the GAP. "So, you have to identify where the gaps are and fill those gaps. Remediation won't work if you teach them the same thing in the same way as in high school." That formula made the difference for Olayinka and other GAP students, he says.

At Wayne State University in Detroit, where about 30 percent of each freshman class needs some level of remedial work, Howard Shapiro, assistant vice president for undergraduate programs, echoes Khatri's team with an example from his school. "It isn't about math, it's the skills of critical thinking" that the school found students needed.

- Take nothing for granted, says Dr. Said Sewell, executive director of the Academic Success Center at Fort Valley State University, a historically Black institution. "We found many students had no understanding of the purpose of going to college and many did not see the value of it," says Sewell. This fall, the school started from scratch with its 1,800 first-year students.

Orientation was a full week, compared with a weekend in the past, with men and women in separate sessions most of the week. Goals and expectations were more clearly articulated and stressed by school officials. At the conclusion of the week, each male student was assigned a "sister" and each female a "brother" with a charge of helping their newly assigned "sibling" build healthy, honest relationships, says Sewell. Wednesdays have been designated dress for success days. The school has added weekly seminars for all first-year students. The sessions are to focus on time management, setting goals, how to navigate college, how to have a conference with a teacher and understanding what is required to graduate. As important, every freshman is now required to have a 15-hour class load (in past years, most students carried 12 hours), a policy that gives students more face time with teachers and graduates them in four years, says Sewell.

"This is the benchmark class," says Sewell, who was recruited by Fort Valley earlier this year after developing a successful retention program for Black male

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Percentage of beginning postsecondary students who reported taking various types of remedial courses in their first year, by control and type of institution: 2003-04

| Remedial course | All  | 2-year |                | 4-year     |        |                |            |
|-----------------|------|--------|----------------|------------|--------|----------------|------------|
|                 |      | Public | Private        |            | Public | Private        |            |
|                 |      |        | Not-for-profit | For-profit |        | Not-for-profit | For-profit |
| Any             | 20.5 | 28.6   | 17.6           | 8.3        | 18.6   | 15.2           | 10.6       |
| English         | 6.1  | 8.4    | 8.4            | 2.2        | 5.2    | 4.5            | 4.9        |
| Mathematics     | 15.5 | 22.3   | 13.1           | 5.1        | 13.9   | 9.8            | 7.9        |
| Reading         | 6.4  | 10.0   | 5.2            | 1.7        | 4.7    | 3.8            | 3.0        |
| Study skills    | 2.3  | 2.8    | 3.6            | 1.7        | 1.9    | 2.1            | 3.1        |
| Writing         | 7.9  | 9.6    | 5.6            | 4.8        | 8.1    | 7.3            | 4.9        |

SOURCE: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS 2003/04 BEGINNING POSTSECONDARY STUDENTS LONGITUDINAL STUDY, FIRST FOLLOW-UP (BPS: 04/06) INSTITUTIONS AND ADMINISTRATIVE TRANSCRIPT RECORDS REPORT HIGHER RATES OF REMEDIAL COURSE TAKING THAN DO STUDENTS.

**“We have a sizable number of students on learning support but the university understands our mission is to not only deal with the strongest students.”**

— Dr. Said Sewell, Executive Director, Academic Success Center, Fort Valley State University

students at the University of West Georgia. “Yes, we have a sizable number of students on learning support but the university understands our mission is to not only deal with the strongest students.”

For sure, there are critics of the new thrust toward remedial education. Educators say they hear scattered complaints from employers who say students are taking too long to graduate. Lawmakers from state to state question why governments are spending money twice for the same thing – an education in college for what was supposed to have been taught and learned in high school. There is also division among faculty and administrators at some schools, Wayne State among them, over whether four-year colleges are wasting their time focusing resources on remedial students.

The points have merit, remedial advocates acknowledge. Still, they say, facing the challenge with fresh ideas is preferable to continuing past practices.

“Frankly, it doesn’t cost us anything to do it,” says Wayne State’s Shapiro, noting students must still pay for their remedial classes. “It cost us (society) not to. If students come in underprepared that does not mean they are not talented. The early intervention is worth it.”

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## Remediation Best Practices

Advocates of reinventing college remedial education programs say these are some key ingredients to boosting remedial education success rates and retention:

**Intervene early:** Compel underprepared students to take remedial courses prior to starting their first year or as soon as they start their first year. The earlier the intervention the greater the likelihood a student can be helped and retained.

**Assume nothing and start with the basics:** Many recent high school grads are just clueless about college. In addition to academic prep, they need intensive coaching on expectations, goals, time management, study skills, taking notes in class, meeting with professors, and determining what courses need to be taken in order to graduate in a certain field. Many older adults who are starting college for the first time face many of the same hurdles and often bring outdated skills to school. A good foundation in the basics enables a student to learn better and retain what they are learning.

**Target remediation:** Using dental care as an example, don’t pull all the patient’s teeth if only one or two need work. The best remedial programs identify specific deficiencies and focus on them, rather than use a scatter gun approach of teaching an entire topic all over again.

**Test and retest:** Give students the same basic test at the end of the remedial program that they took at the start. That way, teachers can truly measure whether the student has mastered the shortcomings initially identified.

**Try learning communities:** Have the students stay in the same group as they change courses. This “linking,” as it is called, builds more community among the teachers and students and can build student confidence as they become more familiar with each other and their instructor(s).

SOURCE: THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE AND STUDENTS IN TRANSITION, ACHIEVING THE DREAM: COMMUNITY COLLEGES COUNT; AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES; ACADEMIC SUCCESS CENTER OF FORT VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY; GATEWAY ACADEMIC PROGRAM OF THE UNIVERSITY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.