



For the past two years, **DAVID URSO** has been a counselor and coordinator of student life at Lord Fairfax Community College (VA). He has been responsible for designing a new approach to on-campus student orientation that emphasizes the student as the owner of the educational process. A native of Pennsylvania, he earned bachelor's and master's degrees from James Madison University (VA).



For the past three years, **JOHN J. "SKI" SYGIELSKI** has been president of Lord Fairfax Community College. A strong supporter of student life at the college, he works closely with Mr. Urso and his peers supporting their efforts in many traditional and non-traditional ways and consistently challenging the student population to succeed in their academic pursuits. A native of Cleveland, Ohio, a first-generation college student himself, he earned degrees from several higher educational institutions in the Midwest.

By David Urso and John J. “Ski” Sygielski

Why Community College Students Make Successful Transfer Students

Tony

Tony, a 17-year-old high school graduate, earned a dozen college credits during high school through a dual enrollment program his high school arranged with his community college. However, Tony, like many of his friends, was unable to gain admittance into the state’s flagship institution and reluctantly decided to spend a year at his local community college rather than enrolling in another state four-year institution. This way, Tony and his friends thought, they would be able to get a year’s worth of transfer courses completed and save some money before they transferred to their first choice.

Having successfully completed his dual enrollment credits over the past two years, Tony carried a full-load his first semester and earned a 3.2 G.P.A. This success was particularly compelling due to the individualized attention he received at his community college, which helped spot a learning disability. After the disorder was identified, Tony was directed to specific grant-based resources on campus that were designed to help students like him excel.

In preparation for the second semester, he spoke with his advisor and college counselor to identify and register for the appropriate transfer courses for the next semester. Having gained confidence in his academic abilities during his first semester, he not only registered for another full load, but he also decided to find an opportunity to get involved with a group on campus. After exploring his options, Tony selected the Gay-Straight Alliance. The group was small, but its size allowed Tony to quickly assume leadership responsibilities in the organization.

Half-way through his second semester, based on his improving academic success and his increased sense of pride and confidence, he decided not to apply to local four-year schools with only one year of credits completed.

Tony decided it was the right choice to complete a second year at the community college and attain an associate’s degree before transferring to the state’s flagship institution of higher education. In addition to acknowledging the additional academic support that was available to him, Tony had come to understand that finishing his associate’s degree before leaving would make it easier to find a better paying part-time job during his time at the four-year school. This information combined with Tony’s comfort in the welcoming social climates of the community college persuaded him to run for President of the SGA—He was elected during his second year.

After working two jobs over the summer, he, and many of his new friends, returned to the community college in the fall. Later that semester he became a member of Phi Theta Kappa (International Honor Society for Community College students) and joined the Scientific Club and Big Brothers/Big Sisters in his community. After serious conversations with his advisor and counselor, he decided to change his career aspiration from information technology to pre-law and worked closely with a counselor from the out-of-state university his latest research revealed would best meet his needs.

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Tony graduated with honors that spring and transferred all of his coursework to his out-of-state university. The credit that transferred in helped Tony attain junior status. Many of Tony's friends went on to other four-year institutions in the state. Tony stayed in touch with these friends and was consistently energized by hearing that they were also experiencing great successes at the four-year schools based on their active participation in their community college.

Two years later, Tony again graduated with honors and had been accepted into a top-tier law school to pursue a future in environment law. While he formed many new life-long relationships with his classmates and faculty at the four-year institution, he was delighted to see so many community college employees and former classmates in attendance at his graduation.

Mary Ann

Approaching her 40th birthday, Mary Ann, an African-American woman, recently received a plaque celebrating her 20th anniversary of employment at the local textile plant where she, her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother had worked for a combined 75 years. In addition to her tasks in the laundry department, Mary Ann stocked shelves in the evening at a local discount store to support her three children (12, 14 and 16). A single mother for nearly 10 years, she looked forward to the day when she could quit her evening job and do the thing she really wanted to do—work at a near-by nursing home where her grandparents had recently become residents.

Shortly after returning from a well-earned week off from both her jobs, Mary Ann learned she, and most of the other 300 employees at the plant, would be laid off within the next three to six months. As a high school drop-out, Mary Ann wondered what she would do in a town whose unemployment was already the highest in the state. In fact, the

other businesses that supported the plant had slowly moved away over the past several years making the only other major employers in town the hospital and county government offices. As the news of this impending shutdown became a reality, she anxiously looked through the newspaper to see what positions existed and learned a high school diploma was the minimum qualification for all of them, with a majority requiring at least some higher education skill work. Realizing education was going to be the only way to help herself and her family achieve a new life, she decided to enroll in the local high school's G.E.D. program.

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Aware that she was the first in her family to even think about attending college, she contacted her minister who spent many hours over the course of the summer talking to her about the possibilities a college education could afford her and her family, especially since her mother became disabled and had recently moved in with her and her children.

Upon arriving at campus with her minister, Mary Ann learned more about what it would take to become enrolled in college courses. After listening to a counselor for several hours discuss the process and procedures of enrolling at the community college, Mary Ann decided to take the placement test and complete the necessary paperwork for financial aid. Now working part-time, she decided to enroll in two classes in the evening and one on Saturday morning while her mother watched her children. Several weeks later, she learned she qualified for both financial aid and a College

Foundation scholarship to help pay for tuition, books and some housing expenses.

Mary Ann's commitment was bolstered by her success in those initial three classes, and she enrolled as a full-time student the following semester. She remained such for the next two years. During this time, Mary Ann also worked up to three part-time jobs at once. This requirement left little time to become heavily involved in college life. However, she did become an active model to and mentor for several other single mothers who were just beginning their higher education experience. She received her associate's degree in Nursing (ADN) and, through an approved articulations agreement, was able to transfer all of her community college coursework to a local four-year institution to attain her bachelor's degree in Nursing (BSN).

Having received a full-scholarship to attend the local four-year university nursing program, Mary Ann met with an informed counselor who helped her navigate her academic roadmap. She enjoyed the stimulation and challenges of university life and brought her entire family to university events, exposing them to a new life filled with new possibilities: possibilities never experienced by any generation of her family before.

Two years later, a few months before graduating with her BSN, she interviewed for jobs in various hospitals and nursing homes in the area and was offered two job opportunities; one in the regional hospital and one in the local nursing home. Even though she could have earned three times what she was making just five years earlier without college degrees if she took a job in the hospital, she took the job at the local nursing home so she could be close to her grandparents. Finally, her long-time dream had come true.

Today, years after these initial successes, in addition to being a head nurse at the nursing home, she is delighted to help two of her three children with their coursework at the same community college, while she is completing her master's degree in nursing through an on-line higher education institution.

The previous stories represent a common paradigm shift at the community college level. Schools are shifting away from simply helping students register for classes and shifting towards helping them identify and become involved with all of the parts of the "traditional" college experience that are available to them.

Mary Ann and Tony, as community college students, represent half of the nation's first-time college freshman. The colleges' accessibility is facilitated by open admission policies and low tuitions. Consequently, community college enrollments reflect the rich diversity of the nation, and campuses are populated with people of all ages, ethnic and cultural heritages and socioeconomic backgrounds.

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Through these two highly-typical stories, the strengths of the community college transfer student can easily be extrapolated. Although this list represents only a segment of the extensive gifts this particular population brings, the following specific characteristics signify a great beginning on the quest to better understand them.

Leadership Skills

The 400,000 individuals who graduate annually from community colleges have the opportunity to become involved in their college governments, student clubs and associations, churches, local elementary and high schools, and in a wide variety of local civic and social organizations. With developed leadership skills at a community college, they are now able to actively participate in many causes with a high level of experience in similar organizations at four-year institutions or in nearby communities. Throughout the community college experience, the avenue is provided for the growth of self-confidence and willingness to become actively involved in the life of the college grows along with the passion for making a difference in their college, residence hall and local community. Often times, students volunteer to become more involved in the life of the college by sitting on department of studies advisory groups, various student groups, and many different on- and off-campus clubs and organizations. In many cases, these individuals emerge as both vocal and silent leaders and are able to rally others in ways that were developed while they were studying at their local community college.

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Perseverance

The stories of Mary Ann and Tony are very common within the community college environment. In Tony's case, he had to learn how to achieve his academic goals in new ways because of his learning disability. In Mary Ann's case, as in so many cases, she had to overcome obstacles of low self-esteem and learn how to be successful in college since she was the first in her family to attend. Both of these individuals found, in their community college, an environment that helped them succeed in student specific ways.

Focused Work Ethic

These individuals, at the start, were focused on an immediate personal goal before they connected with resources and came to understand what additional options were available to them. In Mary's case, she knew she would no longer be able to provide for her family without the income power of a higher education provides. As she surprisingly learned, she was able to juggle her studies with part-time employment and family responsibilities. Tony, on the other hand, was a traditional-aged student who learned many of the same values but was free from the added responsibilities a family brings. His additional pressures stemmed from the desire to experience adult independence while still living at home.

Time Managers

As this story illuminates, individuals like Mary Ann and Tony are exceptional time managers. Both students had to develop those skills because of the many responsibilities associated with studying, working and raising a family. Understanding what their instructors (and they) expect of them, they are able to allocate the appropriate amount of time for studies, student life and personal responsibilities.

Socially Involved

Like so many of the community college students today, Tony and Mary Ann had two years to develop and mature intellectually,

socially and personally. Academically they were able to learn how to think critically and become familiar with diverse thoughts and ideas. Socially, they were able to interact with many new and different types of individuals. And developmentally, they were able to experience a maturation process that afforded them new opportunities and insights into their goals and dreams. It was in the community college environment that they learned what it meant to be a responsible student and community member.

Learning Style

As older students entering the four-year school, generally, community college transfer students have had several opportunities (assessments, tutoring/mentoring sessions, seminars, advising, etc.) to develop their college success skills and understand their learning style and are able to apply it to their academic pursuits. Additionally, they understand learning outcomes and associated responsibilities.

Team Work

As older, more mature individuals, community college transfer students have learned how to work with a diverse group of individuals in different settings. At the traditional four-year school, students are exposed to peers of a variety of ethnicities, personalities, religions, and demeanors. At community colleges, these same differences are flanked by differences in age, academic ability and socioeconomic status. Community college students, in order to be successful, are required to find ways to work with students of all types to meet curricular objectives. These individuals not only promote changes in demographics at the four-year institution, they help others understand what it's like to live with, work with, study with someone different in gender, age, sexual orientation and/or life experiences. This runs separate from the mindset and life experience issue because these demographic changes impact the ability of the students to connect with one another just as instrumentally outside of the classroom as they do on the inside.

Individualized Attention

With smaller class sizes, these individuals received the necessary attention they needed to increase their self-confidence as participants and active members of the learning process. This increase in confidence allows them to engage fellow students, college employees and members of the faculty in meaningful academic and social discussions.

Life Experiences

When these individuals transfer into four-year institutions, they arrive with a new mindset, and a segment of life experiences to offer in third and fourth year classes at the new institution. The value of this mentality is that it has been developed differently than the peers who have been at the institution since coming out of high school. These additional experiences and energized mentality are useful, as the community college transfer students are able to challenge their peers to think in new and different ways as well.

Greater Involvement

Once engaged in a four-year institution, they want to be more connected to the greater community outside the college. As this translates to added value for the four-year, it means that the incoming students will find ways to contribute to the community at the school, but also to the local community that surrounds the school.

Resource Usage

From the start, community college students are often in greater need of on-campus resources to help them find success. This need challenges them to identify (and use) on-campus resource opportunities in a more thorough manner on a more regular basis. The development of this habit allows the students to follow a similar path of researching and utilizing available resources on the four-year campus.

Research Opportunities

Basic research skills are expected from all community college students. Research across the curriculum continues to be a foundation for this growth. Still, resources are somewhat limited for the schools, so students are challenged to be extra thorough and resourceful to find the information that they need. Therefore, when they move to the four-year school, this same commitment to being thorough holds true as they steer away from simply using the “first” answer they come to and commit instead to validating sources and using verifiable information.

Conclusion

The life journeys of Tony and Mary Ann are very different. Tony, a traditional-aged student, reluctantly entered his local community college because he was unable to prove, scholastically, that he was capable of handling the coursework at his choice

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flagship institution in the state. After spending four semesters at the community college, he not only proved he was able to compete academically, he also developed his leadership abilities. Mary Ann, though much older, was hesitant to enter her community college, but did so because she saw that the only way to get out of her current situation as a single-mother with growing responsibilities was to receive further education. Even though both of them are separated by over two decades in age, their outcome was the same.

Students transferring in from the community college system will not by any means have an easy path at the four-year university they move to next. They will find their share of struggles along the way. These may include things like adjusting to a significantly larger campus, finding success in classes that are markedly larger than the community college courses, and adapting to a new and different social scene. Transfer counselors at the four-year schools must integrate into their mindset the responsibility of both getting these students in the door through streamlined application processes and strengthened articulation agreements and helping them find success during their early time at their school. One effective technique to aid with the transition into the new institution would be the establishment of a transfer student organization on campus, specific residence halls, or specific programming tracks designed with this group in mind. In addition to being valuable in helping these students get the information they need to have in order to be successful, it also sends the message that they are an important and irreplaceable component of the campus community.

Final Thought

Today’s community college participants—the administration, faculty, staff, and the student population—are charged with raising the bar. For some students, this involves changing the expectation that the curriculum at the community college does not parallel the education available at the four-year schools. For the majority of students, this challenge also involves improving the expectations that the students have of themselves. The community college family works hard to help all of these students overcome low expectations and find success. In so doing, they establish habits for success in hundreds of thousands of students. These students, with new, higher expectations in tow, head off to four-year schools with the mindset that they have every tool they need to start changing the world.