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Pathways to Student Success at Fayetteville State University

T J. Bryan

Fayetteville State University, TJ.Bryan@uncfsu.edu

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T. J. Bryan

Even though Dr. T. J. Bryan's parents never finished high school, they always stressed the importance of education, believing that success in life takes hard work. Dr. Bryan took those words of wisdom to heart. On July 1, 2003, she was named chancellor of Fayetteville State University, the second-oldest public university in the Old North State.

Dr. Bryan attended graduate school at Morgan State, where she earned a master's degree in English. As a Ford Foundation National Fellow, she enrolled at the University of Maryland at College Park, where she earned a doctoral degree in English language and literature. Dr. Bryan joined the English faculty at Baltimore's Coppin State College in 1982. There, among her accomplishments, she established one of the nation's fourteen original Ronald McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement programs. At Coppin she was progressively promoted to department chair, dean of the Honors Division, and dean of arts and sciences at Coppin State, where she worked through 1998.

In 1998, she was selected by the thirteen-campus University System of Maryland to become its associate vice chancellor for academic affairs. In this role, she focused on faculty affairs, academic policy, and educational equity issues. She is the primary author of *Miles to Go: Maryland* and *The Road Taken*, two works that led to legislation in 2000 and 2001, creating a governor's task force and passing legislation in 2002 that provided a college intervention program and guaranteed financial assistance to low-income students.

In 2002, The Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education recruited her to the position of vice chancellor for academic and student affairs. She also served as chief academic officer and chief student affairs officer for the system. In 2003 she was appointed chancellor of the Commonwealth's fourteen state-owned universities. A year later, The University of North Carolina System appointed Dr. Bryan chancellor of Fayetteville State University.

Since Chancellor Bryan's arrival at FSU, enrollment has increased to approximately 5,500 students, and the student to faculty ratio has improved from 23:1 to 21:1. She has also made international education one of her priorities. Fund raising has increased in 2004-05—in large measure because of Investment 136, her initiative to call on alumni and friends to match the university's investment of \$136 for land on which FSU's predecessor institution—the Howard School—was erected in 1867.



PATHWAYS TO STUDENT SUCCESS AT FAYETTEVILLE STATE UNIVERSITY

Introduction

The United States is home to more than thirty-five hundred colleges and universities—two- and four-year; public, private, tribal, and proprietary; research and doctoral; comprehensive and liberal arts; serving historically Black, traditionally White, and Hispanic populations. Within this wide assortment of institutional types, a variety of degree programs is available to the millions of students who enter college each year. These entering students are by and large optimistic about the future and about their chances for success. Of course, they do not all enter college classrooms with the same level of preparedness for success, nor do they enter with the same academic experiences or credentials across the board. But they generally expect that they will do well and that they will obtain the preparation they need for the next phase of their lives.

But while the United States is considered in important ways the “land of opportunity” academically, our institutions are failing many of our students. Those students who enroll in college expecting success often find that they have not been well prepared for the rigors of higher education. Many of them wind up losing whatever confidence and aspirations with which they began their higher education careers when they encounter their first real academic challenges. For others, the problem is not a lack of academic preparation or confidence in their abilities but, rather, a lack of financial resources and a dearth of knowledge about pursuing student-aid opportunities. For some, the problem is at least threefold: lack of preparation, dearth of financial resources, and hardships posed by difficult family circumstances. These

burdens are particularly overwhelming for first-generation college students and students of color.

Data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics reveal the depth of the problem. In a study of first-time college students whose progress was followed from 1996 through 2001, only 29 percent of the students who began college in 1996 had earned bachelor's degrees by 2001. Ten percent had earned associate's degrees, and 12 percent had earned a certificate of some kind. Fourteen percent were still enrolled in college in 2001, but 35 percent of the students left without earning a degree.

If present trends continue, only sixty-eight of one hundred students who are currently in the ninth grade will graduate from high school on time. Only thirty-eight will go directly to college, and of those thirty-eight, only eighteen will end up graduating from college. For African American students, the numbers are even worse. Of one hundred ninth graders, just forty-nine will graduate from high school on time. Only twenty-seven will go directly to college, and of those twenty-seven, only nine will graduate.

Other studies—including the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies' examination of the Black worker's plight in the twenty-first century—indicate that the unemployment rate among African Americans remains twice as high as the unemployment rate of White Americans. The center's report blames this disparity not only on discrimination but also on differences in education. Speaking more broadly, unemployment data for the country indicate that, in 2001, when the country's overall unemployment rate was 3.5 percent for people ages twenty-four to sixty-four, 2 percent of college graduates were unemployed; for those who had only graduated from high school, however, the rate was 4.2 percent.

As a nation, we know how important earning a college degree is—not just for the individual who earns the degree but also for the family, the community, and society at large. Many organizations, including the Institute for Higher Education, have linked attainment of a college degree to participation in civic life and community service. U.S. Census data underscore the connection between a bachelor's degree and economic prosperity: individuals with bachelor's degrees earn almost \$1 million more during their working lives than do individuals with only a high-school education.

Sadly, as readily available as these data are, and in spite of the clear picture they paint of a nation divided, our country has often lacked the will to address the problems that lead to the disparities—the nagging issues of inadequate preparation, insufficient financial aid, and inadequate emotional

support, all of which can make attaining a degree an unrealistic goal for millions of students.

An article in the fall 2004 issue of the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* notes that in a study of graduation rates at forty-four of the largest historically Black public and private institutions in the country, two-thirds or more of all entering African Americans at twenty-four of these campuses dropped out. Yet, as someone who has spent most of my life either studying or working at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), I believe that HBCUs as a distinct and important subset of American campuses are uniquely equipped and positioned to deal with the challenge of graduating African American students.

The programs that many HBCUs have in place to enhance retention benefit not just African American students but also other groups of students as well, particularly students who are the first in their families to participate in higher education. I think it is important to keep this point in mind in any discussion of retention efforts because our society suffers when higher education systematically fails *any* group of students—whether they are African Americans, Appalachian Whites, Latinos, or Hmong refugees.

Not all of the news about African American education is disheartening; indeed, some of it is uplifting. U.S. Census data reveal that 17 percent of African American adults over age twenty-five held bachelor's degrees in 2002, compared to 11.3 percent in 2000 and 3.1 percent in 1960. Meanwhile, according to the National Opinion Research Center's "Doctorate Recipients from United States Universities: Summary Report 2003," 1,708 African Americans earned doctorates in 2003, an all-time high. African American doctoral recipients accounted for 6.5 percent of all doctoral-degree recipients in 2003, a 4 percent increase over 2002.

But the data are mixed, and, in any case, the numbers alone fail to convey the full story. There is an old saying that if you do not know where you are going, any road will take you there. For several decades, many of us in higher education have been wandering—always with good intentions but not necessarily with a clear destination in mind. We have often focused on data, that is, the numbers of students entering colleges, the numbers of students graduating, the length of time to degree, etc. Yet, we have too often been blind to what the data could potentially reveal to us because we do not always "connect the dots," and we have not always used the findings to make our institutions, whether they are HBCUs or traditionally White institutions, places of success for students. At this critical stage, however, our society seems to have reached a tipping point when policy makers and educators

are united around one very simple idea: at a time when an increasing number of college and university students are students of color, and at a point at which our nation's economic future is so closely linked to the success of our educational systems, we simply cannot afford to fail to graduate most of the students who actually enter our campuses.

The Bronco Way

My own institution has engaged in a number of student-success strategies over the years. Fayetteville State University (FSU), a constituent institution of the University of North Carolina, was founded in 1867 initially as a normal school for the education of Black teachers. In fall 2004, FSU enrolled 5,441 students, of whom 4,085—or 75 percent—were African American. In 2003–04, more than half of our undergraduate students received aid in the form of grants and scholarships, and over 43 percent of our undergraduates had student loans.

Many freshmen who enter FSU possess characteristics that are linked to high dropout rates; they are low-income, first-generation students with SAT scores below 900. An annual study of the sixteen campuses within the University of North Carolina indicates that Fayetteville State has one of the highest percentages of freshmen with family incomes below \$25,000.

We have attempted to ensure student success by establishing core values for everyone in the university community—students, faculty, administrators, and staff. Our sports mascot is the Bronco, and our mantra, “The Bronco Way,” summarizes our beliefs about the university and our roles in it. Our mantra appears on pole banners throughout the campus. Faculty members are oriented to “The Bronco Way” and share it with their students. We all invoke it whenever we can—at commencements, class meetings, student orientations, alumni gatherings, and in all manner of contexts.

The attributes of “The Bronco Way” are positive energy, unity, high expectations for all (no exceptions), and accountability. Positive energy means that we believe in ourselves, we believe in each other, and, most of all, we believe in the enduring strength of our learning community, Fayetteville State University, and that we stand together as a family. It means that we commit to a purpose that is higher than ourselves, and that, in spite of occasional disagreements, we come together to lift each other up through encouragement and support. Our common focus and sense of purpose enable us to set high expectations, the third tenet of “The Bronco Way.” Achievement is our highest priority. We set high expectations for each of our

students while also recognizing that they come to us with different learning styles, multiple intelligences, and different needs. We also set the highest expectations for our faculty, administrators, and staff. The final tenet is accountability, which means that we do the things we promise to do. We take responsibility for both our achievements and our failures. Our students are accountable for their performance, but we are accountable to *them*, and we are also accountable to each other!

Our premise is that adhering to The Bronco Way and making it our philosophy strengthens us as a community, for through these shared values, all of us at the university are connected in ways that would not otherwise be possible.

Fayetteville State University Retention Programs, Including Outcomes Data

We have implemented a number of initiatives to improve our retention and graduation rates. Some have been in place for a number of years, others are in their first year or still in the planning stages. Descriptions of some of our programs and summaries of their efficacy follow.

Project Cheer

We work extensively with incoming freshmen through Project CHEER (Creating Higher Expectations for Educational Readiness), a four-week, summer-enrichment program. CHEER provides an opportunity for admitted students to earn six hours of university credit (Introduction to College Algebra and Grammar and Usage); improve study skills through workshops; and meet other students before the regular academic year begins. In addition, participants receive a university-funded scholarship that covers the full cost of tuition and books.

To be eligible for CHEER, students must be North Carolina residents and have the potential to contribute to and gain maximum benefit from the program. Each CHEER student must attend an orientation session with a parent or guardian; attend and arrive on time for all classes and workshops presented as part of the program; and complete all assignments associated with classes and workshops. Students who miss more than three days for reasons other than *documented* personal illness or family emergency are withdrawn from the program and are required to repay the scholarship.

As the fall 2004 semester ended, the sixty-three students who participated in CHEER were performing better than the freshman class as a whole,

with an average grade point average (GPA) of 2.57, compared to 2.35 for the entire class. In addition, 69.4 percent of the students are on track to graduate in four years, based on earning at least fifteen credit hours in the fall, compared to 22.7 percent for the class as a whole. The CHEER students achieved these milestones despite having lower SAT scores and lower high-school GPAs than did the freshman class as a whole. Furthermore, of the twenty CHEER students who participated in the program in summer 2003, nineteen enrolled for the spring 2005 semester, a retention rate of 95 percent. Significantly, fourteen of the summer 2003 students are on track to graduate in four years.

University College

The University College implements a number of activities, beginning with summer orientation. Students receive information and are encouraged to take advantage of resources. They complete profile examinations and, based on the findings, are registered in specific courses. Students are placed in specific "Bronco Cohorts" and are likely to have three or four courses with other members of their cohorts. Students who need assistance are assigned to the Mathematics Laboratory and the Reading/Writing Center. They may be pre-selected for participation in the Student Support Services Program, which provides tutoring, academic counseling, and enrichment activities.

We implemented our Freshman-Year Initiative (FYI) in 1996, although individual components of the program had been in place before that time. Prior to full implementation of FYI, it had become increasingly clear that far more students were falling by the wayside than were graduating. FYI is based on several assumptions drawn from current research on the factors that lead to student success:

- Programs must address a variety of academic, personal, and social needs as they assist students in making the transition to college.
- Students must be both academically and socially integrated into an institution; they must feel as though they *belong*. This connection occurs as students discover congruence between their individual goals and the institution's mission and resources.
- Programs must incorporate intrusive advisement and early-alert systems during the freshman year, when students are most vulnerable to dropping out.
- Students must receive rapid, regular feedback from faculty members.

One simple step is to check attendance in classes and activities and to communicate to students that their presence and absence are noticed.

- To the extent possible, support resources should be coordinated by a single campus office; in our case, our first-year efforts are coordinated by the University College, the unit to which all freshmen are admitted. Primary components should be housed in a single building on campus.
- All components of the program should be assessed regularly, and the results should be used to make revisions when necessary.
- The campus chancellor or president and other high-level administrators must champion retention and graduation efforts.

Specific components of FYI include the following:

- *Freshman Seminar.* Students are enrolled in a two-semester sequence that covers a variety of topics designed to ease their transition to FSU: university history, policies, and procedures; study skills; health issues (particularly as they pertain to sexual matters); financial aid; and university services such as counseling and the library. The Freshman Seminar instructor meets with students weekly and advises all students in his or her seminar section. The importance of the seminar is that it provides a structure for monitoring student progress, intervening when necessary, and ensuring that students establish contacts with other university resources such as Career Services, the Library, Financial Aid, and alcohol- and drug-awareness programs.
- *Student Peers.* Freshman Seminar is the context in which students are linked to student mentors. These Peer Academic Leaders, or PALs, are available to students to offer assistance and are often critical members of a student's support group.
- *Faculty/Administrator/Staff Mentors.* Following an application process, freshmen are paired with volunteer faculty/administrator/staff mentors for a semester. Each student and mentor pair signs a contract that outlines the parameters of the relationship. The expectation is that the parties will meet on at least three occasions during the semester—for a minimum of one hour each time. As often as possible, the meetings occur off campus. Mentors receive a mentoring manual and training/orientation to enable them to perform maximally. Evaluations are completed at different points during the semester. After the semester,

students and mentors may continue the formal mentoring relationship with each other or may discontinue the program.

- *Early-Alert System.* Students who are experiencing academic difficulty are identified through midterm grade reports. Because of their frequent interaction with the students, Freshman Seminar instructors are well positioned to assist students who have questions or are identified through the Early-Alert System.
- *Freshman Counselors.* Freshman counselors communicate with students who have particularly serious academic or personal problems. They help students to resolve problems and refer them, when necessary, to the Counseling Center or another appropriate resource.
- *Assistance with Choice of Major.* Students declare their majors at the end of the second semester and are transferred to the appropriate department. If they do not meet the requirements of the majors they want to pursue, they continue to be served by the University College.
- *Monitoring of Progress.* Members of the University College staff monitor students' progress to ensure that they complete core-curriculum requirements and enroll in the general-education courses required in their intended majors.

The results of our Freshman-Year Initiative have been gratifying. The cohort of students who entered Fayetteville State in 1996 had a graduation rate of 23 percent; the cohort of students who entered in 1995, a year before full implementation of FYI, had a four-year graduation rate of 14.8 percent.

Our success with FYI notwithstanding, we noticed that too many students who were being retained through the freshman year were dropping out in their sophomore or junior year as the attention and targeted resources they received diminished. In fall 2004, we rolled out the Sophomore-Year Initiative (SYI) to combat "sophomore slump," a period when the enthusiasm of the first year has waned and students may feel isolated and overwhelmed by the college experience.

SYI includes many of the components that define FYI: mentoring, intrusive advisement for those students who need it, tutoring, and supplemental instruction. Experience and research tell us that many low-income, under-prepared students can excel in higher education, but they need very highly structured support systems to do so. We have a variety of such structures for first-year students; the goal is now to extend some of those resources to the second year. We are also working to create learning communities that will

link students together and integrate them more fully into the academic and social environments.

Eleven items from the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory that are directly related to the University-College experience were reviewed. In general, the Student Satisfaction Inventory results indicate that the University College is achieving its goal of assisting students in their transition to the university and providing advisement and academic support.

In all eleven areas, for each of the past four years, the satisfaction level of our students has been higher than the satisfaction level of the national group, with only two exceptions. The 2002–2003 freshmen rated the advisors' knowledge about requirements at the same level as the national group. The 2002 freshman class rated the item on students' sense of belonging above the national group by a difference of just +0.23, which was statistically insignificant. Differences in satisfaction between FSU students and the national group in the other nine areas are statistically significant (that is, they cannot be attributed to chance).

Bronco Men of Distinction Learning Community

Black males on college and university campuses are rapidly becoming an endangered species. Men of all races and ethnicities are now enrolled in higher education in lower numbers than are women. In our continuing effort to improve our retention and graduation efforts, we introduced the Bronco Men of Distinction learning community in fall 2004 to track selected male students from the freshman to the senior year.

Named in honor of the university's bronco sports mascot, the learning community is designed to serve first-generation males with at-risk characteristics such as low high-school GPAs and low SAT scores. We especially target for inclusion males who have participated in CHEER. The goals of the learning community are as follows:

- Awaken students to their personal strengths.
- Foster student achievement from a strengths-based perspective.
- Enhance student engagement through a strengths-based campus philosophy.
- Enable students to create actionable strategic plans that build on their strengths.

"Strengths Finder," at the core of the learning community, is used to train faculty and advising and residential staff. It is invoked to assess the

strengths of all freshmen in the learning community, each of whom receives a copy. Bronco Men are all enrolled in course sections that are set aside specifically for them; course pedagogies include experiential learning and active learning. In addition, each semester, Bronco Men engage in at least three advising sessions. At the end of the freshman year, Bronco Men should have earned thirty-four credits.

In the sophomore year, they continue to enroll in sections of courses that are set aside for them; their activities include career-planning and strengths-development retreats as well as professional forums and career fairs. In year three, Bronco Men engage in service learning and cross-cultural courses, and in their senior year, they participate in internships tied to their strengths and engage in capstone experiences grounded in strengths-based reflection.

The Bronco Men are outperforming the other African American males in the freshman class (although somewhat below the class as a whole, which is 67 percent female). They earned a mean semester GPA of 2.21, compared to 2.11 for other African American freshman males. Of the Bronco Men, 18.9 percent were on track to graduate in four years, compared to 12.2 percent for other African American males in the class (and compared to 22.7 percent for the largely female class as a whole). The Bronco Men earned an average of 12.26 hours for the fall semester, compared to an average of 11.75 hours for the rest of the class.

The Pilot Gateway Program

The Gateway Program is a learning-living initiative designed to provide an opportunity for students to improve academic performance while living in an on-campus residential environment. Throughout the academic year, the students receive targeted academic support. Of the students in the pilot program, 73 percent have improved academically.

Experimental Programs at FSU

FSU recently implemented the following initiatives, which are promising, but for which we do not yet have outcomes data.

Bronco Parents and Family Association

Initiated in fall 2004 by the Academic Student Services Center, the Bronco Parents and Family Association (PFA) promotes and enhances opportunities for parents of our students to communicate, participate, and establish a sense

of community with one another and with FSU faculty, staff, and administrators. Consisting of Fayetteville and area parents and families, the PFA's board seeks input from parents and families from across the country. Parents and other family members may volunteer for board membership at any time during their students' university careers. Once appointed by the associate vice chancellor for student academic services, board members serve terms of up to five years. The board meets twice annually to conduct the business of the association, once during the fall and once during the spring semester.

With input from the board, we plan to publish a handbook for parents that includes information about life at FSU. It will also include a campus map, a list of helpful telephone numbers, miscellaneous information about the campus and community, and the academic calendar.

Three hundred parents and family members attended the initial meeting, which was convened during summer orientation.

The FSU Graduation Project

The Graduation Project identifies students who left the university in good academic standing and were close to completing their bachelor's degrees. The purpose of the project is to encourage these students to return so that they can complete their degree requirements. Nonenrolled students with a minimum GPA of 2.00 and with ninety earned credit hours comprise the target population.

Sophomore Summer I

The most commonly stated reason for poor academic performance is an unbalanced division between work and school commitments. The primary function of Sophomore Summer I, which was implemented for the first time in summer 2005, is to provide students, at the end of the freshman year, with strategies that lead to their uninterrupted continuation in good academic standing at the university. The program is open to all second-year students who have not earned thirty hours or have below a 2.0 GPA. Program participants are housed in a residence hall and enroll in one or more Summer School Session I courses. Peer tutors provide academic support; the ratio of students to tutors is 5:1. Through a structured workshop on time management, students develop their own blocked schedules to include university courses and informational workshops; study time (such as individual study, study groups, peer tutoring, and computer-assisted learning); recreation opportunities; tours; enrichment activities; and employment. Assessment strategies include a pre- and postprogram student survey, and all workshops and

activities are evaluated. In addition, advisement counselors continuously evaluate the program. Documentation of workshops and activities is provided through videotaping, publicity, sign-in sheets, and photographs.

Conclusion

As Hunter R. Boylan, director of the National Center for Developmental Education and a professor of education at Appalachian State University, has observed, successful retention efforts must focus on surrounding students with support, thereby making it difficult for them to “escape our grasp.” My colleague at FSU, Jon Young, senior associate vice chancellor for enrollment management, keeps a quotation by John Dewey on his wall that serves as a good reminder that the conditions we create will often determine whether our students fail or succeed: “We never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment. Whether we permit chance environments to work, or whether we design environments for the purpose makes a great difference.”

Students must not believe that they are at their own risk to sink or swim; rather, they must believe that the learning community will encourage and teach *all* students to swim. The conditions we have created at FSU encourage students to recognize and build on their strengths, and the environment provides structure that prepares students to take responsibility for the entire learning process—their temporary failures as well as their eventual successes.

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