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The authors outline how the University College (UC) model can serve as an effective vehicle for others.

The University College Model: A Learning-Centered Approach to Retention and Remediation

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The critical need for improving academic and support services for first-year, full-time students is well documented in the literature. As Vincent Tinto (1996) observed, “Nearly 57 percent of all drop-outs from four year institutions leave before the start of their second year” (p. 1). Thus many students fail to make an effective transition from high school through higher education. Often the transition issues include academic underpreparedness, but increasingly researchers are aware of socialization and economic factors that play into the equation. These transition issues represent a major dilemma for state institutions, especially those serving traditionally under-represented populations, which represent a growing portion of our future enrollments. If these students do not resolve their transition issues during their first year and drop out, everyone loses. The loss of these students costs universities and colleges in financial terms and also in time wasted. The loss to the student in terms of quality of life and to the nation in terms of lost potential and productivity is immeasurable. Research findings have repeatedly demonstrated that the first semester is the most crucial for the new student. If the student makes it through those first months, he or she will more than likely return for the next semester (Tinto, 1993; Christie and Dinham, 1990). If the student makes it successfully through the first year, he or she will more than likely return for the second. Thus the first year, more specifically the first semester, is critical for student survival.

For many students, particularly those from low-income households, a successful first-year experience derives from a combination of factors:

improving academic skills, completing required paperwork (especially for financial aid and housing), developing college-level social and study skills, and achieving a new level of maturity and decision making that will help them make the transition into upper-division life. A primary ingredient is the development of positive habits (for example, going to class) that greatly enhance their college survival. The University College (UC) at Prairie View A&M University has developed a multifaceted, highly intrusive, “tough-love” approach to this dilemma that simultaneously addresses a number of first-year problems and offers a proven model that has been successfully disseminated to other start-up programs throughout the United States. This chapter outlines the history and structure of the award-winning program, demonstrates how it continues to ensure the success of hundreds of students annually, and offers elements that can be transferred to other settings to deal with comparable problems.

The Institutional Setting

Founded in 1876 as the second-oldest public institution of higher learning in the state of Texas, Prairie View A&M University (PVAMU) is a HBCU in rural Waller County, roughly forty-five miles from downtown Houston, and is part of the Texas A&M University System. The university’s original curriculum was designed primarily for the preparation of African American teachers, but the institution’s curricular range expanded with the passage of the Second Morrill Act of 1890, which designated the campus as a land-grant college. Over the years, the addition of new undergraduate and graduate programs has pushed total enrollment past 8,000 students, including approximately 1,500 first-time, full-time freshmen. At present, the university offers a wide variety of programs on its main campus and has recently begun expanding its presence throughout the state via on-line distance learning.

As PVAMU grows in complexity and adds more doctoral programs, the university still remains committed concurrently to serving under-represented and underserved populations as a part of its mission, believing that access and excellence can coexist in an institution. The student undergraduate body is approximately 90 percent black, 6 percent white, 2 percent Hispanic, and 2 percent Asian, Native American, or “other”; 94 percent of all students are classified as in-state residents, with over 40 percent coming from the greater Houston metropolitan area.

For Fall 2003, over 50 percent of the incoming freshman class were admitted provisionally, meaning they did not meet the university’s minimum academic admission requirements of a high school GPA equal to or greater than a C+ (2.50 on a 4.00 scale) and an SAT score of 820 or ACT score of 17. Furthermore, approximately 60 percent required at least one developmental (remedial) class based on the state-mandated Texas Higher Education Assessment (THEA) test. For Fall 2003, 88 percent of all undergraduates

received some form of financial aid. Grants constituted 62 percent of all financial aid, followed by scholarships with 24 percent (PVAMU University Factbook 1997–2002). The Fall 2003 freshman class included 56 percent first-generation college students, most of whom had graduated from Houston-area high schools, which had less than ideal facilities and services. Counseling is often limited in such secondary schools, and many students enroll in the university without adequate knowledge of financial aid requirements and procedures. And coming from homes with no history of college attendance, parents lack knowledge of the processes. Thus the students coming from such environments find college requirements daunting, if not overwhelming.

The UC Model and the Student-Centered University

During the late 1990s, a spate of reports, including two sponsored by The Carnegie Foundation and the Kellogg Commission, called on universities to re-examine their modes of operation to become more student-centered (Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University, 1998; Kellogg Commission, 1997). Patricia Bayer Richard and her colleagues put it succinctly in their 1999 report that the “ethical imperative that guides the student-centered university is that students be treated as *ends* in themselves, not as *means* to other ends such as the institution’s financial health or the well-being of departments” [emphasis added] (Richard and others, 1999, p. 1). Living in a formula-driven world that counts “bodies” and credit hours, too often campus officials become budget-focused rather than student-focused, as the spiraling costs of higher education (payroll, repairs, and infrastructure, for example) skyrocket. Students too often become viewed as a means for getting a larger share of dwindling state higher education dollars, as quantity becomes more important than quality for administrators focused on formula funding. The mission becomes blunted by the means devised to fulfill it. The student-centered institution should seek instead to move resources into activities that would improve student learning and students’ ability to remain in college rather than becoming overly fixated on improving the resource base as a priority. Learning, in fact, is the priority.

The UC model is an excellent focal point around which to develop the student-centered university because there the twin elements of *service learning* and *learning communities* can serve in a symbiotic relationship. In its unique position, then, the UC model is principally able to facilitate the promotion of student-centeredness, particularly in that its personnel “are free of departmental allegiances and neutral about disciplines. As a result, they can promote students’ genuine exploration and discovery in choosing courses and in planning internships, study abroad, undergraduate research, or other undergraduate research, or other educational experiences” (Richard and others, 1999, p. 3). In addition, as UC personnel work with the incoming students, they are well placed to have a broader perspective on university life and

work as change agents in identifying new-student needs early and recommending practical responses before disaster occurs. Furthermore, research findings suggest that poorly prepared black students have different degrees of retention rates at black and white universities, and Prairie View (an HBCU) is in an excellent position to achieve high levels of success with such students—success that might not be possible at other types of institutions (Sherman, Giles, and Williams-Green, 1994; Suen, 1983; Watson and Kuh, 1996).

According to its mission statement,

[Prairie View's UC is] committed to providing an academically-focused, student-centered, supportive, structured environment for the entire University community *with emphasis on freshmen* [emphasis added]. This environment is sharply focused in its activities on improving matriculation, retention and graduation rates, increasing student success in academics and facilitating a smooth transition to the world of higher education (University College Strategic Plan 1999–2004).

The UC mission, in turn, directly supports the university's broader mission, which includes doctoral programs: providing excellence in education, research, and service.

As noted earlier, PVAMU admits freshman students from a wide spectrum of academic preparedness, from the totally prepared honors student entering an honors program to the ill-prepared, first-generation college student with demonstrated academic deficiencies. Despite the diversity of academic preparedness of its incoming students, however, PVAMU remains strongly dedicated to attaining and sustaining intellectual rigor in all its programs. Standards will not be sacrificed to the detriment of quality. The UC model supports this broad effort by providing all students who must proceed through this program with an environment that focuses primarily on academics and student success, regardless of the individual student's entry level of preparedness. These UC programs, then, can and do benefit *all* entering freshmen, regardless of their level of academic or social preparation, but they have special relevance for the underserved or historically by-passed student. However, all students ultimately must achieve a minimum level of proficiency before graduation.

Birth of the UC Model

The UC story at PVAMU begins in 1995, when the Texas legislature was expressing major concern over the growing number of underprepared students enrolling in state colleges, the escalating cost of state-mandated remediation, low freshman-to-sophomore retention rates, and the state's low graduation rate—in short, escalating costs with subpar results emanating from the effort. Colleges and universities in Texas and around the country were expending considerable resources, time, and effort on enhancing academic

and social and personal development programs targeted at ill-prepared freshmen. As graduation rates fell and the public policy debate increased, institutions of higher learning began to front-load scarce resources in an attempt to retain increasing numbers of poorly prepared students through the critical freshman year. Depending on the state and the type of institutions involved, between 16 and 40 percent of all students arriving at public colleges and universities during that era were underprepared or ill prepared to do the academic work of their selected institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 1991). In 1986, the report titled “A Generation of Failure, a Case for Testing and Remediation in the State of Texas” indicated that Texas was at the high end of that national statistic, with approximately 40 percent of all Texas freshmen underprepared to do college-level work in all areas. This finding led to the development and implementation of the legislatively mandated Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP), which subsequently morphed into the Texas Success Initiative (TSI), whose primary purpose was to provide a *diagnostic* function for these ill-prepared students. The TASP-mandated testing was for diagnostic purposes for all college students, and appropriate remediation or developmental education was to be provided by the institution, with modest state support, in three major areas of deficiency: reading, mathematics, and writing.

Unfortunately, the cost of such remediation rose exponentially, and anticipated student retention and graduation rates did not improve at a rate commensurate with the efforts and resources put forth. This was a common story, not only in Texas but nationally; California and Florida offered other prototype states. In short, the program was not a success, and it was consuming scarce resources at a ferocious rate, which won the program few advocates at either the campus or legislative level. State demographer Steve Murdock points out, in his report “Texas Challenged,” that college graduation rates per capita in Texas, despite the TASP remedy, still trailed the nation (Murdock, 1995). Responding to the lack of cost-effectiveness, some impatient state lawmakers argued that TASP testing should be eliminated and remediation mandated. However, it was questionable whether eliminating diagnostic testing would solve the problem. Furthermore, without specific developmental assistance, as diagnosed through TASP, significant numbers of ill-prepared Texas students would have been denied access to higher education. Failure to assist these students, then, would ultimately have reduced the total number of college graduates, which was a state priority in its “Closing the Gaps” mandate, essentially directed toward increasing the numbers of minorities entering and graduating from college. So in 1995, there was an obvious, serious need for more innovative, successful programs that could provide effective, cost-efficient, timely academic and nonacademic assistance to underprepared or transitionally challenged college students in their first year of college. The climate was ripe to develop the UC model, not only in Texas but elsewhere.

In 1995, former PVAMU president Charles A. Hines proposed such a program to the Texas state legislature. He envisioned a pilot bridge-to-college summer program, located on the PVAMU campus, that would address these concerns; the Academy for Collegiate Excellence and Student Success (ACCESS) was born, with a primary mission of preparing students for college. As the first of the tripartite transition programs at Prairie View, ACCESS addressed in its summer preparatory program the “What’s college really like?” question for needy students, primarily with no past family experience of higher education. Students attending summer ACCESS were not required to attend PVAMU, but many did and still do.

ACCESS was designed with two primary components: (1) an intensive, residential, summer, precollege academic component often referred to as an academic boot camp encompassing a tough-love theme, and (2) a holistic, centralized series of student-support-services component during the freshman year. ACCESS has three significant functional elements: (1) academic enhancement, (2) effective advisement, coupled with highly centralized support services, and (3) a structured, academically focused residential environment.

The three functional elements are found in both components but with a different priority and emphasis. In the summer boot camp component, academic enhancement is the primary emphasis; advisement and support services are secondary. The subsequent freshman component was officially established as the Panther Learning and Community Experience (PLACE) in 1998; the advisement and support service was primary and enhancement secondary.

In 1996, the first ACCESS summer component was implemented. That initial program lasted eight weeks, but in subsequent efforts the ACCESS summer component has been shortened to seven weeks. The initial class was made up of seventy-five students; that number has varied over the years, but the average has been one hundred students. The program is extensively marketed, and normally there are three to five applications for every available seat. Students are selected for attendance by a formal process, which includes submitting a scored application form and three letters of recommendation and being interviewed. The application and recommendations center on eight noncognitive variables developed by William Sedlacek to predict academic success for a variety of special groups, including African American and international students (Ting and Sedlacek, n.d.):

- Positive self-concept
- Realistic self-appraisal
- Demonstrated community service
- Knowledge acquired in a field
- Successful leadership experience
- Preference of long-range goals over short-term, immediate goals and ability to defer gratification to attain goals

- Ability to understand and cope with racism
- Availability of a strong support person

Prior to entry, selected participants sign a contract agreeing to abide by the program rules, including a strict curfew and the prohibition of personal phones, pagers, video games, and TVs. The development of positive habits and a strict focus is evident from day one.

Study skills and self-discipline are stressed. Those two elements are often lacking in ill-prepared, first-generation college students. As part of the research used in developing the ACCESS curriculum, the components of the state-mandated TASP examination were carefully scrutinized. Analysis of comprehensive test data showed that PVAMU students mirrored other Texas students in terms of weaknesses in problem-solving and critical-thinking skills. These findings prompted the ACCESS coordinators to build the program's curriculum around a constructivist model emphasizing the three basic content areas of math, reading, and composition, while concentrating on learning strategies to address the demonstrated weak skills of problem solving and critical thinking.

Faculty for the ACCESS program are primarily college instructors. Carefully selected individuals received a modest pay supplement in the spring prior to the first ACCESS class in 1996, which was intended to compensate for developing their initial curriculum and attending a variety of training sessions. Since the initial class, however, the teachers have not received supplemental pay, but they have continued to update their curricula and attend training sessions in the spring, including workshops on constructivist methodologies and learning styles.

Tough love and discipline are injected into the program from the day the student starts the program. ACCESS students are in class daily from 8:00 A.M. to 3:00 P.M., taking courses in math, composition, reading comprehension, critical thinking, and problem solving. The students also attend structured study halls five nights a week, which include individual tutoring, assisted small-group study, and three workshops weekly in math, study skills, and speech and articulation. The summer component includes an active advisement and counseling element that uses the services of professional advisers and graduate and doctoral students. These individuals are each assigned to a small group of ACCESS participants to whom they administer the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI), the Holland Self-Directed Search Test, and the College Adjustment Scale. Each adviser then meets at least twice during the seven weeks with each student to interpret and discuss the results of these tests. As part of the summer component, ACCESS students receive TASP or THEA preparation and take the exam at the end of the program. Helping a student pass TASP and exit remediation expedites the ACCESS student's completion of his or her degree program and reduces the long-term costs to the state—to the delight of policymakers.

ACCESS students also participate in leadership training, social and personal development activities, and cultural enrichment experiences on the weekends. These activities are geared to broaden underdeveloped students' social and intellectual horizons and force them to use the critical-thinking and problem-solving skills they are exposed to and are developing in the classroom. These activities have included attendance at the "Challenge Works" experienced-based leadership training program at Texas A&M University in College Station, participation in Peter Loew's "Success Seminar," a visit to a foreign consulate, participation in a mock Mars Mission, attendance at performances by the Houston Symphony Orchestra and the traveling company of the Broadway musical *The Lion King*, enrollment in courses in etiquette training, attendance at professional sporting events (each sporting activity includes a behind-the-scenes meeting with the team's business management to discuss careers in sports that do not involve playing the game), and visits to a variety of museums and other educational and cultural activities. Most first-generation students have not experienced any of this in their precollege lives.

Such activities, although vulnerable to criticism from policymakers and funders, are essential in developing the base for a successful college experience. Each summer ACCESS session concludes with a two-day trip to Austin and San Antonio that includes a special visit and briefing at the state capitol, which subtly develops civic responsibility. In 2004, the students' experience also included a week's journey through Alabama, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Georgia to personally observe and study firsthand the events leading to major civil rights educational and voting reforms—another experience that broadens students' sense of responsibility and value of education. All in all, the students are exposed during this seven-week experience to a disciplined environment with a rigorous academic preparation program and a broadening of their leadership and cultural horizons. Such experiences develop positive habits and exposure that prepare them to enter a formal college program.

Students who attended the first ACCESS summer program and ultimately matriculated at PVAMU became the initial ACCESS freshman component. The 1996 initial program provided minimal counseling, tutoring, and a small number of other support services for ACCESS students who attended PVAMU for their freshman year. By the end of that first year, the criticality of this component to student retention was realized. The results from the first two ACCESS classes suggested that what was done for those students as freshmen (or before college entry) could make or break their college careers.

During the first two years of the ACCESS program, the services aspect provided by the freshman component grew significantly. The most critical service added for the students was academic advisement provided by professional advisers (PAs). Serious concerns arose initially concerning the quality of the advisement many of the ACCESS freshmen were receiving

from the university at large. The ACCESS staff knew the students' needs very well after spending seven intensive weeks during the summer with them on a daily basis, and it was quickly concluded that incoming students were often advised based on their degree *plans*, with little initial attention given to their high school records or test scores. As a result, these students were often placed in classes that fit their degree plans but were beyond their skill level. In short, they were provided with what they *wanted* but not what they *needed*. As the program progressed into its second year, the ACCESS staff (rather than the colleges) became the official academic advisers for the ACCESS students during their freshman year. This effort introduced a certain level of concern by the colleges, which sometimes used the advising experience as a recruiting avenue for their programs. ACCESS also became the first group or department to register and confer with these students privately in offices, as opposed to the more common centralized arena-style registration provided to the rest of the school. Following ACCESS's successful lead, the graduate school and then all other colleges and schools at PVAMU adopted decentralized, extended registration for students. The advisers also served as more focused, centralized points of contact and needed referral for individual student support services' concerns dealing with such diverse areas as tutoring, financial aid, housing, roommate disputes, and medical problems. The simple matter of decentralizing registration—focusing more on student skill levels than degree needs and assisting in student services for those largely first-generation college students—proved beneficial in a short time.

Financial aid concerns, particularly with these first-generation college students, surfaced as a bottleneck that often eclipsed academic needs as a serious initial obstacle to freshman success and retention. With 88 percent of the institution's students receiving financial aid, the issue is major. McCleod and Young, in Chapter Five, also found dealing with financial aid and its burdensome procedures a problem for this cohort of students. Research findings have long suggested that ability to pay is a chief and growing concern during the first-year experience (Cabrera, Stampen, and Hansen, 1990; Cabrera, Nora, and Castaneda, 1992; McGrath and Braunstein, 1997), although further investigation into the exact relationship between retention, academic success, and financial ability is needed. Many Prairie View students arrived at the university with little or no knowledge, or point of information, as to how the complex financial aid mechanism worked, which resulted in many individuals either losing their financial aid package due to misinformation or poor grades or not processing the paperwork in a timely fashion. Students unfamiliar with the financial aid process obviously needed more personalized hands-on assistance in this complicated area than the existing universitywide personnel would normally be able to provide with their limited numbers of staff, universitywide mission, and large number of students.

In response, ACCESS increased its targeted services in the areas of financial aid and housing, both difficult areas for new students. By assisting the

students in a more intense, personal manner with the appropriate paperwork and by ensuring their timely submission of documents, program counselors were able to improve student satisfaction with the financial aid process and remove some of the burden from other campus offices, which concurrently increased the retention rates for these students. Further, program leaders developed a customer-friendly, published directory of necessary services available both on and off campus that students could use as needs arose. As the program progressed, ACCESS students began to bring their non-ACCESS classmates to the ACCESS offices for assistance, themselves serving as one of the best marketing tools to weave word of this new program into the fabric of the university.

The Expanded Concept

The first 1996 and 1997 summer ACCESS cohorts exceeded the statewide averages in the state TASP categories of “exiting remediation within one year” and “retention to the sophomore year.” These early successes and the apparent need of many incoming freshmen for the proven services provided by the ACCESS staff prompted the president to implement an expanded pilot program that extrapolated the summer ACCESS concepts across a larger number of freshmen, representing a broad academic cross-section of the total incoming 1998 freshman class. Funding was successfully sought from the Houston Endowment, a private organization, to implement this expanded freshman pilot program, labeled PLACE (described earlier). Once all considerations were in line, PLACE also became the freshman component for the summer ACCESS students. ACCESS '98 students attending PVAMU and three hundred other freshmen initially participated in this new program. All participating students signed a written contract similar to that signed by the summer ACCESS students. The contract outlined in specific terms what the program would provide the students (accessible advisement, academically focused resident hall, in-hall academic enhancement opportunities, for example), and it detailed the student’s responsibilities (attend class, see an adviser regularly, attend the enhancement activities, and so on). In other words, both parties were provided with a written set of rights and responsibilities. Although it had no formal, legal sanction, it did implant in the students’ minds the seriousness of their academic undertaking, thereby providing more impetus to the agreement being entered into by both parties.

The PLACE program used the same basic elements that had proved so successful with the summer ACCESS students: (1) advisement by PAs, (2) academic enhancement, and (3) centralized support services.

Advisement by PAs. The ratio of advisees to PAs was 100 to 1, which was comparable to the summer ACCESS model. The PAs worked flex-time to include weekends as a way to ensure that they were available when students needed them. They provided academic advisement; one-on-one major, career, and basic personal counseling; and resource referral; they also taught the “Freshmen 101” orientation course to their advisees.

Academic Enhancement. PLACE offered in-house tutoring, the formation of study groups, and specialized academic workshops in study strategies. Students who had not successfully exited the state-mandated TASP exam were required to attend enhancement classes in addition to the state's mandated developmental classes. Students whose grades dropped below a 2.0 were required to attend mandatory study hall.

Centralized Support Services. The PLACE students now had a one-stop center for services and referrals. Students addressed problems to their PAs first. The advisers kept abreast of current university rules, policies, and procedures, and ensured that students took their problems to the correct person or office or department, which had proven difficult for earlier classes of students. Further, the advisers taught the students the proper way to access services, report complaints, and seek assistance. In short, the students learned how to make the system work for them rather than become an additional problem.

The ACCESS/PLACE Support Services Center had its own financial aid adviser, who worked closely on a one-to-one basis with students to ensure that all required paperwork was filled out correctly and submitted in a timely manner. As filing for financial aid had long been a perplexing and frustrating task for most students, a "personal touch" solution in this area would prove significant in improving student retention. The financial aid adviser also proactively sought out other funding sources for individual students and kept them updated on current changes in financial aid procedures and timelines.

The PLACE program also featured a specialized residence hall, which allowed for a structured housing environment that supported academic progress by enforcing quiet hours and other appropriate rules for students who brought little self-discipline with them to college. Again, the injection of tough love introduced and developed productive habits in these students. A key success element was the hiring of a more mature housing staff rather than using students, as done traditionally, to supervise this hall. The first three RAs hired were in their forties and fifties, under the belief that freshmen required more mature supervisors and older role models. The residence staff also received training geared to their changed mission, as the residence hall was also to be the site of a variety of academic programs and cocurricular activities. The staff of the residence hall was to be more than babysitters and maintenance persons; their strict focus was student learning and academic success. Therefore, the housing staff worked in conjunction with the PAs as part of an overall team focused on enhancing academic success. The mission was clear and undiluted by aberrant behavior.

Impact of the Program. As with the summer ACCESS program, the PLACE program immediately made a positive impact on its participants. In 1999, the program expanded and moved into a larger residence hall where the PAs could have centralized offices in the building. A second-floor area was converted into a classroom and study hall, and a graduate student was hired to run a structured study hall program in this area five nights a week.

During PLACE's second year, it was discerned that an academically focused learning environment that truly complemented the university's educational mission could be created. Coincidentally, a Texas state panel suggesting means to improve lagging academic success at Prairie View and at Texas Southern University (another HBCU) recommended creation of a UC model to increase retention and graduation at PVAMU (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2000b). This suggestion coincided with the state's major study of education (*Closing the Gaps*), which addressed issues of student retention, particularly among minorities (Benjamin, Carroll, Dewar, Lempert, and Stockly, 2000; Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2000a). PLACE became the forerunner of the universitywide effort to improve the first-year experience for all PVAMU freshmen, which materialized as University College in Fall 2000.

The UC Structure: Function Drives Form

The Kellogg Commission report *Returning to Our Roots: The Student Experience* characterizes universities as "genuine learning communities" that should be "student centered" and "[put] students first" (Kellogg Commission, 1997). The report concludes that there is a dire need to reform undergraduate education in these directions, particularly with the new type of first-generation student attending college in greater numbers. Underscoring this idea, the report *University Colleges and the Student Centered University* stresses the lead role of UCs in this area (Richard and others, 1999). An increasing number of universities have now incorporated such UC structures that effectively contribute to promoting qualities of a student-centered university among first-year students. UC at Prairie View A&M University was designed as such a unit and is thus the physical embodiment of the campus's learning-centered commitment to its freshmen. The focus is on helping individual students learn how to successfully deal with the problems they encounter; the system is seen as the solution, not the problem. University College's mission, then, is to provide freshmen with effective advisement, intense academic enhancement, accessible, centralized support services, and a structured, academically focused residential learning community.

The University College is under the supervision of an executive director who reports to the provost and vice president of academic affairs for the university, making it a component of academics rather than student services. Directly reporting to the executive director are an associate executive director for academics and an associate executive director for administrative services. The UC administration is divided into three divisions: Advisement, Academic Enhancement, and Student Life. The three basic divisions of University College thus reflect and deliver the three critical elements that led to the success of ACCESS and the PLACE: intrusive advisement coupled with centralized holistic support services, academic enhancement, and an academically focused residential environment.

University College's mission is to provide freshmen with those proven ingredients found to be necessary for retention and academic success: effective, intrusive advisement, intense academic enhancement, accessible, centralized support services, and a structured, academically focused residential learning community. In addition, University College has five primary goals that support its mission:

1. To reduce time in remediation
2. To improve overall academic performance
3. To improve retention to sophomore year
4. To improve graduation rates
5. To improve leadership, promote outstanding scholarship, and offer research opportunities for students

To accomplish its mission and goals, the University College provides a holistic, intrusive living-learning environment, which closely monitors student academic and social progress. The lessons learned from the growth and development of both ACCESS and PLACE have created an environment in which the average first-year student receives almost daily attention from college staff dedicated to that student's well-being. Tough love develops productive habits and, ultimately, productive people. The results speak for themselves: improved overall TASP pass rates, marked improvement in financial aid filing, and swift and immediate handling of behavioral problems that could affect the progress of other students.

The living-learning community model, even in its most basic form, has been proven effective (Stassen, 2003). At Prairie View, the comprehensive UC program complements its programmatic elements and mission with a state-of-the-art residential complex comprising fourteen mini-residence halls surrounding a Freshmen Center. Each student is assigned to a UC Academic Team (UCAT) in a specific residence hall consisting of approximately 100–125 students, a PA, a learning community manager (LCM), two community assistants (CAs), and a conscientious faculty fellow (FF). This team provides intense support services, offers the sense of community and belonging traditionally provided by the student's family, and supplies the concerned "others" a freshman needs, not only to survive but, more important, to flourish in the strange and sometimes frightening new environment of college. Furthermore, the formation of new habits and the inhibition of bad habits enhance considerably these students' chances of success. This dedicated, mature team provides the heart of the freshman's personalized orientation to the campus, teaching students about the university's history and traditions, stressing the academic rather than the social or athletic focus of college life, and emphasizing the importance of balance in student activities. Tough love and strict supervision bring discipline and positive role models, and form a set of enduring positive habits that provide a foundation for survival that is lacking in many students.

The advisement and support services elements of UC form the advisement division; both are located in the Freshman Center. The day-to-day operation of this unit is supervised by the UC director of advisement, who reports to the associate executive director for administrative services. There is one PA for each of the fourteen residence halls and one for nonresident students; each PA works with 100–125 students. This ratio is purposely low to ensure that incoming students with destructive habits and multiple concerns can initially receive concentrated necessary comprehensive advisement services. The advisers carefully review each student's high school record and standardized test scores and work with each student to select appropriate courses and register for sequenced classes *based on their state of development* rather than the "suggested" standardized degree program.

This process begins prior to the start of the term, as students attend one of the one-day "registration" sessions. The PAs work closely with designated faculty advisement coordinators (FACs) to ensure that the academic advice is appropriate for the students' intended majors. Each college on campus has at least one FAC, with the College of Engineering having two and the College of Arts and Sciences having three because their student populations are larger. These individuals are selected by their deans and receive supplement pay from UC to serve as their college's point-of-contact. They meet monthly with the PAs and are available on a daily basis to answer questions and provide assistance.

The PAs use a variety of instruments such as the LASSI and Holland Self-Directed Search (SDS) to help students explore their major and occupational preferences, as well as their study and learning styles. With over half of the freshmen (56 percent) coming from first-generation college families, such students need more focused, directed career advice in line with their wishes, as well as their skills, provided at the outset of their college careers to minimize destructive choices. The PAs then proactively track the individual student's academic progress. Many freshman classes send lists of UC students who have missed three or more classes within the first month (a very significant indication of failure), and the PAs contact their students to quickly rectify the situation. Destructive habits such as failed attendance need early amelioration to prevent failure, particularly for weak students. At midterm the PAs send each of their advisees a copy of his or her grades and a letter. If a student's midterm grades are below 2.0, the PAs actively intervene, reviewing the situation personally with the student and helping the student prepare an educational progress plan (EPP) that details the tutoring, study halls, or enhancement classes the student is to attend to improve his or her performance; advisers then follow up to ensure that problems are resolved.

PAs also work with their UCAT to plan and execute cocurricular activities for all of their advisees. These activities might include workshops on health issues, academic speakers, attendance at university-sponsored academic and cultural events, and field experiences off-campus. As students

progress through the year, the PAs help students complete requirements for exiting provisional status and declaring or changing a major. They also provide assistance in placing the student with a faculty adviser in the appropriate major. The Student Support Services Center is housed within the advisement component. The financial aid counselor assists the PAs and the students in the entire process of applying for financial aid. This center also has a trained mediator who can assist with roommate controversies and similar concerns and distractions. The center's staff are prepared to assist the PAs in referring students with problems that cannot be handled on-site (for example, medical, personal, or transportation problems); many are common to underprivileged first-generation college students and can become obstacles to retention and graduation.

The academic enhancement division, supervised by the associate executive director for academics, consists of the Developmental Education Program, the Scholars Program, and the Academic Support Center. This area is of vital importance to individual and program success, as Texas mandates continuous remediation for students who do not pass TASP (over 60 percent of PVAMU students must take one or more developmental classes). However, at PVAMU and in the state in general, students are not necessarily passing TASP on their second (or even third) attempt following remediation. To deal with this concern, UC contracted the services of the National Center for Developmental Education at Appalachian State University to help restructure the delivery of campus developmental education services. The results have been phenomenal. The new centralized developmental education program under the University College has reduced the size of developmental classes, provided additional training and professional development for the developmental instructors, and used a combination of classroom and lab exercises for each class by encouraging innovation in delivering developmental instruction. The program has been so successful that the journal *Black Issues in Higher Education* cited it as a program worthy of national recognition and emulation (Hamilton, 2001).

The Center for Academic Support (CAS) provides tutoring, supplemental instruction, structured study groups, enhancement classes, and interactive workshops for any PVAMU student seeking assistance. The center encourages faculty projects and research focused on improving freshman learning and attendance at professional seminars and conferences. To support this component, UC has implemented supplemental instruction (SI) for key undergraduate classes.

The physical center of the UC Student Life Division remains the UC Learning and Living Community, which opened in 2000. Unusual for its time, this project was built as privatized housing at no cost to the state or the university. The community originally included twelve mini-residence halls, each housing 102 students, with two more halls opened in Fall 2003. Each residence hall has three floors, with a staff person living on each floor. On each floor is a designated room that can serve as a lounge, meeting

room, or a classroom. Each night, one of these lounges is used as a group study area, with no TV! Each hall has one LCM and two CAs in residence. These staff members, the assigned PA, and the UC FF form the leadership of one UCAT. The faculty members who act as FFs are assigned to UCATs and are paid a small stipend for providing interactive programs in their assigned residence halls. These programs may be as formal as classes on a particular topic, or as informal as discussion groups on current events, but the central purpose of these activities is to enhance communication between faculty and freshman students and, in a subtle way, develop positive habits and academic interests that help these students achieve a long-term academic goal.

The UCAT leadership team works together to provide a nurturing, structured, academically focused living environment for the team members. Each team receives joint training and works as a unit to provide services to the team members. Despite the regular presence of the UCAT teams in the residence halls, the LCMs and CAs are not merely babysitters and maintenance staff. They are mature professional educators, role models, and mentors who work with the PAs and FFs to provide an effective learning climate for the students. Such elements also combine to create a congenial family environment and promote good habits that mold the student in a positive direction designed to assist in his or her success.

The residence halls are clustered around a Freshman Center, which is a physical unit that houses the PAs and Support Center staff, a 110-seat theater (large enough to seat an entire residence hall), a multipurpose room (which can be divided into three classrooms or used for UCAT socials), a computer lab, a fitness room, a vending area, and a large social court. This Freshman Center forms a central focus—an extended family unit of sorts—for much of the freshman's out-of-class activities. The theater is ideal for meetings, talent shows, recitals, workshops, presentations, and the like. Two nights a week the multipurpose room is used for tutoring. The computer center is a critical academic support element, where students can work on homework, do research, and print out assignments. Further, this facility is equipped to offer the Web-based LASSI and SDS instruments, which makes it more efficient for the PAs to provide local, personalized advisement based on these tools; a variety of faculty-requested software for freshman use is available. Rounding out the complex, the UC Fitness Center provides a healthy amenity and release for the students and staff, while the large open UC social court creates a safe area for student socialization.

The Results

The high-school-to-college transition experience at Prairie View A&M University has achieved regular positive results since its inception in the late 1990s. But whether retention outcomes, awards received, or numbers of educated individuals entering the workforce and society are examined, the

University College must be considered a success for the university and for the State of Texas. The sections that follow provide five pieces of evidence for that claim.

Improved Retention. ACCESS, PLACE, and UC have been successful both statistically and anecdotally: to date, 756 students have completed the ACCESS summer component, with 630 continuing on to college at PVAMU. The ACCESS classes entering PVAMU from 1996–2001 had an average annual retention rate to the sophomore year of 79.2 percent, as compared to the PVAMU institutional average for that same timeframe of 67.7 percent and the state’s average (uncertified) of 71.4 percent. Likewise, the first two ACCESS classes to reach the six-year graduation mark had a graduation rate of 40.6 percent, as opposed to the university’s rate for the same two classes of 34.95 percent (uncertified). Furthermore, the ACCESS classes have exceeded the university’s first-time, full-time freshman first-semester GPA seven out of eight years. ACCESS has been an active part of PVAMU’s diversity program, and the program’s students commonly assume leadership roles in campus activities. A growing number of nonblack, traditionally under-represented students have also completed the program, and indications are that this growing trend will continue into the future, particularly as Hispanics enter higher education in greater numbers. In addition, a few vignettes of success are instructive: ACCESS students have been elected student body president and “Ms. PVAMU,” have been the top graduate of both the army and navy ROTC programs, and have gone on to dental school, law school, the military, and a number of graduate programs. One 1996 ACCESS student worked for the program her entire time in undergraduate and graduate school and was recently hired by UC as an assistant ACCESS project director.

Improved Enrollments. ACCESS is listed in *The New Era for Enrollment Management: Recruitment, Remediation and Retention in the 21st Century: A Directory of Promising Practices, Notable and Significant Programs for Higher Education*, sponsored by the Kellogg Foundation and FIPSE, December 1999. The ACCESS program also received the state’s prestigious Texas Higher Education “Star Award” in 2003. The award is given annually to programs that have made exceptional contributions toward achieving the goals of Closing the Gaps—the state’s legislated mandate of enrolling an additional 500,000 students by 2015.

More Participation. In 1998 and 1999, a total of 1,000 students participated in the PLACE program. The annual retention rate for both years was 78 percent, or 8 percent above the university’s average for those years. For both 1998 and 1999 incoming freshmen, a boost in the overall university graduation rate is anticipated due to these three programs and their participating students’ success, as well as the fact that they made up a significant number of the total campus enrollment. UC entered its fourth year in 2003, having served 5,100 students. The annual retention rate has exceeded 71 percent, even after a more rigorous change in probation and

suspension regulations, which was expected to significantly affect these rates in an adverse way. In 1998, PVAMU had 787 sophomores; in 2002 PVAMU had 1,200 sophomores at the twentieth class day. Not only has the institution retained more freshmen but more of these freshmen have successfully completed the thirty hours required for sophomore classification. The University College average first-semester GPA has been 2.44 over the last four years. In the previous four years, the institution's freshman GPA never exceeded 2.33 and went as low as 2.06. This is clearly a significant indicator of success, along with many others.

Improved Support for Students. ACCESS has provided effective, holistic student support activities for PVAMU students. For several years, the program has used the ACT Survey of Academic Advising in order to compare the UC advisement program against national norms. UC has consistently exceeded the national norms in all areas. For example, in 2002–2003, 33 percent of UC students surveyed indicated that the UC advisement system met their needs exceptionally well, as compared to the national norm of 19 percent. The efforts of the UC freshman financial aid coordinator have reduced the number of students dropped for lack of funding and increased the number of students who submit their financial aid paperwork complete on time. Members of the ACCESS-UC staff have made presentations on UC programs and procedures at state, regional, national, and international conferences (for example, White House Initiatives Conference on HBCUs, NAFFEO, Texas Academic Advising Network (TEXAAN), College Academic Support Program (CASP), National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), First Year Experience (FYE), Texas Association of College Registrars and Admissions Officers (TACRO), National Association of College Auxiliary Services (NACAS), National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD), and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's Access and Equity Conference) to rave reviews. The UC division of academic advisement hosted the 2002 TEXAAN Conference, and a staff member was elected to a statewide office. UC was also cited in the report *College Completion: Additional Efforts Could Help Education with Its Completion Goals* (General Accounting Office, 2003).

Increased Recognition. As word of the program's success has spread, the program has received numerous requests to help transplant the program to other environments. In recognition of their efforts, ACCESS-UC staff received a \$435,000 FIPSE grant to share its recruitment, retention, and remediation strategies with four other HBCUs: Jacksonville State, Savannah State, Kentucky State, and Fayetteville State. Other funding efforts to disseminate the program have followed in the wake of its growing list of successes.

John Dewey wrote, "We never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment. Whether we permit chance environments to do the work, or whether we design environments for the purpose makes a great difference." Prairie View A&M University, through its UC model, has

determined it will not rely on serendipity where its students are concerned but shape the results desired. UC has become the embodiment of the university's active commitment to its freshmen and a model vehicle for a highly structured learning environment.

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