

How Essex County College doubled its graduation rate in 3 years

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Community colleges have long been judged by their accessibility, which is a combination of affordability and openness to students of all academic backgrounds. Essex County College has always been judged favorably on this count with its open admission policy and low tuition. But it isn't enough for students to get into college; they also need to get out of college with a diploma and with the knowledge, skills and dispositions we expect of college graduates. All colleges, including Essex, are increasingly being judged across three dimensions: access, quality, and completion.

When I arrived three years ago, there was no doubt about accessibility, and the quality of Essex's programs was apparent in the high placement rates for graduates in our career programs and the fact that Essex graduates who transfer to Rutgers, NJIT and other four-year schools are as successful as those universities' native students. However, our completion rate was only 5%, the lowest of the nineteen New Jersey county colleges. For the three years I have been at Essex, first as Chief Academic Officer and now as President, I have led an energetic campaign to increase completion, and I must credit the Board of Trustees, the faculty, and every department with sharing my commitment to student success. So, I am proud to say that this year our graduation rate has doubled to 10%.

How did we do it? It began with a college-wide commitment in our Strategic Plan to make student success our top priority, but good intentions are not enough. As president, I provided a clear goal, steady leadership, and resources when they were needed, and the faculty and staff once again demonstrated their dedication to our students by doing the difficult work of creating new ways to improve student success. Here are some specific innovations:

1. The **Graduation Hold** protects students who are within a year of graduating from changing their schedule without seeing an academic advisor. This addresses the problem of students who unknowingly drop courses that are required for graduation because another course meets at a more convenient time or is recommended by a friend.
2. The **Completion Scholarship** provides small grants, usually about \$300, to students who are close to graduation but cannot afford essential items that they need to finish school, such as a textbook, CLEP exam fees, tuition for a single course, or bus passes. This addresses the problem of students whose only barrier to graduation is a relatively small financial barrier that they simply cannot overcome without aid.

3. **Graduation Math** addresses the fact that math is often the course standing between students and their diplomas. Graduation Math uses the same syllabus and textbook as a regular math course, but enrollment is limited to ten students, all of whom need math to graduate so they share a common bond. The class is taught by an instructor who is attuned to the anxieties of math-avoiders and includes an in-class tutor. Pass rates are close to 85%.

4. The **Three-Semester Advising eWorksheet** gets students to plan their classes a year in advance instead of just scheduling the next semester, which forces students to think ahead to graduation. The Office of Academic Advising, which has only one full-time academic advisor for every 1,500 degree-seeking students, finds that the eWorksheet makes it easier for advisors to keep students on track to graduation.

5. **Withdrawal Protection** is for students who are close to graduation but cannot pay their tuition by the due date. Instead of automatically withdrawing them from all of their classes, which is standard practice at virtually all colleges, the bursar's office engages a telephone bank to reach out to these students to make payment plans that keep them enrolled and on track to finish.

These five innovations are not the only measures we implemented, but they are good examples because they show the engagement of the entire college, from the faculty to the Bursar's Office to the Office of Academic Advising, Enrollment Services, and others. And we are not done, this September we will implement two more notable innovations:

1. The **Academic Alert System**, developed and tested by IT last year, gives faculty a mechanism for identifying struggling students in the first two to four weeks of the semester and transmits this information to the Office of Academic Advising, which can reach out and help before it is too late.

2. **Reverse Transfer** is a process that follows students who transfer out of Essex before they graduate and identifies the credits they earn at other colleges and universities. These credits can be transferred back to Essex to satisfy degree requirements and award a degree.

You may read this article and accept the innovations but point to the fact that 10% graduation is still too low. The average graduation rate at community colleges nationwide is 20%, and in NJ County Colleges it is 16%. I agree; we clearly have more to do, but doubling our graduation rate in three years is a good demonstration that the college is united toward the goals in our Strategic Plan and is making measurable progress.

It is worth noting that the graduation rate is a good statistic for benchmarking against other schools because federal guidelines ensure all schools measure it uniformly, but it does not capture the full picture of student success because the narrow federal definition only includes students who begin as full-time students, get their degree at the same school where they started, and earn an associate's degree in three years or less. This misses a lot of successful students at Essex, where over 90% of students are not ready for college-level math and English

when they arrive and need a year or more of remediation and/or English as a Second Language (ESL), which makes it difficult to graduate in three years. About half of our students move between full-time and part-time student status in response to employment opportunities, which also makes it difficult to finish quickly. The close proximity of four-year colleges and universities in Newark attracts many students to transfer before they graduate, which is a successful outcome that is not counted in the graduation rate. A more complete picture of student success comes from a six-year graduation rate that includes students who started at Essex and completed their degree at any institution. By that measure, students who started at Essex in 2007 have a 23%3 success rate, much higher than the 5% federal graduation rate for the same year. So student success is more than the federal statistic, and our current official graduation rate of 10% indicates a significantly higher success rate.

Yes, we have more work ahead of us, but we are unified in our commitment to student success, we are excited to begin another school year, and we are grateful to our dedicated faculty and staff, and for the support of our Board of Trustees, the County Executive, and especially to the citizens of Essex County.

1. Snyder, Thomas D., and Sally A. Dillow. 2013. Digest of Education Statistics 2012. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education.
2. Compiled from 2013-2014 Institutional Profiles;
<http://www.nj.gov/highereducation/IP/IP2014/index.shtml> accessed on 10/16/15.
3. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2014). Student Tracker Postsecondary Completions; Institutional Benchmark Report (Pilot); Fall 2007 Entering Cohort; ESSEX COUNTY COLLEGE: School and Branch Code



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