About the Writing Team: The University of Central Arkansas’s Mashburn Center for Learning is a research center that specializes in high-quality professional development and instructional intervention. The Mashburn team is highly committed to forging partnerships with stakeholders in Arkansas to close the achievement gap between students who fail and students who excel. They shall not rest until such gaps are closed.

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What are the key factors that lead to graduation from a college or university in Arkansas? What practices have succeeded in improving the odds that Arkansans will attain more postsecondary degrees?

In plain terms, what is working?

After talking to instructors and administrators at different two- and four-year institutions throughout Arkansas, education experts at the Mashburn Center for Learning uncovered a set of effective strategies for increasing college retention and graduation rates. These strategies comprise what the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation (WRF) calls “The Six”:

1. **Support Student Retention and Completion.** Students need a structured framework of support that meets specific needs. It is the best way to overcome the challenges that often arise at the postsecondary level.

2. **Practice Hands-On Advising.** A counseling approach founded on open communication and proactive goal-setting is key to ensuring program completion.

3. **Identify and Develop Engaging Instructors.** Successful institutions hire instructors whose teaching skills match or exceed their expertise in a subject. Strong professional development programs can further strengthen teaching skills.

4. **Establish One-to-One Student Connections.** When close faculty-student relationships are a high priority, students connect to their institution and are thus more likely to persevere.

5. **Build a Strong Campus Community.** Students who have a sense of community both on campus and in the surrounding town or city are likely to display more pride and greater motivation.

6. **Employ Data-Driven Decision-Making.** Solutions for increasing retention and completion rates need to be informed by regular assessments that track student progress at critical checkpoints in a college career.
Effective strategies do not implement themselves, however, because what works in one place will not automatically work in another. In conversations with stakeholders, the Mashburn Center sought out the guiding principles that ensure successful implementation. Five principles stood out in these conversations:

- **Remember the Human Factor.** An approach founded on building relationships with students embraces the emotional dimension of learning and recognizes it as a key factor to student success.

- **Go the Distance with Student Support.** To counter the trend of student decline after the first year at the college level, institutions should explore interventions that extend throughout student careers.

- **Rally Committed Leadership.** Leaders who build school-wide policy around student retention and graduation goals ensure buy-in from all faculty and staff and empower instructors to succeed.

- **Practice Learning Communities.** A community of learners, comprised of a wide range of actors, can drive the process for developing comprehensive and coordinated interventions tailored to an institution’s needs.

- **Be Strategic in Professional Development.** Effective professional development can not only help colleges and universities improve their capacity to deliver quality education but also shore up institutional structures, network capabilities, and daily communication among stakeholders and students.

There has been a great deal of negative attention about the low college completion rates in Arkansas (the state ranks 46th in the nation in the percentage of adults with an associate degree and 49th in adults with a bachelor’s degree or higher). As a result, the spotlight has neglected the success cases—effective interventions and initiatives that beg for our consideration and reflection. These examples of success are not just isolated feel-good stories; they represent what is possible for Arkansas if we take what works in colleges and universities and apply it on a larger scale.
Recent steps in the Arkansas state government and in philanthropy signal a new climate of support. By creating new performance-based funding formulas, lawmakers have acknowledged the connection between college retention and completion and have made graduation as high of a priority as enrollment. The nonprofit organization Complete College America has marshaled the support of national funders and in 2011 awarded Arkansas $1 million toward the state’s retention and completion efforts.

Recognizing the urgency of the moment, this publication seeks not only to lift up examples of success, but also to challenge community leaders, policymakers, administrators, and anyone committed to higher graduation rates to advocate for and adopt these effective practices in Arkansas’s postsecondary institutions.
Across Arkansas, interventions at institutions of higher learning are seeking to increase college retention and graduation rates. After interviewing 110 stakeholders at 23 Arkansas institutions, the Mashburn team has identified six specific strategies that make these interventions work. (See Appendix A for more details about this paper’s methodology.) The pages that follow explore these effective strategies by offering examples and shedding light on their effectiveness.

The traditional Arkansas college system, like that of other states, expects students to succeed without structured support. However, an increasing number of state institutions have replaced this “sink or swim” approach with practices designed to support student retention and completion. Interviewees for this paper shared how they succeeded in adapting to students’ needs and building relationships—among students as well as between students and advisors. This personal touch provides students with a support network, critical resources and services, and valuable skills training—all essential components to successful retention and completion efforts.

The effective support strategies highlighted by interviewees draw from a range of interventions including student services, additional courses, or special activities. Career Pathways, First Year Experience, and Welcome Week are three interventions using slightly different approaches, but all are designed to increase graduation rates in Arkansas, according to interview responses.

CAREER PATHWAYS

The Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative (CPI) focuses primarily on low-income students with dependent children. It addresses the common challenges these students face regarding child care, transportation, finances, and employment. Career Pathways also helps students navigate different processes at an institution, including college applications and enrollment.

CPI addresses financial barriers by supplying textbooks, calculators, flash drives, and other essential course materials that students often cannot afford. Vital services include child care and transportation along with other supports like assistance with writing résumés, preparing for interviews, and completing job applications.
Interviewees reported that the most successful CPI sites match advisors directly with students. These personal guides map out a career plan that takes into account students’ needs in terms of child care, transportation, and financial aid as well as information about the students’ interests, aptitude, and basic academic skills. Along with providing a picture of a student’s future, the career plan provides accountability measures to monitor class attendance and student progress.

CPI has already recorded high success rates in Arkansas. According to a February 2011 report about effective postsecondary programs for adults, 90 percent of students complete the CPI program or continue their studies into the next semester. And in 2009, more than 1,500 Arkansans “received a certificate of proficiency, a technical certificate, or an associate degree through the program.”

By promoting responsive advising tailored to student needs, CPI represents an effective support strategy geared toward higher retention and completion rates for Arkansans.

FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE AND MAKING CONNECTIONS

The first year at a college or university is often the most confusing. Students have more questions than answers about their long-term goals and career choices, and even about themselves and their purpose in life. Interviewees identified First Year Experience and Making Connections as two Arkansas-based programs that help students answer those questions. Equally important, these programs illustrate an effective retention and completion strategy: providing support early and often throughout the student experience.

First Year Experience is a critical college course that familiarizes Arkansas students with on-campus services. Making Connections assists students with making the transition from high school to college, and also places a heavy emphasis on study skills and career planning.

In a similar vein, some learning communities have formed at Arkansas institutions to provide early and essential support. In these communities, students are assembled as a single cohort taking life skills and developmental education classes together. Instructors participate in the cohort by teaching both sets of classes. Joining students and instructors together this way encourages more cohesion among the first-year students and promotes a climate of support. As a result, students receive the necessary support to continue on the path toward program completion.
Welcome Week is a set of planned activities to foster connectedness and belonging. The Welcome Week experience lets new students learn more about college life at the very beginning of their campus experience. Interviewees explained that participating in fun and engaging activities helps students develop a support network, which helps build their confidence in surmounting early school-related challenges and barriers.

Other first-week programming at colleges and universities incorporates the family in a student’s transition. Through the program, parent coordinators are assigned to develop family-friendly and family-coordinated efforts, thereby providing a single point of contact throughout enrollment. As a result, families know they can go to the coordinators for information on issues like tutorial services, classroom attendance, course expectations, and financial assistance. This personal point of contact also plays an important part in supporting retention and completion goals.

The examples above show the critical role that certain supportive programs in Arkansas play in increasing college graduation rates. These forms of retention and completion support are designed around services, courses, and special activities. The more effective interventions offer support early and then sustain that support. They also thrive on close collaboration among instructors, students, and families to overcome obstacles and map out success paths.

Today, many Arkansas institutions of higher education realize that advisors have a broader set of responsibilities to students than their job descriptions once suggested. Discussions with Arkansas stakeholders uncovered a kind of advising that keeps close tabs on students and monitors potential problems. Advocates believe this hands-on advising (or “intrusive advising,” as practitioners call it) works for raising the state’s graduation rates.
Hands-on advising focuses on frequent communication with students and goes beyond traditional priority areas like grades and schedules. Hands-on advisors provide comprehensive support: they assist in goal-setting; listen to student needs and connect them with counseling, community resources, or other services; and take into account students’ outside schedules when placing them in classes. Students have access to these advisors all day, every day.

Numerous Arkansas colleges and universities provide hands-on advising, and some institutions have campus centers designed expressly for advising. Other examples, such as Early Alert, UCAN (Unlocking College Academics Now), and Restart, extend campus-wide and enlist faculty members to engage personally and frequently with students.

One asset of hands-on advising that interviewees commonly identified was that it provides support to students early, often, and ideally before the point of academic distress.

ADVISING CENTERS

Many colleges and universities in Arkansas have set up advising centers on their campuses. A number of these centers are strategically organized so students—particularly freshmen—have ready access to advisors.

One such advising center was highlighted because it designated a single staff member for reviewing the schedules of all freshmen, ensuring that they are placed with appropriate faculty and in the correct courses. This advisor also monitors dropped classes and mid-term grades, checking in with at-risk students. Finally, through regular contact with faculty members, the advising center learns about student issues like excessive absences and cases of low class performance, then responds accordingly.

Another campus was identified because it makes advising more accessible and user-friendly through the use of a custom-built advising cart. In this particular system, the advisors go to where the students congregate and serve them on the spot. This design helps centers fulfill the hands-on mission, with advisors keeping close tabs on students so they can address the problems that may stand in their path toward graduation.
More personalized efforts
EARLY ALERT

Early Alert is a communication structure and another component of hands-on advising implemented at some Arkansas institutions. A key Early Alert feature pointed out by interviewees is the way it draws on the collective efforts of every faculty member.

The protocol of Early Alert dictates that when students miss a class, they receive a card from their instructor upon their return. This card entails a personal note from the instructor with information on how to access missing assignments. If students are not performing well in class, faculty members submit students’ names to student services staff, who then notify students and offer assistance.

The Early Alert framework has become useful for retention coordinators and counselors at some Arkansas campuses. Some staff members are persistent in following up with students, employing social networking tools (i.e., Facebook) as well as e-mail and phone calls to maintain contact with at-risk students or students who do not reenroll for a following term. By maintaining a higher level of communication with students, these more personalized efforts have improved the rates of reenrollment in Arkansas, a key component of increasing college completion rates.

UCAN AND RESTART

Two interventions identified in interviews, UCAN and Restart, serve as “last chance” efforts for students placed on suspension. Hands-on advising claims a front seat in these interventions. The purpose is to increase students’ sense of personal accountability and empowerment for their future academic performance. In addition, the programs teach school policy awareness, study skills, and time management.

UCAN and Restart work in Arkansas because their instructors employ careful monitoring of participants’ academic progress, with close attention to all relevant indicators. Also, the programs depend on and require students to play an active role in the process: when students apply to UCAN, they must write why they want a second chance and complete an initial interview with the program coordinator serving as their advisor.

Each semester, participants complete a survey that asks them to rate the program. Through their responses, students have shared that they felt a sense of empowerment
regarding their own educational attainment and the behaviors that help and hinder advancement. Some responses even reported that the UCAN or Restart experience was “life-changing.” This form of hands-on advising thus demonstrates how motivation and accountability should be high-priority concerns in ensuring a successful plan for completion.

T.E.A.M.

According to interview responses, Together Everyone Achieves More (T.E.A.M.) is one of the most distinguished examples of hands-on advising at the college level. It has been adopted by an Arkansas campus that has implemented multiple layers of advising support, making students, advisors, and family members integral to the success equation.

Including families in the T.E.A.M. mission is important because along with promoting a strong student-family relationship, it provides a common language, helping to connect everyone involved around the common goal of achieving a successful semester.

Clearly, hands-on advising is time-intensive and requires a substantial commitment of human resources. However, Arkansas students enjoy a big payoff, which is the recognition that they are more than a statistic. Hands-on advising heightens the level of accountability between an institutional team and the students, which results in closer relationships. It thus shows great promise as a way to keep more Arkansans on-track for program completion.

Lectures have often been the traditional model for teaching students in two- and four-year institutions. In this approach, students are “empty vessels,” or passive recipients who sit silently, take notes, and walk away. The general expectation is that they will retain all that knowledge.

Institutions of higher education have scrutinized this model of instruction, and some in Arkansas have replaced it with a model that pays close attention to the selection and professional development of instructors. Interview responses for this paper have indicated that the more successful Arkansas institutions have invested in strategies that identify the
This new teaching standard represents an important shift of emphasis. Many hiring teams in Arkansas now seek to identify instructors with a hands-on, relevant, and engaging teaching approach and who understand the diverse backgrounds of students—especially those students who struggle with learning disabilities or other challenges. This student-centered hiring philosophy is complemented by professional development activities for instructors that are designed to impact knowledge, strengthen skills, and encourage a love for learning.

Interviewees lifted up Developmental Education, First Year Experience courses, and B.E.S.T. (Building Excellence by Sharing Together) as programs in Arkansas that prioritize engaging, student-centered instruction and that help increase retention and graduation rates. These programs address the specific needs of many Arkansas students, including challenges regarding remedial coursework, common obstacles accompanying the first year, and the overall classroom experience.

DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION

Developmental Education is the delivery of remedial coursework to students who do not meet minimum required ACT scores. Available figures indicate a high need for Developmental Education in Arkansas: according to a recent study, 39 percent of students in Arkansas’s four-year institutions and 74 percent of students in its two-year institutions take some remedial education.3

Interviewees reported that the more successful Developmental Education instructors in the state are passionate, committed, skilled, and willing to work extra hours with struggling learners. They also typically strive to know more about students’ background experiences, learning styles, and cultural differences. One institution that was highlighted has a strong priority for achieving the “right fit” in multiple ways—achieving suitable matches between instructors and courses as well as between instructors and students. According to interview responses, this commitment to strategically placing instructors correlates with student success.
FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE COURSES

First Year Experience was highlighted earlier in the paper for maximizing student support in Arkansas, but the intervention also serves as a positive example from an instructional perspective, according to interview responses. Along with orienting Arkansas freshmen to their new institution, the initiative’s courses serve to support students’ academic success.

First Year Experience instructors assist students by helping them focus on self-acceptance, teamwork, goal-setting, coping with defeat, and overcoming frustration. The initiative’s careful selection and placement of instructors well-versed in building these strengths helps increase students’ success during their first year.

At one Arkansas institution with a First Year Studies initiative, students and others have described their instructors as passionate, committed, skilled, and willing—all traits that help ensure success for students during their freshmen year.

B.E.S.T.

Building Excellence by Sharing Together (B.E.S.T.) is a program on an Arkansas campus that effectively builds faculty unity and rewards student engagement efforts. The faculty members chose the name because the mission represents the team’s desire to work together as a professional learning community.

B.E.S.T. members solve problems related to student concerns and explore innovative options for teaching their students. On a monthly basis, B.E.S.T. team members discuss strategies for making the classroom experience better for students. They also attend conferences that focus on helping educators better understand the needs and characteristics of students with diverse backgrounds, and then apply that knowledge in the classroom. Yet another effective component of B.E.S.T. is the Super Adjunct program, which provides a stipend to adjuncts for activities that enhance student learning and student engagement. The Super Adjunct program and other B.E.S.T. components show a clear commitment from top leadership to encourage collaboration in designing instruction catered to student needs and concerns.

Student-centered instructors are required for assisting students to make connections with their institution and to stay enrolled semester to semester. The most successful
institutions in Arkansas provide instructors with professional development focusing on students’ needs and characteristics, as well as teaching strategies designed to meet those needs. One Arkansas example fosters collaboration by creating opportunities for instructors to explore teaching strategies together. In the end, the fruits of these practices—teaching practices tailored to students’ learning styles—can positively impact the state’s student retention and completion rates.

A growing number of Arkansas institutions are encouraging a service-minded approach among faculty and staff, promoting an open-door policy for the purpose of establishing one-to-one student connections. Interviewees identified programs and interventions in the state that encourage educators to be available to students and entertain their questions and concerns—both academic and non-academic. Along with fostering strong ties with students, this practice helps increase graduation and retention, according to interview responses.

The examples in Arkansas exemplify two priorities for connecting to students: one, that students are connected with at least one caring individual; and two, that someone is always available to meet student needs. Such practices are supported by research contending that faculty attention impacts the level of connection to the institution, which in turn impacts the likelihood of academic persistence.4
Interviewees reported that programs like Bridge to Excellence, the Network, and Restart and UCAN Students represent some of the best examples in Arkansas of student-faculty connections. Students in these programs attribute their persistence and success largely to the personal attention they received.

**BRIDGE TO EXCELLENCE**

Bridge to Excellence is a mentoring program available on some Arkansas campuses for all freshmen. Its entire mission is to focus on connecting with students by easing the transition from high school to college. For example, one campus team developed a student-centered program requiring students to take a College Student Inventory. Upon completion of the survey, students are assigned a faculty/staff mentor with whom they discuss the results, focusing on their needs and concerns as they begin the college experience.

These committed mentors maintain regular contact with students, conference with them at the semester’s mid-term point, and serve as a “go to” person throughout the first year. In the time since Bridge to Excellence was fully implemented, the program has demonstrated a positive impact on student persistence, with retention rates of participants exceeding that of non-participants by 15 percent or more. The one-to-one connections the program cultivates show promise regarding how such programs can achieve higher retention rates at greater scale.

Students cite the one-to-one
connections as a key factor for their persistence.

THE NETWORK

The Network serves approximately 300 African-American males on three Arkansas campuses by building and maintaining one-to-one student connections. On one campus, the program operates under the supervision of a director, with four coaches who provide support according to students’ individual needs—both outside and inside class. Coaches use a case management approach that includes tutoring, mentoring, and developing interview skills. Additionally, participants are encouraged to build community by joining small teams that collectively earn points for positive actions like attending class and engaging in community service. With accumulated points, students receive benefits like the opportunity to travel to other states for educational and service-oriented endeavors.

The focus on establishing connections is also evident in unity-building activities like presenting students with T-shirts commemorating their experience, and producing films capturing the students’ service projects, testimonies, and certificates. Each aspect of the Network is carefully crafted to ensure that one-to-one connections are made.

One of the program’s participants summed up his experience by saying, “I am my brother’s keeper.” Such an observation speaks to the strong connection that these students feel at their schools. That connection plays an important role in their continued enrollment.

UCAN AND RESTART

Interviewees lifted up UCAN and Restart Along as interventions that foster strong one-to-one connections as well as interventions with strong advising programs. At the two four-year institutions in Arkansas where these programs operate, coordinators work with students whose success is uncertain at best. These students are on the cusp of being dropped from classes and having to withdraw from school; however, through one-to-one connections, faculty of UCAN and Restart help address a tenuous situation by building strong bonds with students and ultimately supporting their college success.

Although the relationship may begin as an “in your face” or intrusive relationship, students respond well to the attention of a caring faculty member, especially when they are provided a kind of tough love. The importance of establishing relationships with caring adults is further illustrated by sending cards and postcards to students when they are doing a good job.
Campuses experiencing growth in retention take steps

The highest endorsements of these programs come from the students themselves, some of whom have asked to continue participating even after officially completing the programs. They cite the one-to-one connections as a key factor for their persistence. One student reported, “Honestly, I think that overall my favorite part of being involved in the UCAN program is the closeness that grows with the coordinators and knowing that I can come to them for everything. I think that alone helped with my success.”

Among college-level instructors, there is a general consensus that relationship building is critical in any institutional setting; however, the more successful institutions in Arkansas put that philosophy into action. Their faculty and staff members consciously avoid the “hit and run” approach with students and favor a steadier, more consistent approach, working hand-in-hand and side-by-side with students. Over time, faculty and staff members ultimately reach a constructive point with the students at which they can celebrate successes, heighten expectations, and effectively communicate the end in mind—certificate and/or degree completion. Thus, institutions with strong relationship-building initiatives typically expect better retention and completion results.

The vitality of campus life draws from an institution’s commitment to building community among its students. But that vitality also derives from the connections between the institution and the families, businesses, and other partners in the surrounding community. In many towns and cities across Arkansas, the college campus is a thriving part of the community. In those cases, many faculty and staff live in the community, and students attend from homes nearby.

Interviewees explained that the Arkansas campuses experiencing growth in retention take steps to create this sense of community both on and off campus. In the positive cases, the sense of “we are all a part of something larger than ourselves” extends beyond the boundaries of the campus into the surrounding area. Arkansas colleges and universities that establish the strongest sense of community emphasize relationships, helpfulness, and unity. When students embrace these aspects of community, they show greater motivation and pride in their work, an outcome that can lead to academic persistence.
The emergence of Residential Halls and the development of programs like Random Acts of Kindness were identified as examples of on-campus community building, while programs that have grown out of the Trade Adjustment Act for Dislocated Workers serve as examples to the rest of the state of effective off-campus collaborations.

RESIDENTIAL HALLS

Residential Halls can build a sense of community when they commit to more than simply housing college students. One Arkansas institution lifted up by interviewees has made that commitment. It requires students who are under the age of 21 or have fewer than 60 credit hours to live on campus. Residential assistants (RAs) are strategically placed in Residential Halls based upon the needs of students living on campus. Every year, the RAs make over 3,000 intentional contacts with students, which include sharing time in the cafeteria, studying together, and/or attending on- and off-campus activities.

In some instances, faculty and staff make “house calls” to students in the residence halls, knocking on doors in the dorms and asking students about their experiences. They inquire about their concerns and solicit feedback about ways to help them succeed. This information is recorded and discussed by personnel in student services as well as by faculty and staff. From these discussions emerge strategies for improving the students’ experience, with the ultimate goal of imparting to them motivation to succeed as community members and dedicated students.

RANDOM ACTS OF KINDNESS

Through Random Acts of Kindness, another Arkansas-based highlighted program, students and employees celebrate acts of kindness. The program asks people to submit names of individuals who have demonstrated acts of kindness. All nominees receive certificates, and once a semester one individual receives a special award donated by the community. Another “acts of kindness” activity is coordinated by the chancellor at one institution, who sends birthday cards to students and hosts ceremonies for students receiving an A or B in the First Year Experience classes. The rationale in all these cases is to knit together the kind of community that inspires and motivates students to succeed academically.
Institutions continually monitor progress in a

THE TRADE ADJUSTMENT ACT FOR DISLOCATED WORKERS

Among the effective community-building programs listed in interviews were those that have grown out of the Trade Adjustment Act for Dislocated Workers. Instituted to help workers who are displaced from a work site, this act has forged new partnerships between communities and higher education institutions. The more successful programs set in motion by the act entail the active recruitment of prospective students displaced by plant closings or relocations. Working with the plants, a campus coordinator monitoring the program serves as an advisor to the displaced workers and assists them in the process of getting a college education.

Frequently, the prospective students are advised before the plant closes. In one community, the program served 300 students in the community who worked at three plants, all of which closed within a two-year period.

Working both on and off the campus to ensure a sense of community requires the commitment of all stakeholders. By establishing strong bonds and relationships with students and community partners, higher education institutions in Arkansas are demonstrating that they are a vital part of the local community, and that the local community is vital to their success. Through this mutually beneficial dynamic, students attain a level of personal satisfaction and motivation that supports their academic persistence, while historically marginalized populations receive essential and supportive services that serve as an on-ramp toward college enrollment.

In the area of retention and completion, a growing number of leaders are defining success by the use of data. Some Arkansas colleges and universities have joined these ranks and have begun looking more closely at data to make informed decisions. In light of the significant gap between Arkansas’s citizens with a high school degree (81 percent) and a bachelor’s degree (18.9 percent), these institutions are maintaining this priority for data, utilizing it to ensure that students successfully attend college and complete the programs they start.

According to interviewees, the better instructional and programmatic improvements in Arkansas are informed by assessments that are both ongoing and designed to measure

Employ Data-Driven Decision-Making
way that assesses student progress on an individual basis.
outcomes. In this approach, institutions continually monitor progress in a way that assesses student progress on an individual basis. Data results are shared in a timely fashion for instructors to plan lessons and for students to monitor their own progress. In the best scenarios, the institutional team uses the data to analyze how practices are being implemented for a variety of programs.

Achieving the Dream and Foundations of Excellence are two statewide programs identified as examples of data-driven decision-making. Interview responses highlighted their relevance to Arkansas’s agenda for increasing retention and completion rates.

ACHIEVING THE DREAM

Achieving the Dream (ATD) is a national initiative dedicated to helping more community college students succeed, particularly students of color and low-income students. Since ATD was developed in 2004, the organization has formed a network of 160 community colleges in 30 states (including Arkansas) and the District of Columbia, serving more than 2 million students.

To help fulfill the ATD mission at the state level, an Arkansas policy team sets the agenda for targeting community college students. Four Arkansas institutions have been designated as Achieving the Dream colleges, and all 22 of the state’s two-year institutions have adopted the ATD goals and data strategy to improve practice and public policy. The data are based on 22 measures of progress, which each institution tracks through assessments during points of transition and other specific checkpoints.

Arkansas’s two-year institutions have shown promising initial outcomes since adopting the ATD initiative. For instance, the heightened awareness of student results at each transition point has already prompted a set of informed decisions about ways to improve practices. By tracking progress each year, two-year institutions are positioned to make adjustments and changes that will positively impact student success regarding retention and completion.
are positioned to make adjustments and changes.

FOUNDATIONS OF EXCELLENCE

Foundations of Excellence, another national program implemented at several Arkansas institutions, also uses data to improve outcomes for students. A handful of Arkansas colleges engaged in a yearlong self-study and developed action plans to redesign the first-year experiences of students. The initiative resulted in learning increases and improvement in retention rates.

Data collection strategies in general have improved, allowing better tracking of student data for administrative and accounting purposes. Such practices have both direct and indirect effects on the state’s retention and completion efforts. For instance, one institution used student data to identify students who were a few credit hours short of completing a technical certificate or an associate degree. Acting on that information, the school contacted the students. As a result, several students reenrolled, and the completion rates increased by approximately 20 percent.

As Arkansas colleges and universities continue to collect data, opportunities will increase to analyze and use that data to inform action plans. Taking advantage of these opportunities could serve as a way to increase retention and completion rates, as illustrated by the data-based efforts described above.

Many Arkansas colleges and universities are using instruments to verify successful practices regarding student retention and completion, and they must continue to assess the degree to which those practices are working. As institutions adopt new interventions, it is critical that they implement those interventions effectively, and recognize that what may work at one institution may not work at another. Utilizing data and student, staff, and stakeholder feedback will be key to determining not only what works, but also how to make programs work better.
Simply calling out effective strategies in Arkansas will not automatically produce better retention and completion outcomes. Stakeholders committed to higher education reform should be guided by key principles for implementing strategies. Acting on this priority, the Mashburn Center identified these guiding principles for making effective strategies work on a broader scale:

✓ **Remember the Human Factor.** One thing that seems consistently clear is that the human factor must be considered in all efforts. Vital to the success of higher education is the relationship building that promotes a sense of belonging and connectedness among students.

The human factor also involves interventions that focus on affective attributes, such as motivation, persistence, and confidence—all essential ingredients for student success. The more promising practices and interventions described in this paper (e.g., First Year Experience, faculty-student partnerships, student-centered instruction) appear to pay closer attention to developing a sense of belonging and connectedness among students as well as the attributes that contribute to an improved work ethic and attitude.

✓ **Go the Distance With Student Support.** There are many existing support efforts for students first entering higher education. First Year Experience and Welcome Week are excellent examples. While there are other programs designed to sustain support, most institutions reported that second-, third-, and fourth-year interventions are less common. There may be a causal relationship between reducing such efforts after the first year in higher education and the decline in persistence rates over subsequent years. While some institutions have taken steps to acknowledge this trend, we recommend that institutions explore further interventions for students beyond their freshman year.

✓ **Rally Committed Leadership.** Without a commitment from top leadership and enthusiasm among administrative teams at two- and four-year institutions, reform has no chance for success. Past attempts at reform typically have been fractured—the natural result of institutions pursuing multiple missions. But if administrators were to rank the mission to retain and graduate students among their institutions’ highest priorities, outcomes could improve. Neglecting this course of action is not an option, considering the cost that failure poses to institutions, communities, workers, and society as a whole.
The trickle-down process from leaders to staff must be clear and visible so that institutional employees at every level know the mission—to increase retention and graduation rates. The ultimate aim should be to empower all instructors and staff to share ownership for success.

**Practice Learning Communities.** It takes a community of learners to develop comprehensive and coordinated interventions like those designed to increase retention and graduation rates. Thus, every program with this objective ought to include a learning community component. Such communities should include a wide range of people, including administrators, student services staff, student affairs staff, program directors, and instructors. In some instances, the learning communities may also involve out-of-institution organizations—the local community, civic leaders, businesses, and possibly family representatives.

This call for learning communities does not advocate that everyone become an expert in all areas, but it does advocate for fostering diverse knowledge of the challenges and their solutions. Broad-based interactions will increase the likelihood of achieving the continuity of services necessary for establishing retention and completion supports, creating one-to-one connections, and building campus communities.

**Be Strategic in Professional Development.** Professional development cannot refer to one-time workshops, or even a series of workshops—that still falls short of impactful, long-term professional development. And just as learning communities solicit support among many partners, professional development should also include a variety of stakeholders.

Lasting positive changes occur when all stakeholders understand the needs and characteristics of adult learners. Staff representing student affairs and services benefit from this kind of understanding as well. Professional development must use assessment data for making programmatic and instructional changes.

Ultimately, effective professional development will help learning communities improve institutional structures, instruction, network capabilities, and daily communication among stakeholders and students.
Some advocacy papers become fodder for academic discussion and little else. This is not one of those papers. This project’s central mission—to identify effective practices and guiding principles for higher education in Arkansas—exists to serve the larger mission of education reform. The Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation and the Mashburn Center now ask Arkansans to think and act: to study and reflect on effective strategies and then, to endorse, replicate, advocate for, and fund them.

The breadth of examples that this paper explores reveal an essential reality: increasing college retention and graduation rates in Arkansas will not occur through the work of a single intervention or group of actors. Success depends on several forms of in-class and out-of-class support.

In the classroom, instructors need to connect with students one-to-one and teach them in an engaging way. Instructors also require professional development that continually strengthens their capacity to teach.

Beyond the classroom, students need robust support systems, hands-on advising, and community-building activities that connect them to their schools and motivate them to succeed.

For both forms of support, data and ongoing assessments are critical for administrators to make informed decisions for their institutions.

However, taking what works in one place and applying it elsewhere does not guarantee higher retention and graduation rates for Arkansas. The state’s success cases have shed light on not only what works but also how to implement what works at colleges and universities. These important principles include remembering the human factor of the learning process; supporting students throughout their entire postsecondary careers; prioritizing retention and graduation through school-wide policies; valuing learning communities; and honoring the strategic value of long-term and intensive professional development.
In recent years, as Arkansas has gained notoriety for its low college graduation rates, a select group of postsecondary institutions and initiatives have fought the negativity surrounding the state with their own examples of excellence. WRF wants to follow the lead of these inspiring stories and urge Arkansans to put the low rankings behind them. This is a moment to challenge community leaders, policymakers, administrators, and committed citizens to recognize the momentum gaining statewide around retention and completion. Success is in reach, but it rests on the identification—and adoption—of effective practices and principles.
Useful Resources

The following websites are resources for general information on programs and services committed to increasing retention and graduation rates. Full references are found in the endnotes.

Achieving the Dream — achievingthedream.org
Career Pathways — arpathways.com
Complete College America — completecollegeamerica.org
Foundations of Excellence — fyfoundations.org
UCAN (Unlocking College Academics Now) — uca.edu/advising/ucan

Appendix A: Methodology

Data gathering for this report was completed through face-to-face and phone interviews with stakeholders from two- and four-year institutions. The participants included 15 two-year institutions in Arkansas and 8 four-year institutions. The interviews consisted of staff people from the Mashburn Center for Learning and approximately five to six members from the higher education institutions.

The stakeholders answered two primary questions:

1. What practices increase retention and graduation rates?

2. What are examples of those practices?
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Dr. Angela Kremers, WRF Senior Associate, Education

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Dr. Sherece West, WRF President and Chief Executive Officer

Endnotes


LISA M. DANIELS, Ed.D., is an Associate Professor in the College of Education at University of Central Arkansas, where she serves as the Accreditation and Assessment Coordinator for the Professional Education Unit. She is also an affiliate of the Arkansas Research Center, whose goal is to use student longitudinal data to provide essential K–12 information to parents, administrators, researchers, and policymakers. A native of Oklahoma, Dr. Daniels comes to Arkansas via North Dakota, where she served as Associate Director of the NDSU Center for Science and Math Education. In that role, she was an active member of a cross-departmental, multi-institutional research team that investigates the use of virtual environments in the teaching of science. Ongoing research projects include working with teachers to design lessons and assessments effective for diverse learners, evaluating the societal implications of public schools, and determining the effectiveness of federal education reforms. She teaches graduate courses in critical pedagogy for diverse student populations.

PATTY KOHLER, Ed.D., is an Associate Professor at the University of Central Arkansas in the Early Childhood and Special Education Department and Coordinator of the Mashburn Center for Learning at UCA. As a former teacher, she has worked with students with disabilities for over 30 years. She was Director of the Division of Exceptional Children in the state’s largest district for nearly 12 years. While there, the district co-hosted the state’s first statewide conference on inclusion. As a teacher in Washington, Dr. Kohler was recognized for her model classroom for students with significant disabilities. Dr. Kohler’s research interests include adolescent literacy, inclusive education, and meeting the needs of adolescents in various settings. She has published articles on co-teaching and the importance of developing positive relationships with students. She is a Strategic Instruction Model professional developer and SIM Leader and works with teachers throughout the state in implementing this model. She is an Executive Coach for the Little Rock School District. She also serves as secretary for the Council of Exceptional Children in Arkansas.

RENEE CALHOON, Ed.D., is the Director of Administration/Teacher Development for the Mashburn Center for Learning at the University of Central Arkansas. For over 15 years, she has been involved in promoting the education and support of the whole child in K–12 education. She supports, assists, and encourages teachers and principals to strive
to meet the mental, social, and physical well-being of each student each day. Calhoon has been a classroom teacher, basketball coach, assistant principal, and building principal. She was the principal of a state and national award-winning middle school, Cabot Middle School North. During her period as principal, Cabot Middle School North was chosen as a 2008 Arkansas Diamond School and a National School to Watch. She also has received awards and honors such as: 2001 Lonoke County Principal of the Year, two-time nominee of Arkansas Middle Level Principal of the Year, Administrative Representative on Arkansas Association of Middle Level Educators, Arkansas Middle Level Breaking Ranks Facilitator, and a Certified Strategic Instruction Model Professional Developer. Calhoon has also been a presenter at both state and national conferences.

MARK COOPER, Ph.D., L.P.C., is Professor of Early Childhood and Special Education at the University of Central Arkansas, Director of the Mashburn Center for Learning, and Founder of Chicks for Children Foundation, Inc. Cooper has worked in the field of education for 40 years. He is the author of Bound and Determined: Strategies for Helping Children with Learning Disabilities Succeed. Cooper has also written for numerous other publications about ways to help struggling learners achieve and succeed. He uses the venues of teaching, counseling, consulting, writing, and speaking to help teachers and parents guide, manage, and teach children and adolescents more successfully. The Mashburn Center for Learning has been an important conduit for Cooper’s professional activities. The primary mission of the center is to create resources and opportunities that encourage Arkansas educators to promote a sense of purpose, hope, academic achievement, and resilience for learners who struggle as they experience barriers to learning. Cooper is also Founder of Chicks for Children Foundation, Inc., a venue of social and economic change designed to develop service-minded children, youth, and adults who participate in meaningful learning experiences that impact global and local communities. He holds a Ph.D. in Early Childhood Education from Georgia State University and is a Licensed Professional Counselor. Cooper’s primary concentration is on helping teaching teams work more effectively with students who struggle with learning and behavior challenges.