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# A Pandemic Silver Lining: Helping Former Students Finish Degrees Online

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The UMBC Finish Line near-completer reengagement program leveraged the university's expanded inventory of online classes and helped to recover students who left the university before completing their degrees.



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In the spring and fall of 2020, the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), like most colleges and universities, pivoted to remote instruction and online learning out of concern for the health and safety of our 13,497 students, 931 faculty, and 1,295 staff during the coronavirus global pandemic. While UMBC offers three online master's programs, less than five percent of our courses are offered online during a typical fall or spring semester.

However, for fall 2020, approximately 90 percent of all UMBC courses were held online, with the remaining courses delivered in a hybrid format (part online, part face-to-face) to support pedagogical necessity (e.g., performing arts, labs, etc.) while also maintaining social distancing in our available classrooms. For example, the largest lecture hall at UMBC has a seating capacity of 350, but to ensure social distancing during the fall 2020 semester, no more than sixty-four people could occupy the space. Consequently, most courses were taught online via remote instruction.

To be sure, moving nearly all teaching and learning online so quickly was challenging, especially at the undergraduate level, but one unexpected outcome was successfully recovering or "re-recruiting" 123 former students who (for one reason or another) left UMBC before finishing their degrees. Below, we describe why and how we planned and implemented the **Finish Line** near-completer reengagement program—which leveraged our predominantly online classes in fall 2020—and what we learned from the process. We then suggest ways to support adult learners, help them feel welcome, and foster their sense of belonging in the institution.

## The Finish Line Near-Completer Reengagement Initiative

Each term, we typically reach out to students who left UMBC without completing their academic programs. These advising conversations were the impetus behind the Finish Line program. However, with more online courses that don't require students to come to campus, we noticed nibbles of interest that we hadn't seen before the pandemic. Consequently, we first reviewed the enrollment data of students whose last enrollment was between fall 2009 and fall 2019 and who had no UMBC degree. We targeted 2,700 students who had earned sixty-plus credits, were in good academic standing (e.g., minimum cumulative GPA of 2.0), and who had not earned a degree elsewhere.

Our multipronged marketing outreach strategy included a **direct mailing** that highlighted the newfound abundance of online courses due to the pandemic, a **website** featuring a video of **UMBC President Freeman Hrabowski**, and targeted social media ads describing access to the fully online classes needed for degree completion. We offered students special incentives to ease the process of returning to school after a long time away, including a waiver of the \$50 application fee, support to help streamline enrollment in classes, and access to college-completion grants for those who needed financial assistance. We also put students directly in contact with experts in admissions, financial aid, and advising so they could get answers to their questions without being passed from one office to another. To increase students' chances of finishing this time around, we assigned students an advisor who checked in on them periodically to ensure they had everything they needed to succeed in online classwork.

A total of 275 students responded to our outreach campaign, and of the 213 who applied for fall 2020 readmission, 196 were readmitted. Ultimately, 123 students enrolled in fall 2020 classes, and more than one-hundred additional students expressed interest in enrolling in spring 2021 classes. The re-enrollees are geographically diverse. While 90 percent of these students currently live in Maryland, the rest hail from states across the country, including New York, Missouri,

New Mexico, and Puerto Rico. Many of these students could not have returned if the classes had been offered strictly in-person on campus. Many are first-generation college students who are at higher risk of not finishing their degrees. The average age among students in the group is thirty-two years old, and almost two-thirds of them are minorities. The students were highly motivated to finish their degrees; they had already earned an average of 115 credits coming into fall 2020, with some students just a few credits shy of graduation. A little over one-fifth of the group enrolled full time in fall 2020. About a third of the group were STEM majors, and transfer students were significantly overrepresented. More than half the registrations (60 percent) were in upper-level courses, while 40 percent of the registrations were in 100- and 200-level courses. Most of the registrations (84 percent) were in language, culture, arts, humanities, social sciences, and writing-intensive courses.

## Meeting Students Where They Are

The UMBC Finish Line program has helped students who have experienced personal hardships that disrupted their education—including financial challenges, evictions, severely ill parents, mental-health challenges, and single parenthood—to continue their educations. Students shared that their circumstances seemed insurmountable, and as time passed, they felt despair and had given up on the idea that they might ever be able to return to school to complete their degrees.<sup>Footnote1</sup> They expressed how deeply grateful they were to UMBC for not forgetting about them, for giving them a second chance to finish what they had started, and, more importantly, for restoring their sense of hope. Students talked about how good it felt to know that people at the university cared about them and supported their success. Some of these students graduated at the end of the fall 2020 term.<sup>Footnote2</sup>

### Finish Line at UMBC

As an institution, we learned some important lessons from implementing this program. Although we had always reached out to students who were close to degree completion in the past, we have never had this level of response. One key element of our communication that was different this time was that students could return to school fully online. This option met the students where they were and directly addressed one of the biggest challenges adult learners face: balancing career, family, and school. Some of our returning students have been removed from the classroom for seven years or more, and many are working full time and raising children. Providing flexible options goes a long way toward making their lives easier and the idea of returning to school less daunting.

Our mostly online course offerings were made necessary by the pandemic. If we were to continue this program, however, we will need a robust menu of fully online regular-term course options beyond spring 2021. We are currently consulting with our deans and program directors to consider ways to continue the program even after the pandemic. In addition, we have started renovating some of our classrooms to support simultaneous online and in-person instruction, sometimes referred to as HyFlex, in which students can choose the delivery mode that works for

them.<sup>Footnote3</sup> We are also looking to refine our staffing structure to allow for a more sustainable model of advising support for these students.

Contrary to the view of some people who believe that effective instruction can only take place in face-to-face settings, we have found that online instruction also offers significant pedagogical advantages. Some students reported that online learning suited them better, not only because it was more convenient, but also because it allowed them to play, pause, and review online lectures as many times as they needed to; chat with classmates; and strengthen weaknesses through adaptive and personalized learning, especially in math.

## Supporting Faculty

Perhaps more importantly—if we wish to sustain this momentum after the pandemic—we have learned the critical importance of building capacity for effective online course design and delivery. Emergency remote teaching is a temporary shift to an alternate instructional delivery mode due to crisis circumstances. It is different from experiences that are planned and designed from the beginning to be online.<sup>Footnote4</sup> Emergency remote teaching involves the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face. During the spring 2020 semester, UMBC had to adopt emergency remote teaching due to the coronavirus pandemic, as did most other institutions. But in planning for fall 2020, we were much more intentional about helping faculty design their courses to be online. In summer 2020, nearly 70 percent of our faculty participated in our Planning Instructional Variety for Online Teaching (**PIVOT**) workshops, which helped them redesign their courses for online delivery based on the national Quality Matters standards.<sup>Footnote5</sup>

Although students who have taken courses with faculty who participated in PIVOT remarked on how they appreciated well-designed and organized online courses, we also realized that one semester of online course design and delivery (during a global pandemic) is hardly conducive to faculty feeling comfortable. Planning, preparing, and developing a fully online university course typically takes six to nine months, and faculty are usually more comfortable teaching online by the second or third iteration of their online courses.<sup>Footnote6</sup> We've also learned this through more than fifteen years of the **Alternate Delivery Program** (ADP), which has incorporated the **QualityMatters** (QM) standards since 2014 and served as the foundation of the PIVOT program. The ADP is sponsored by our Division of Professional Studies (DPS) and run by our Division of Information Technology (DoIT), and more than one hundred faculty have completed the program to date. In addition, effective online education requires an investment in a comprehensive ecosystem of academic, co-curricular, and social supports, which take time to identify and build. As we rolled out plans for a mostly online spring 2021, we continue to provide our faculty with the help they need to build this capacity.

## Why Finish Line's "Recovery" of Lost Students Is Important

In his recent book, *The College Dropout Scandal*, David Kirp highlights the apparent contrast between the contention that college is the engine of social mobility and the reality that thirty-four

million Americans over the age of twenty-five attended college but left before receiving a diploma. Kirp argues that while higher education is the pathway to America's middle class for most students, those who leave college before graduating are often worse off economically than if they had not started college at all.<sup>Footnote7</sup> While those completing a bachelor's degree have lifetime earnings of \$1 million more than those with only a high school diploma, dropouts earn a little more than those who never went beyond high school, and they often leave college with a sizable debt. As a result, dropouts are nearly twice as likely to be unemployed as college graduates are and four times more likely to default on student loans, thus damaging their credit and restricting their career options.<sup>Footnote8</sup> Currently, only about 60 percent of first-year students graduate from a four-year institution in six years.<sup>Footnote9</sup> For the other 40 percent of these students who never make it to graduation, their higher education experience represents both a personal tragedy and a lost opportunity for our nation.

Unlike students of the past, who generally tended to come from well-to-do families that knew how to navigate a college education, today, more than a third of undergraduate students are the first in their families to go to college. In fact, much of the enrollment growth in higher education in recent years has been among what Kirp calls the "new-gen" students: low-income, minority, or first-generation college students. While access to entering higher education has improved, many colleges and universities have been less successful in retaining new-gen students and helping them graduate. Many of these students are navigating the academic, financial, and social aspects of college for the first time, and for them, graduation does not come easily. They often have no one outside of the college or university environment who has the knowledge and understanding to help them cope with the stresses of academic life. As a result, college and university completion rates vary widely along racial and ethnic lines, with black and Hispanic students earning credentials at a rate that is about 20 percentage points lower than white and Asian students.<sup>Footnote10</sup> Some students leave school due to a lack of money, and others realize that college is not for them. But Kirp contends that many drop out of college because the institution has not provided them with the support they need to succeed.<sup>Footnote11</sup>

What does this support look like? Many colleges and universities, including UMBC, have employed some relatively low-cost approaches to increase retention and degree completion, such as descriptive and predictive data analytics to anticipate which first-year students are likely to need help, "nudging" strategies that encourage students to seek support, and clear degree pathways from within four-year universities and from two-year colleges to four-year universities. Kirp proposes that all of these strategies work because "[t]hey enable students to recognize that they are full-fledged members of a community that takes them seriously, as individuals, rather than as members of an impersonal bureaucracy . . . ."<sup>Footnote12</sup> A recent study of nearly 7,000 students on thirty-four campuses reached a similar conclusion. The more students believe that they belong in the institution, and the more they feel that the institution is supportive of their academic, personal, and social needs, the better they do academically.<sup>Footnote13</sup>

Increasing the sense of belonging among students is not a new concept to many colleges and universities. As illustrated in *The Empowered University*, UMBC recognized this over twenty years ago as an essential component of increasing student success, although the development and implementation of new tactical approaches, such as the deployment of data analytics and modern pedagogical practices, have created more effective approaches over the years.<sup>Footnote14</sup>

# Higher Education's Grand Challenges

In the May 2020 issue of *EDUCAUSE Review*, Susan Grajek and D. Christopher Brooks made a compelling case for how institutional digital transformation can help to address higher education's grand challenges: (1) student success, (2) financial health, (3) reputation and relevance, (4) external competition, and now (5) the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>Footnote15</sup> They drew attention to the fact that digital transformation requires an institutional culture that values flexibility and agility, has shifted from risk aversion to risk management, adjusts strategy in response to changing circumstances and new opportunities, is adept at change management, and prioritizes cross-organizational alignment and collaboration over siloed goals and autonomous lines of business. They observed that the coronavirus pandemic has forced many of these cultural shifts on colleges and universities, making possible new ways of thinking, working, and leading—ways that until now had seemed unlikely to ever happen at many higher education institutions. They claimed that of the many changes that institutions have made with remarkable speed during the pandemic, the implications those changes had on cultural shifts were perhaps the most profound. So, while the pandemic has presented significant challenges to higher education, it has also provided unprecedented opportunities that may not have been conceivable just a few months ago.

UMBC's Finish Line initiative has made significant progress toward addressing the five grand challenges described above. The initiative has helped UMBC (1) promote student success by reengaging students who have dropped out, (2) strengthen the institution's financial health by bringing in \$385,000 in additional tuition revenue, (3) improve our reputation and relevance as a public institution, (4) more effectively ward off external competition by being more responsive to students' needs, and (5) provide instruction in a safe and healthy manner during a public health crisis.

One of the opportunities made possible by the Finish Line initiative is a renewed focus on the role, value, and impact of online learning. Although remote instruction may be challenging for students and faculty who prefer in-person classes, some institutions, including UMBC, have used this opportunity to address the higher education degree completion problem directly.<sup>Footnote16</sup>

## Conclusion

Helping students return and complete a degree is one of the fastest ways to increase college attainment in the United States. It is also the morally right thing to do. Higher education professionals need to be thinking about how our policies and practices can best serve adult learners and find ways to make them feel like they are welcomed and important members of our communities. We need a variety of models that will lead to different certifications to help people get jobs. We cannot use a cookie-cutter approach where everybody comes into our institutions and graduates in four years. Today's students need a flexible, affordable, and supportive higher education system, and the time is now to act on this knowledge.

## Notes

1. Randianne Leyshon (2020, October 2). **"Finish Line in Sight,"** *UMBC Magazine*, October 2, 2020. **Jump back to footnote 1 in the text.** [↗](#)
2. Randianne Leyshon, R. (2020, December 15). **"Each Journey Unique: UMBC Students Complete Their Degrees After Returning Mid-Pandemic,"** *UMBC News*, December 15, 2020. **Jump back to footnote 2 in the text.** [↗](#)
3. **"HyFlex Classrooms,"** UMBC Division of Information Technology (website), accessed April 5, 2021. **Jump back to footnote 3 in the text.** [↗](#)
4. Charles, Hodges, Stephanie Moore, Barb Lockee, Torrey Trust, and Aaron Bond, **"The Difference Between Emergency Remote Teaching and Online Learning,"** *EDUCAUSE Review*, March 27, 2020; Kelvin Thompson and Patsy Moskal, **"Simultaneously Supporting Faculty for Remote Instruction and (Actual) Online Teaching During COVID-19,"** *OLC Insights* (blog), Online Learning Consortium, May 26, 2020. **Jump back to footnote 4 in the text.** [↗](#)
5. Sarah Hansen, **"UMBC Faculty on a Mission to Prepare Robust, High-Quality Online Classes for Fall Semester,"** *UMBC News*, July 9, 2020. **Jump back to footnote 5 in the text.** [↗](#)
6. Mariann Hawken, **"Students Praise Organized Course Designs from PIVOT+ Faculty,"** Division of Information Technology, UMBC, November 18, 2020; Hodges, et al., **"Difference Between Emergency Remote Teaching and Online Learning,"** **Jump back to footnote 6 in the text.** [↗](#)
7. David Kirp, *The College Dropout Scandal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). **Jump back to footnote 7 in the text.** [↗](#)
8. Judith Scott-Clayton, *The Looming Student Loan Default Crisis Is Worse Than We Thought*, research report, (Washington, DC: Brookings, January 2018). **Jump back to footnote 8 in the text.** [↗](#)
9. **"National Six-Year and Eight-Year College Completion Rates Reach New Highs, 59.7% and 61.8%, Respectively,"** *Clearinghouse Today* (blog), National Student Clearinghouse, December 10, 2019. **Jump back to footnote 9 in the text.** [↗](#)
10. Doug Shapiro et al., *A National View of Student Attainment Rates by Race and Ethnicity – Fall 2010 Cohort* (Signature Report No. 12b), research report, (Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, April 2017). **Jump back to footnote 10 in the text.** [↗](#)
11. Kirp, *The College Dropout Scandal*. **Jump back to footnote 11 in the text.** [↗](#)
12. Ibid., 8. **Jump back to footnote 12 in the text.** [↗](#)
13. Robert T. Reason, Patrick Terrenzini, and Robert Domingo, **"Developing Social and Personal Competence in the First Year of College,"** *Review of Higher Education* 30, no. 3 (Spring 2007): 271–299. **Jump back to footnote 13 in the text.** [↗](#)
14. Freeman A. Hrabowski III, Philip J. Rous, and Peter H. Henderson, *The Empowered University* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019). **Jump back to footnote 14 in the text.** [↗](#)
15. Susan Grajek and D. Christopher Brooks, **"A Grand Strategy for Grand Challenges: A New Approach through Digital Transformation,"** *EDUCAUSE Review* 55 no. 3 (August 2020): 10–22. **Jump back to footnote 15 in the text.** [↗](#)

Natalie Schwartz, "[How Colleges Are Reenrolling Stopped-Out Students during the Pandemic,](#)" *Higher Ed Dive*, November 23, 2020. **Jump back to footnote 16 in the text.**