

# The Assessment of the Disengaged Adults Returning to College Program

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## PROGRAM DESCRIPTION AND PURPOSE OF THIS EVALUATION

The purpose of these case studies is to examine the role and effectiveness Disengaged Adults Retuning to College (DARC) funding has played at Rider University, William Paterson University, Passaic County Community College, and Mercer County Community College thus far. The results are incorporated into this formative assessment of all four institutions who received DARC funding in an effort to help each institution further their mandate. In addition, this case study and its role in the larger formative evaluation will help provide insight for the New Jersey Commission on Higher Education (NJCHE) in its effort to identify the utility of such grants and serve as a best practices guide for other institutions.

The NJCHE contracted with the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy to produce a formative evaluation of the program to date. This formative evaluation used both quantitative and qualitative methodology in collecting data. Over the course of the spring 2010 semester, four Bloustein School students interviewed the staff with the responsibility to oversee the implementation of the DARC program at the various institutions. Bloustein students also spoke with students receiving DARC grant support services as well as attending a student focus group at William Paterson University. Through these interviews, information was collected regarding the start-up, implementation, sustainability, and usefulness of the program. In addition to interviews, survey data gathered by the institutions, NJCHE, and researchers were analyzed alongside budgetary data.

Specifically, the following tasks were conducted:

- Interviews:  
Mercer County Community College: Ms. Latonya Ligon, Director of Advisement  
Passaic County Community College: Ms. Joann Gonzalez, CSS Executive Director  
Rider University: Mr. Boris Vilic, Dean, College of Continuing Studies  
William Paterson University: Mr. Robert Seal, Executive Assistant to the Provost, and Luis Escobar, Project Coordinator
- Focus group conducted at William Paterson University
- Conversations with available DARC students
- Analysis of recruitment materials, space for DARC students
- Analysis of surveys given by institutions. William Paterson University did not have a survey. A survey was created combining the surveys from MCCC and Rider then distributed to students at William Paterson University

Several limitations to the findings and conclusion are present. These limitations include a time constraint of less than one semester of data collection, only being able to interview a few students, and lack of standardized survey data among institutions.

## PRIMARY FINDINGS

- **Finding # 1:** Initial student recruitment was more difficult for institutions than originally anticipated, although these efforts resulted in collection of information that will provide a foundation that will make tracking and recruiting disengaged students far easier in the future.
- **Finding #2:** Casting a large net to engage as many adult students as possible is the best method of recruitment. Targeting specific kinds of students, particularly recruiting students by major or careers path, is ineffective.
- **Finding #3:** The most important parts of the DARC program include outreach/recruitment and staff services to help students succeed.
- **Finding # 4:** When implementing the DARC program, administrators realized that their preconceived notions and assumptions about the characteristics of returning students were inaccurate. For instance, to their surprise, many returning students seemed reluctant to utilize nontraditional course offerings - such as online, weekend, and night classes, and instead generally favored a traditional classroom experience.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Recommendation #1:** Because staff services and related student support appear to be such important aspects of the DARC program while other aspects of the program are less useful, it may be beneficial to relax limits on the amount of funds that can be spent on staff services.

**Recommendation #2:** While students appreciate textbook funds, other forms of direct aid to students, particularly resolving financial obligations and childcare services, are less integral o the program. Furthermore, the need for support for financial costs for school is an issue for all students, and not just DARC students. Disengaged students, like all students, have other available resources to cope with financial needs, including loans, financial aid, and scholarships. Because these resources are available elsewhere, the most important aspect of the DARC program should support institutional efforts, particularly recruitment and staff services.

**Recommendation #3:** Looking towards future programs, DARC funding may be effective if applied to more institutions at smaller levels. An initial investment needs to be spent on creating databases to contact students, recruitment literature, and other costs with startup programs. After the first couple of years, funding can be scaled back, and the remaining funds can be spent on staff services.

## SUSTAINABILITY

Despite the short time DARC has been in place, it appears that sustaining it at each institution could be accomplished. Although there is no certainty that any institution would continue such a program absent of funding, many institutions have created a solid foundation to recruit disengaged students in the future. At William Patterson University, DARC has gained broad institutional support as a means to further the school's mission and better meet current student needs. In addition to William Paterson University, Rider University's DARC program appears to be well positioned to continue.

If funding is discontinued, it is likely that the current level of advisement enjoyed by current DARC students would be unsustainable in its current form at the community colleges. MCCC has used DARC funding to hire a part-time advisor specifically for DARC students, which would no longer be available if funding were terminated. Administrators at PCCC communicated that absent of DARC grant money they would not be able to contribute the current amount of funding to recruiting disengaged students and would be unable to offer book vouchers. However, individualized advising for disengaged students would continue within regular advising services. All schools communicated that the DARC program served a valuable learning process for their institutions resulting in changes in approach to staff services for disengaged students.

# THE INSTITUTIONS

## MERCER COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE (MCCC)

### *Program Description*

In June of 2009, Mercer County Community College (MCCC) received a grant from the New Jersey Commission on Higher Education (NJCHE) in order to bring back eligible students, former students who left with a GPA of 2.75 and at least halfway through required course work toward completing their degree. The purpose of Mercer County Community College's (MCCC) two-year DARC grant is to bring back and graduate students who have left institutions without obtaining their degrees. To this end, MCCC has used funds to target eligible students, make contact, and convince them to return to school to finish their degree. As a direct result of the formation of the DARC grant, 27 former students have enrolled in spring 2010 to begin the process of completing their degrees.

MCCC's goal for the DARC program is to successfully reintegrate disengaged students who left in good academic standing and realize their goal of graduation. In addition to supplying monetary support for outstanding financial obligations, MCCC has used DARC funds to hire a part time advisor to assist DARC students. Not only does this advisor guide students individually through academic and institutional challenges confronting these students, but also fields questions from the general public in response to their public outreach effort comprised of flyers and newspapers ads. Staff expects that as knowledge of the program and its benefits becomes more widespread, with flyers distributed throughout the community, direct mailings, radio and newspaper ads, open houses, and by word of mouth, more former students that did not complete their degree will return to MCCC.

### *Profile of Students*

In an effort to better understand DARC students, MCCC created a survey, which was completed by 20 students enrolling for the spring 2010 semester. Despite the varied profiles of students, one common element among the 32 current DARC students is that the majority of them withdrew within the last five years. Although this is not a large enough sample to draw conclusions regarding groups as a whole, the survey shows some interesting characteristics among these twenty students.

### Reasons for Returning

According to the survey results, the reason with the most responses that motivated the decision to return among these twenty students was due to "Promotion/Improve skill." This reason was followed closely by "Career Change" and "Personal Interest," both with eight responses respectively. Not surprisingly in this economic time, six responded that the textbook funding

voucher was the primary reason that motivated their return. Respondents were allowed to list more than one reason for returning

Of those who are enrolled in DARC and filled out the survey, twelve indicated that they were not pursuing the same degree that they began at MCCC. These new majors varied from paralegal and nursing, to graphic design which demonstrates the wide variety of academic interests present among students. This variation could be important in defining how future recruitment is carried out.

#### Barriers to Finishing

Of the twenty students who completed the survey, eleven indicated that financial constraints prevented them from being a successful student. The second highest barriers were childcare and learning challenges. Several indicated that the primary reason why they stopped attending MCCC before completing their degree was due to “Work” while a few marked “Money” or “Sickness, death of a grandparent/caregiver/family.” Respondents were allowed to list more than one barrier to finishing their degree.

#### Demographics

In terms of demographics, the twenty DARC enrollees who completed the survey were roughly equally divided between White, Black/African American, and Latino, while a minority indicated they were Asian/Indian. The majority of respondents were aged 10-29 while a few were in the 30-40 age group. The two most common income brackets that respondents identified themselves being in were in the \$15-\$30K and in the \$30-\$45K.

#### *Changes to the DARC Program from Proposal*

As outlined in their proposal, MCCC initially wanted, “Where possible, identify those students whose credits might be applied to occupations that are a priority with the Department of Labor” in addition to prioritizing students whose concentrations, “...reflect demand vocations in the immediate labor force such as Radiographers, and other Allied Health Professionals, as well as Engineering students who may benefit from stimulus funding.”<sup>1</sup> However, administrators discovered that most returning DARC students were focused on continuing the degree path they were pursuing when they left MCCC. Students who were interested in changing degrees wished to change degrees based on a new interest of their own, and chose not to follow administrators’ suggestions that they pursue degrees related to careers in high demand. Due to this, staff abandoned recruitment and advising efforts related to workforce development. Staff is not concerned about this departure and views this modification in recruitment strategy as enhancing the flexibility of MCCC’s DARC program. The staff believes that by shifting the program from a focus on workforce development to a broader focus on general degree completion, the program will be able to serve more students and result in a more diverse set of students attaining degrees.

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<sup>1</sup> MCCC DARC Proposal Pg. 4

The second primary deviation from the original grant proposal occurred with the allocation of funds. The grant proposal dedicated \$15,000 to fee forgiveness for DARC students. However, MCCC found that few returning students needed fee forgiveness. At the same time, there was a large demand for reimbursement of the cost of books, which was established in the book fund. Through a budget modification request to NJCHE, a total of \$7,000 was moved from the fee forgiveness account into the book fund account in an effort to more adequately meet DARC student's needs.

In addition to major changes to the program, several minor changes were made from MCCC's original proposal. However, the overall goal of the proposal has stayed the same. These changes were mainly made in order to obtain a large enough eligibility of potential students to contact. This included the lowering of the GPA limit from 2.75 to 2.5 and the widening of the time frame for those who stopped going to MCCC from five to seven to up to ten years.

### *Student Recruitment*

A critical element to the successful implementation of the DARC program hinges on student recruitment. In order to be an eligible DARC student, one had to have left the college up to ten years ago after completion of at least 50% of their degree, be over twenty years of age, and have a cumulative GPA no lower than 2.5. Initially staff at MCCC had identified 2094 potential students while making contact by some means with 1869 of them.

MCCC spent a total of \$8,000 for the initial recruitment strategy, which focused on the following approaches:

- Direct personalized mailings to those identified on internal lists who met the eligibility requirements
- Posting 13,000 flyers in public places announcing the new program. These flyers listed many of the benefits awarded to eligible DARC students, such as book vouchers and assigned counselors available for returning students
- Radio and newspaper advertisement similar to that of the flyers announcing DARC
- Table at the Fall Semester Open House held at MCCC

In addition to these efforts, starting with the first cohort, word of mouth among students and the community is also seen as an important recruitment tool.

The most effective method of recruitment was the direct mailings. These personalized letters were sent out to the 1,413 eligible potential DARC students listing the benefits of the program. In addition, they included both staff contacts for the program at MCCC. In an internal survey completed by twenty DARC students, a quarter of the students indicated that these mailings were how they heard about the DARC grant. It seemed as if the Open House was the least effective strategy for bringing in potential students. Only one student indicated that they heard about the DARC grant this way. This could be due to the fact that it was not a DARC specific open house but was comprised of various programs and services offered as a whole at MCCC. In addition, it took place during the weekday from 4:30pm - 7:00pm.

According to MCCC's internal survey, the majority of respondents were convinced to return due to several factors. The top three responses for reason for students to return were; "Promotion," "Personal Interest," and "Career Change." The next highest two, were "Available Time" and the "Textbook Funding Voucher". Unemployment and Debt Repayment did not seem to be high motivating factors for re-entry by students. The fact that MCCC requested a budget modification to move excess funds from their fee forgiveness into the book voucher fund seems to back this up. Both the part time advisor and the program coordinator in advising potential and current DARC students first had to overcome the wording of the flyers, mailings, and newspaper ads. Many of the first questions potential students who contacted them had was how much in tuition they were going to pay for. This resulted from the word "grant" in the contact methods and potential students misinterpreting the context of the word. Many potential students lost interest after MCCC advisors explained that DARC funds did not pay for tuition but rather for books and for any outstanding fees accrued from their previous enrollment at MCCC.

#### *Services Provided Exclusively to DARC Students*

DARC students are provided several services exclusive to their enrollment. These services are broadly centered on financial support and advising support.

#### *Financial Support*

Students who enroll in the program are eligible for college fee forgiveness and book vouchers. Students have used this book fund extensively. A companion to the book fund voucher has been the popular "Education Bundle" which provides a Thesaurus, Dictionary, and 2 megabyte memory stick after the completion of a DARC survey.

#### *Advising Support*

With the funds obtained by the DARC proposal, MCCC was able to hire a part-time advisor exclusively for DARC students. The advisor's hours are evening and weekends in order to better meet the needs of non-traditional students. Available at the request of DARC students, the advisor helps not only in academic advisement but also in navigating various institutional questions as well.

DARC staff consists of the part time advisor in addition to the DARC program coordinator. Both are available for potential students to contact with questions about the program as both of their contact information is listed in mailings, flyers, and the internet. They both serve as intake advisors helping the student through enrollment.

The substantial personal advising available to students seems to have been one factor in DARC students' academic success. To date, only two students who enrolled in the fall 2009 semester failed to enroll in spring 2010 due to academic standing.

## *Sustainability of DARC Program at MCCC*

Recruitment and advising are the two issues surrounding the sustainability of the DARC program at MCCC. Although the total amount of money MCCC used on recruitment was modest, the amount of time spent on recruitment efforts was considerable. DARC administrators staffed an open house, made phone calls (358 contacts were made) and emailed potential students (545 emails were sent out). Through this effort, a large base of DARC eligible students totaling 2,094 has been identified. From this, MCCC now has a large identified population from which it is unknown whether further recruitment efforts will be continued.

The second issue regarding sustainability at MCCC surrounds the DARC students' individual advisement. If funding is discontinued, the ability to continue employment of the part-time DARC staff member has been questioned by the Director of Advisement. This staff position was deemed an important component in the success of the program by staff. If this position were cut, a much higher percentage of time would be spent on individual DARC student advisement by the college's Director of Advisement. In addition, those DARC students needing advisement outside of the college's normal hours would have a much harder time obtaining it were the position eliminated.

Going forward, if DARC funding is cut, MCCC could theoretically continue the recruitment effort but its current level of advisement could be jeopardized.

## *Findings*

**Finding #1:** The part-time staffer hired by MCCC to specialize in facilitating the return of students has been extremely helpful in not only enrolling DARC students but also retaining them. One of the main results of this part time advisor is the more concentrated advisement of DARC students. This is primarily due to the availability of this advisor on evenings and weekends when traditional advising at MCCC is not offered. The substantial personal advising available to students has resulted in only two students who were enrolled in fall not enrolling in spring due to academic standing.

**Finding #2:** DARC students have diverse backgrounds and academic interests. This makes it hard to channel many students into different fields that are more in-demand in the labor market. This makes it difficult to provide broader services specifically to DARC students. This could pose a problem in the future; returning students' needs may be so disparate that demand will not be sufficient to justify additional funding to meet the needs of DARC students, such as offering additional weekend classes or online courses.

**Finding #3:** In the future, DARC staff envisions students receiving DARC funds becoming a more cohesive and integrated cohort. One of the ways staff hopes to achieve this goal is to have students interact with each other through academic and social events provided exclusively to DARC students. Currently, funds cannot be used to purchase food or drink. Staff believes the ability to use DARC grant funds in order to buy food and/or drinks would help in the effort to

enhance DARC group cohesion by creating incentives for non-traditional students to come to various group meetings.

**Finding #4:** The fee forgiveness is not being used heavily by students. Of the students surveyed, only a couple indicated that the primary motivation for their return to MCCC was as a result of the fee forgiveness offered.

## PASSAIC COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE (PCCC)

### *PCCC Credentials for the Workplace: Program Description*

In June of 2009, Passaic County Community College (PCCC) received the Disengaged Adults Returning to College (DARC) Grant from the New Jersey Commission on Higher Education (NJCHE) with the objective of implementing a degree completion program for adult students who left the college in good academic standing. In addition to complying with all DARC requirements, PCCC specifically targeted students with the greatest chance of graduating in a twelve-month period and are pursuing academic areas reflecting jobs that projected to be in demand in New Jersey.

### *Student Recruitment*

PCCC sent out over 800 individualized mailings to students identified as disengaged from an internal database from the college's Institutional Research Office. This database was cross-listed with the National Student Clearinghouse and the New Jersey Student Unit Records (SURE). Additionally, banner ads were taken out on NJ.com and the program was advertised on the PCCC website. Fliers were also placed in strategic locations- including the PCCC main campus and satellite campuses, as well as at one-stop career centers and community centers. Recruitment proved far more difficult than anticipated. Initially, PCCC set the goal of reaching out to 2000 students, but were only able to contact 1000 students due to outdated contact information. Additionally, PCCC had the goal of reaching 100 students to show serious interest in the program, and were only able to reach 42. Staff interviewed 54 students as potential re-enrollees. From these efforts, 37 students enrolled on either a part-time or full-time basis, five students were referred to other institutions, and 12 students showed interest but decided not to attend at the current time. No students were enrolled for fall and 35 are enrolled for spring, falling below the initial goal of fifty students. Administrators believe the reason for this is partially because recruitment did not begin until late summer, when the DARC money was allocated, and a large part of the recruitment effort was not underway until November. The response rate to recruitment efforts was lower than expected, although a number of students provided courtesy calls communicating that they had either graduated from a different institution or responded that they were not interested in returning.

Common reasons for students not wishing to return included their inability to get finances in order or concerns regarding quitting a job in order to return to school. A number of interested students misunderstood and believed that the program offered tuition remission. This is partially because the initial mailings were somewhat ambiguous as to what the exact nature of the support the

students would be offered. Additionally, upon learning about the program, students inquired about tuition remission and other financial support, regardless of the fact that the promotional materials never mentioned tuition remission. Twelve students showed serious interest but have not decided to return at this time. Without substantial financial support, many students were not interested in participating in the program. Advisors worked with some students to provide foundation money or scholarships where appropriate, including need-based aid. Staff told us that students "were willing to meet them halfway" regarding tuition costs. Due to this difficulty in recruitment, the initial requirement of a 2.5 GPA was lowered to a 2.0 GPA. The timeframe for students returning remained the same at ten years out of the program, with one student returning 15 years after leaving.

Despite these initial challenges, after speaking with a number of students who inquired further, administrators believe that additional students who did not join this year are planning to enroll in the program next fall. This is partially due to the delayed effects of outreach because returning students often have multiple personal and professional obligations and returning to school requires assessing changes that will have to be made to work schedules, family obligations, and personal finances. Additionally, although students show various degrees of initiative, administrators believe that all of the students currently enrolled are on track to graduation. Furthermore, administrators are already talking to students about next year's program who heard about the program through word of mouth from current DARC students. An open house advertising the DARC program as well as engaging existing DARC students with each other, faculty, and potential DARC students is scheduled for April.

After the initial outreach to students, the most effective recruitment strategies included phone outreach to students- where staff discussed the program, answered questions, and provided individual guidance. Word of mouth from current DARC students to other potential students is also thought to be a continuing source of recruitment, although the extent of these effects is not yet fully known. While mass mailings and web advertisement were necessary for the first round of recruitment and somewhat useful, unsurprisingly, they are not as precise or effective as direct staff interaction with students.

### *Profile of Students*

Students participating in the program range from one year out of school to fifteen years out of school, with a median of five and a half years out of school. While the original purpose of the grant was to target students concentrating in areas representative of careers that are in demand in New Jersey, due to difficulty in recruitment, majors and areas of concentration span a number of different areas of focus; the majority of students return to obtain the degree they were intending to get when they left school. Students who did wish to change degrees faced more academic obstacles, and in two cases students dropped below the needed number of credits to qualify for the DARC criteria. Unsurprisingly, students also are employed in various occupations, with nine students currently unemployed. 70% of students are currently part-time (26) with the remaining enrolled full-time (11). The most common majors are currently teaching (including special and early education), humanities, nursing, business, accounting, and math. The average

re-enrolled GPA is 2.67. The majority of students initially left school due to financial reasons, with a larger amount leaving for a combination of reasons involving financial concerns, including family obligations and work schedules.

### *Advising Support*

The most substantial part of PCCC DARC efforts involves individualized advising and providing personalized success plans for each student. The advisor offers a flexible schedule to meet with students, including, upon request, meeting in the evenings and on the weekends. Additionally, a large portion of student correspondence is done via email. The other main component of advising consists of navigating administrative details, primarily concerning billing, scheduling, and counting previous courses towards degree requirements and credit totals. Because many returning students find that navigating the college's bureaucracy is daunting and confusing, administrators often provide additional services to students. This work includes work that students are usually expected to do themselves, such as completing and submitting necessary documents to other departments. While much of this work was fairly straightforward, such as determining what test a student would have to take to bypass a requirement, other times administrators would have to offer much more individualized services, sometimes acting as an advocate of a student. This included reaching out to faculty for tutoring services as well as personally discussing with other administrators ways previous courses could be honored.

### *Other Services Offered to DARC Students*

DARC students are offered four primary services that are not universally available to other PCCC students: additional one-on-one advising, childcare vouchers, \$250 reimbursements for books, and on a case-by-case basis, additional financial support offered by PCCC's foundation. Although most students use the book vouchers, administrators communicated to us that the reimbursement for the books was often not enough to make a significant impact on a student's book costs, particularly for students in the sciences.

Most surprising is that no students utilized the childcare vouchers for PCCC's childcare center; a service that administrators initially anticipated would be one of the program's most attractive features. Based on communication with students who have childcare needs, staff speculates that there are several reasons for this. First, many students who have children do not have circumstances that are well suited for the on-site childcare center. Some students have children who are either very young (under age 2) or older (ages 12-18). The childcare center does not provide services to infants and is not designed for older children. Second, the childcare center operates from nine am to five pm. This makes it impossible for students who take night classes to enroll their children. When asked if extending the hours of operation would be beneficial, administrators communicated that most students indicated that they would prefer their child be put with a sitter in the home, as providing for dinner and putting the child to bed would be likely to occur when night classes were still in session.

Staff was surprised by the reluctance of returning students to utilize nontraditional forms of education, specifically online courses, in which only one student participated during the fall semester. When designing the program, PCCC believed that online courses would be well suited for returning students, who would be able to set their schedule to a greater extent with online classes. PCCC did not have an extensive offering of online courses as recently as five years ago. Consequently, students are reluctant to take online courses, particularly because they believe that it will be difficult to navigate the technology as well as harder to learn the material.

#### *Findings:*

**Finding #1:** Outreach has been time consuming and difficult. However, PCCC anticipates that these efforts may have delayed effects- several students who were contacted expressed interest in returning at a later time. Twelve students more officially expressed this interest while a larger number of students informally expressed interest. Student contact information, as well as every point of contact (including phone conversations, email correspondence, and visits to the office) are tracked and kept on file, even if the student has not decided to return to school at this time. Attempts to recruit students in certain vocational areas that are in high demand were largely ineffective in the first year. Because student recruitment has been so difficult in the first year, targeting certain vocational demographics is a strategy that should be discontinued.

**Finding #2:** Services that were originally thought to be attractive to students have either been underutilized or not utilized at all. Although book vouchers have been useful, they were not enough to make a difference for many students. Returning students are reluctant to take online classes and prefer a traditional classroom experience. College sponsored childcare was not as highly demanded as expected, and students who do have childcare needs prefer not to use the childcare center. No funds were reallocated for childcare reimbursement where students can get childcare vouchers or cash credit for the center of their choice. While these services are not currently being used, it is difficult to determine if these services should be eliminated. The first cohort of DARC students at PCCC is a small group, and the needs of future students may differ from students currently participating in the program.

**Finding #3:** DARC students generally want individualized and intensive advising and support services. DARC students prefer direct financial support in the form of tuition remission. Although this information is important and valuable, these preferences and needs are not unique to disengaged students. Staff dedication to providing a high level of personalized services appears to be a key component in the students' initial re-enrollment and continued success.

#### *Sustainability of DARC Program at PCCC*

PCCC is undertaking significant efforts to expand and support the DARC program. This includes matching individual students up with external foundation money, scholarships and resources on a case-by-case basis. Administrators communicated that if the DARC grant money were discontinued they would likely be unable to dedicate the same amount of financial resources to recruiting disengaged students and would be unable to offer book vouchers. However, PCCC

believes that the DARC program has provided valuable information not only providing strategies to assist returning students, but also to develop programs and allocate resources that may prevent PCCC students from initially leaving. PCCC has not decided how they will provide programs that will prevent students from leaving, but believe that interaction with returning students will allow for the gradual implementation of policies that will help PCCC more effectively retain students.

## RIDER UNIVERSITY

### *Return2Learn: Program Description*

In June of 2009, Rider University received a grant from the New Jersey Commission on Higher Education (NJCHE) intending to assist non-graduate, former students to return to college and obtain a degree. The New Jersey Commission of Higher Education awarded Rider University \$75,000 through the DARC grant program. Rider created a program entitled *Return2Learn*, described in Rider's grant proposal as a "comprehensive institutional program," designed to "recruit and support disengaged adults while capitalizing on the University's experience with and commitment to non-traditional learners."<sup>2</sup> Rider describes "non-traditional" learners as the portion of the student body that have transferred from a community college or other four-year school, identified as "engaged," and students having earned 60 or more college credits, but that have not graduated, identified as "disengaged." *Return2Learn* is Rider's intra-institutional program directly created with DARC grant funding.

*Return2Learn* is a four-step progression:

- 1.) Identify those students who have left school in good standing prior to the completion of a degree.
- 2.) Reach out to students who have left school in good standing prior to the completion of a degree.
- 3.) Provide incentive for the return of students who have left in good standing prior to the completion of a degree.
- 4.) Provide guidance toward the ends of the completion of a degree.

Rider University believes it has a moral commitment to see every student graduate. Returning disengaged adults to school is part of the effort to see every student graduate. Rider reported having returned 40 students to the University as of the spring semester of 2010. However, Rider identified that the *Return2Learn* program data can be used to prevent students from leaving to lessen the need to return students to school. Rider is using the DARC grant not only to re-enter students who left college, but also to evaluate the reasons students left school during efforts to re-enter students in order to identify those current students who may be at risk of leaving.

### *Direct Student Recruitment*

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.state.nj.us/highereducation/grants/Disengaged.htm>

The initial charge to DARC program institutional recipients is to find and recruit those students who have left school early. Rider identified 717 students who had left Rider, lived within a 30-mile radius of the University, were at least 24 years of age, obtained 60 or more credits and left in good academic standing within the last 10 years. DARC funding allowed Rider the financial flexibility to send personalized mailings to identified former Rider students who met the criteria. Previous mailings from Rider's College of Continuing Studies were non-specific and sent out without the names of the intended contacts. Rider plans to target those having recently left Rider first, before broadening the scope to a local radius including students who left other local institutions. Eventually Rider intends to use its New Jersey inter-institutional contacts to begin reaching out to students who may have left other institutions and reside in closer proximity to Rider than the institutions that they have left.

Rider requested all the returns from the post office to assist in cleaning their contact list. Rider used People Finders as a resource for further cleaning of their contact list in their efforts to locate departed students. After the effort to narrow their search, Rider sent a second mailing and began making calls to targeted individuals. Rider sought to narrow their search and target more aggressively, rather than broaden their search to enroll disengaged students.

Rider identified geographic distance from the University as a major barrier to the recruitment of returning students. To alleviate this difficulty Rider allocated \$24,000 for the creation of the Bachelors of Science in Business Administration Online Degree Completion Program. The program is aimed at providing the service of a web-based degree completion program to assist those students in degree completion from their homes. The details regarding Rider's new degree option is described below in the discussion of Rider's "Web Development" efforts.

### *Web Development*

The enhancement of internet services is a large part of Rider's efforts to return students to college. *Return2Learn* carries out targeted mailing programs attempting to direct candidates toward the Rider website where students fill out a survey prior to any initial consultation. Rider is able to track information about those visiting the Rider site, with or without the visitor having filled out the survey. The survey and web tracking produce data on site visitors that can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of Rider's efforts to recruit disengaged students. Furthermore, the information obtained through the website is used to identify why students left Rider in the first place. Part of Rider's efforts to help disengaged students is to prevent them from disengaging. Rider hopes to identify those who are at risk for leaving school in order to refer them to the University's counseling services.

About one-third, or \$24,000 of Rider's grant, was used to create a new degree option for Rider students in general, while targeting returning students in particular. Rider identified geographic location as a major barrier to students returning to school. While Rider is in close proximity to Trenton, it is not close enough to have public transit like a bus or train stop to serve its students. In order to ease the burden of issues like travel or other preventive barriers to returning to school

such as childcare, Rider created a “Bachelor of Science in Business Online Degree Completion Program.” Rider hopes the capability of educating online will appeal to disengaged adults wishing to return to college.

According to Rider’s grant proposal, Rider began offering online course options in 2006. Since then, Rider has increased its online course options to offer 50 online courses. Rider predicted that it would need to create 12 more courses in order to provide an online degree option for students who had obtained at least 60 credits. Rider proposed to do this by offering each professor choosing to provide a course online additional monetary incentive. Participating professors are provided \$2,000 of DARC grant funding. The idea followed a successful “faculty professional development grant” program utilized in the creation of the existing online course offerings.

### *Expanding Degree Options*

Rider feels that it is important that every student who attends the University graduates. The addition of an associate degree option makes this goal more easily obtainable. Many students who have left school are now eligible for an associate degree with the addition of the associate degree program at Rider. Disengaged students not able to complete a bachelor degree for any reason, but who have obtained enough credits for their associate degrees, are contacted by Rider about their eligibility.

Rider has also expanded their professional certificates programs to further increase educational options. The certificate programs further assist in serving Rider’s institutional goals for its students by expanding educational opportunity.

### *Financial Support and Fee Forgiveness*

Rider estimated that nearly 90% of students who had left Rider did so because of financial reasons. With this in mind, Rider allocated \$20,500 of the DARC grant to fee forgiveness. Rider provided \$10,000 in matching funds.

The *Return2Learn* program works closely with the Bursars office to stretch the fee forgiveness money in order to assist as many students as possible. The Bursars office is charged with making sure that students with outstanding balances do not return to school. Students must first meet with the Bursars office to review existing balances and chart a plan of action for tuition reimbursement including other grants, loans, and scholarships as supplementary payment options in conjunction with Rider’s fee forgiveness and the student’s personal payment.

Mr. Vilic noted that collection services charge approximately 1/3 of any collected funds as payment. He would rather see students pay for an earned degree and not for coursework without degree completion. The collection fees provide an incentive for the University to collect payment without the use of collection services while placing students on track to graduate. If a student owes and pays \$1,000 through collections, Rider only receives approximately \$700. If

Rider can collect \$750 of the \$1,000, Rider is still in a better financial position than having used the collection service alternative.

The effort to return students to Rider through *Return2Learn* increases efforts on the University's part to regain unpaid debt. Returning students are informed of student grants, scholarship, and loan opportunities. Students are then evaluated to determine their ability to pay future tuition and past due balances using their own funds.

### *Student Profile*

60% of students returning to Rider through the DARC grant initiative are female and 40% are male. Most students returning to Rutgers are white (45%), however over 25% of returning Rider students are African American, 10% reported their ethnicity as Asian, and 5% reported their ethnicity as Hispanic/Latino. Students returning to Rider are slightly more likely to be female and while many of the students are white, the population of returning DARC students at Rider can be described as diverse.

The overwhelming majority of disengaged adults returning to Rider are employed full-time and all but one student are returning on a part-time basis. About two-thirds of students returning to Rider through the DARC grant initiative are over the age of thirty, which also departs from the concept of the "traditional" student who might be in his or her late teens or early twenties, having just recently graduated high school. These statistics suggest that returning DARC students at Rider are "non-traditional" in the sense that they are not "traditional" students who may have recently graduated from high school and are full-time students either unemployed or working a part-time job. Rider students tend to be older than their "traditional" student counterparts and tend to be employed full-time. The result appears to be that returning students are more likely to be part-time.

Thirty of the students returning to Rider had left college within the last four years leaving only 10 students having left five to ten years ago. Rider had targeted students who left within the last ten years or after the year 2000. This statistic supports the notion that the more recently a student has left Rider the more likely he or she is to return. The earlier efforts are made to return students to Rider, the more likely they are to re-enroll.

### *Sustainability of DARC Program at Rider University*

Mr. Vilic articulated that he recognized the benefit in obtaining data related to the reasons why students left Rider and why they are returning to assist their efforts to return disengaged students to school. He also mentioned that the DARC grant assisted Rider greatly in establishing a database of students who can be contacted regarding a possible return and aided the University in understanding why students left. The data compiled continues to help Rider amend existing programming, not only to return disengaged students to Rider, but also to help Rider identify and act on warning signs when a student may be at risk to leave.

With one-third of Rider's budget allocated for outreach and another third used to create online course and degree options it leaves the third used for fee forgiveness. Mr. Vilic commented that the DARC funding certainly helped with personalized outreach mailings and online course creation. But, now that a list of possible contacts has been compiled and the online degree option is up and running, the only necessary portion of the DARC fund for Rider to continue their efforts to return disengaged students to Rider seems to be the approximately \$25,000 of fee forgiveness funding.

Rider is in a good position to continue its efforts to re-engage students and keep their student population engaged with or without DARC funding. Rider's efforts appeared to be assisted by DARC funding and increased awareness about the benefits of attempts to return disengaged students to Rider. There is no certainty as to whether or not Rider would continue its efforts without DARC funding, but they are in a good position to continue with the mission of the DARC grant program, as it is very much in line with the mission of Rider University as described by Mr. Vilic.

If it is not a matter of fully continuing DARC funds at Rider or not continuing DARC funding at all, a compromise might be reached whereby DARC funds can be decreased or phased out while Rider takes on more responsibility for returning students to the University on its own as per its described institutional mission. Fee forgiveness is a large part of Rider's efforts and Rider would benefit from continued NJCHE funding to assist Rider's good faith efforts to return students to school through shared fee assistance funding.

### *Findings*

**Finding #1:** Rider has successfully expanded its educational programming through associates degree and professional certificate programs to expand the options for returning, disengaged adults.

**Finding #2:** Rider effectively utilizes the internet to assist their efforts to return disengaged adults to school. Through effective internet advertising, surveys and web tracking Rider effectively uses the internet to recruit disengaged adults. Through increased online course offerings, Rider utilizes new media applications and learning methods to create educational options intended to lessen the burden of time constraints and travel that can make a return to school more attractive.

**Finding #3:** Rider creates personalized financial plans for returning students. Rider works to identify grants, loans, or scholarships that may be available to supplement the personal payments of returning students. When personal payment and financial aid are not enough, Rider can provide fee forgiveness through DARC funding and through Rider's matching funding allocated for fee forgiveness.

**Finding #4:** Rider intends to use the data collected from the previously disengaged, now returning students, to assist future efforts to re-enroll disengaged students and assist the students'

efforts to obtain a degree. Returning Rider students tend to be white and female, although males represent 40% of the returning students and there is evidence of diversity among the students as well. Returning students tend to be employed full-time and return on a part-time basis. Students are also more likely to have left school as recently as four years prior to their return than to have been out of school for five years or more.

## WILLIAM PATERSON UNIVERSITY (WPU)

### *Online, Weekend, and Evening (O-W-E) Program Description*

In June of 2009, William Paterson University (WPU) received the Disengaged Adults Returning to College (DARC) Grant from the New Jersey Commission on Higher Education (NJCHE) with the objective to implement a degree completion program for adult students who left the University with a grade point average of 2.0 or higher.

The New Jersey Commission of Higher Education awarded William Paterson University \$75,000 through the Disengaged Adults Returning to College (DARC) grant.<sup>3</sup> WPU used these funds to create the Online, Weekend, and Evening (O-W-E) Program that aims to reach out to non-traditional students who left the University in good academic standing and provide guidance on their path toward completion of their degree. The OWE/DARC staff modeled the program though the Sponsored Student Program (SSP). Apart from DARC, SSP is the only program at William Paterson University that enrolls non-traditional students in the University. WPU has traditionally enrolled only students directly from New Jersey high schools, and SSP accepts 125 high school graduates every year who have grade point averages or SAT scores below the state medium but possesses exceptional talent in the Arts. The SSP program gives students the academic and personal advisement that they need for their success at WPU; the DARC program at WPU was created to replicate the personal advisement aspect. So even though similar, the DARC program is the only program at WPU that gives the one on one academic and personal support that returning adults need to continue to be engaged at WPU until the completion of their degree.

### *Student Recruitment*

A critical element to the success in the implementation of the DARC program centers on the efforts of student recruitment. WPU identified 2,154 students, aged twenty years or older, who left WPU in the past ten years in good academic standing (2.0 GPA), and had not enrolled in another institution. To narrow their search, WPU also required eligible applicants to have completed at least half of the credits needed to graduate. Recruiting prior disengaged students that meet the O-W-E/ DARC requirements was not an easy task. WPU anticipated contacting at least 50% or 1,070 students and 275 would show some interest in the O-W-E program. They also stated in the grant proposal that the first cohort of students would be of at least thirty-five students in the fall of 2009. However, the first cohort of students was only of ten enrolled students who enrolled in

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.state.nj.us/highereducation/grants/Disengaged.htm>

the spring '10 and seventeen accepted students who would be enrolling in either the summer '10 or fall '10 semester. Despite low numbers, the DARC staff is optimistic that the current DARC students have the enthusiasm and dedication needed to successfully complete their degrees.

The initial recruitment strategy at WPU focused on direct personalized mailings to 2,430 students from the database who had left WPU in the last ten years in good academic standing, meaning at least a 2.0 or higher and are not enrolled in a different institution. To be able to obtain the addresses of these individuals, the PROVOST Office contracted the National Clearing House through WPU's Alumni Association. The PROVOST Office had to go through the Alumni Association as it is the only department inside the University that is recognized as a 501(C) 3 organization and the National Clearing House only sells its findings to 501(C) 3 organizations. This bureaucratic hurdle cost WPU's DARC program a semester without any students. Therefore, even though the grant was awarded in June of 2009, the grant funds were not received until September of 2009 and the Alumni Association postponed contacting the National Clearing House and started the procedures to obtain the addresses until all of the funds were received. Consequently, the personalized letters were not sent out to students until November of 2009. As a result, the first cohort of DARC students did not enroll until December '09 and January '10 and started classes in the spring '10 semester.

#### *Profile of Students*

The profile of the first cohort of student is very important in the implementation of the OWE/ DARC program because it sets the platform of any future OWE/ DARC student at WPU. The first cohort of students at WPU consisted of ten prior WPU students enrolled in WPU to complete degrees they had once started.

Apart from the ten currently enrolled O-W-E/ DARC students there are seventeen students who are admitted and eligible for the DARC program, however, due to external events they will not enroll and start taking courses until the summer '10 or fall '10. In addition, after hosting a series of open houses fifty more prior disengaged WPU students have shown interest in the program. Currently, these fifty students are being evaluated by the advising committee to determine their eligibility for the program.

#### *Services Provided Exclusively to DARC Students*

The students receiving the DARC grant are provided with personalized advising. DARC students are exclusively provided with special advising by the DARC Project Coordinator. The project coordinator was an employee of the department before the DARC grant was awarded. However, because of his exceptional performance in other projects, the department decided to hire him as a part-time worker for the coordination and implementation of the DARC grant. The project coordinator is very familiar with the institution as he was an undergraduate student and is currently a graduate student at WPU. He is a counselor in training and is able to advise students in a variety of areas. Apart from advisement from the DARC Project Coordinator, DARC students have two undergraduate peer mentors that follow-up with them on a weekly basis.

In addition to student recruitment and student advising, DARC program staff complete extensive paperwork exonerating all DARC students from the college re-enrollment fees. Also, all students who enroll in WPU through the DARC program receive book vouchers that cover the total value of all of his/her textbooks for every semester enrolled in the University until the time of graduation.

### *Advising Support*

With the funds obtained by the DARC proposal, WPU was able to keep on staff a dedicated part-time Project Coordinator whose duties included advising and mentoring DARC students. In order to better meet the needs of returning students, the Project Coordinator's hours are only in the afternoon and evenings. Upon request, The Project Coordinator is also willing to travel to a different location to meet with students. The advisor offers academic advisement and supervises two peer mentors for the students. The peer mentors assist students with courses and any other personal barriers that might prevent them from graduating.

### *Changes to the DARC Program from Proposal*

WPU anticipated having a cohort of students interested in Liberal Arts degrees. However, the first cohort of students was not interested in changing their area of study, instead preferring to continue working towards the degree they were pursuing when they left WPU. In our conversations with students concerning their experiences with the DARC program, one student expressed "It was easier to continue than start a new degree.... plus I liked what I had before."

WPU anticipated needing to reserve guaranteed seating for DARC students in courses. However, they have been able to assure that all DARC students are able to take desired courses solely by offering DARC students priority registration.

WPU anticipated offering a variety of online, weekend and evening courses as the name of the program states. However, because of the flexibility of the schedules of the enrolled group of students, this has not been needed. According to student surveys conducted by WPU, the current offering of online and weekend courses offered by the University sufficiently meets the needs of the students.

WPU anticipated needing a lending library in which students will be able to borrow textbooks from the Library. However, the DARC students have not needed the lending library since they have received a book voucher that covers the cost of all of their textbooks.

### *Findings:*

**Finding #1:** WPU effectively contacted a large pool of students who left the University with a grade point average of 2.0. These efforts resulted in ten students enrolled in the spring '10 semester and seventeen additional students that are admitted into the program. However, due to personal circumstances, many students are waiting for summer '10 or fall '10 to register for classes. These numbers are very low compared to the amount of students WPU anticipated in the

grant proposal but this number is increasing at a rapid pace as an additional fifty students are considering re-enrolling at WPU through the DARC program. Should all of these students decide to enroll in the University and there are no graduates this May '10, there should be seventy-seven DARC students enrolled in the fall '10 semester.

**Finding #2:** The part-time staff member hired by WPU is the DARC student's primary contact throughout his/her academic career. This staff member is responsible for advising students from re-admission to graduation to ensure appropriate and timely course selection, as well as address any problems that may arise in the student's academic career.

**Finding #3:** Generally, DARC students would rather focus on completion of their prior academic studies, rather than returning to college to obtain a different degree.

**Finding #4:** In order to start the recruitment process at WPU, the PROVOST office was forced to work under the WPU's Alumni Association, because the National Clearing House, the organization contracted to find and sort all students who would be eligible for the DARC program only services 501 (C)3 non for profit organizations. The WPU's Alumni Association is the only organization in the institution recognized independently as a 501 (C) 3 non-for-profit organization.

**Finding #5:** The mission of WPU is very traditional and the DARC program is the first initiative to enroll students who are non-traditional. In order to accommodate the needs of these students who have left the institution and have been in the workforce for several years, the DARC administration has been able to bypass the rule of the University that does not allow students to receive academic credit for work experience and award students with work experience credits if the student is able to first have the credits transferred to another institution and then to WPU. For example, if the student is able to get "a community college to accept the credits then they will transfer them towards the student's degree at William Paterson" (Robert Seal). However, no straight connection can be made between continuing education credits and credits towards a bachelors degree.

#### *Sustainability of DARC Program at William Paterson University:*

In order to keep the current DARC students engaged at WPU, the PROVOST staff is hosting a series of open houses where current and prospective students are encouraged to attend as it not only attracts more students but also creates a community of students. The purpose of the student community is to set up student bonds and peer mentoring.

The PROVOST staff is also organizing focus groups in order to fully understand the needs of the DARC student. As the Director of Student Affairs/ PROVOST office stated, "We need to understand the reasons why they left William Paterson in the first place, the ways that they will continue to be engaged at WPU until their graduation and understand the things that we need to change to not lose any more students."

WPU has started listening to students and breaking some institutional barriers in order to better serve the DARC population. As the program was created to engage an older group of students who are very different from the traditional college student who enters college directly out of high

school the DARC staff has been able to go through hoops to award students with life experience and college re-entry fee forgiveness.

The DARC grant has allowed WPU, a very traditional institution to re-engage a non-traditional disengaged student population into the University until they complete their degree. As stated by all students in the student questionnaires and conversations, they would have not returned to William Paterson University if it wasn't for the O-W-E /DARC program. If the program does not continue, it is not certain that WPU has the resources to keep on staff the DARC advisement members or pay for the book vouchers. William Paterson has applied for DARC grant renewal. Staff indicated that disengaged students were being discussed in meetings at the admissions office. Staff also communicated that should the grant money be discontinued, William Paterson will have to scale back efforts regarding disengaged students, particularly textbook vouchers, but will continue to provide funds for staff support services of disengaged students as well as limited tuition support.

# COMMON THEMES

Over the course of this formative assessment, several common themes emerged among the institutions and the DARC students.

1. *The Institutions*

1. All of the institutions struggled with a late start in the academic year. Most of the institutions did not begin receiving their grant funding until late in the summer. Consequently, this hindered their ability to recruit students for the fall semester.
2. The expectations of the community college institutions to move DARC students into demand occupations as defined by the Department of Labor or the Center for Occupational Employment Information has not been realized. Although offering students this option, many students chose to finish the degrees they had started rather than shift into a different field of study. Support systems such as academic advising, as well as future efforts to provide faculty mentors to interested students may be the best ways of fulfilling these goals. In the future, although these services have not been utilized for long enough to effectively determine whether they are useful.
3. All the grantees concluded that DARC students require significantly more individual counseling than traditional college students. As a result, the institutions were obliged to increase staff commitments in order to serve DARC students. In addition, every school has planned either faculty/student mentoring for DARC students or intensive advising.
4. All institutions used and continue to use similar strategies to recruit DARC enrollees. Included in these strategies were personalized mailings. The more personalized the communications, the more successful the recruitment strategies. Rider, who had enrolled the largest number of DARC students, had the most personalized mailings with the potential DARC student's name included in numerous places on the mailing rather than only on the envelope.
5. Respondents interviewed at the institutions implementing the DARC program believe that it not only added value to their mission to educate, but also has helped them better understand why students dropped out after completing more than half of their degree requirements. Many institutions were surprised by the number of students who had dropped out so close to obtaining their degree. This program seemed to be the first time institutions were trying to gather reasons for their students' withdrawal. Many institutions plan on relaying information given by DARC students to current advisors in an effort to ensure current students get support that DARC students lacked before they dropped out.

6. The institutions had much smaller enrollments of disengaged adults for the fall semester of 2009 as compared to the spring semester of 2010. This, coupled with this assessment-taking place in the middle of the spring semester, has resulted in a lack of useful data gathered by the institution related to DARC student participation within the program. As a result, it is difficult for the institutions to evaluate their effectiveness in returning disengaged adults to school making it difficult to evaluate some aspects of the DARC program's effectiveness.

II. *The Returning Students:*

1. As we were unable to speak directly with more than a few students, it is not possible to generalize about the reasons for a student's departure or return to school. The professionals managing the program also could not clearly identify the true reason for student leaving with over half of degree completed. Because they knew very little about the potential returning population, it was difficult to develop an effective strategy to convince students to return to college.
2. As far as we could determine, the DARC students returned to either finish their degrees or study in areas of their interest rather than undertaking a program that was presumed to offer a greater chance of success in the labor market. Based on the lack of use of alternative teaching methods, it appears as if DARC students prefer a traditional classroom setting, meaning favoring coming to class rather than taking online courses. Students' academic interests varied greatly from liberal arts to science degrees.
3. The majority of DARC students are part-time but are highly motivated to finish their degrees once re-enrolled. DARC professionals communicated that students were generally in constant contact with DARC professionals and were willing to make major life changes in order to finish their degree.
4. Student feedback, while limited in scope, has been highly positive toward the DARC program. One student mentioned that due to previous life hardships the, "...assistance that I have been given through the DARC program is a gift!" Of the few students we spoke with, all echoed this sentiment. Returning students expressed that while they had considered returning to school before the schools' outreach, recruitment efforts played a significant role their decision to return to school.

# LESSONS LEARNED

Because the DARC program is in its first year, the full effects of the program are not yet known, particularly the progress and graduation rates of returning students. However, based on the experiences of schools in the first year, we can report several valuable lessons.

**Lesson #1** Student recruitment takes a substantial time investment and a considerable amount of resources.

All of the institutions dedicated substantial funds to recruitment. Additionally, all institutions recruited substantially fewer students than the stated goal in the grant.

These recruitment efforts were difficult for a few reasons. First, receiving the DARC grants late in the summer delayed recruitment efforts. Consequently, many students received information with too little notice to make the life changes necessary to return to school. However, although recruitment was difficult, the information compiled by institutions will be useful in the future. All institutions now have large databases of disengaged students for the past ten years as well as recruitment literature and strategies. In upcoming years, recruitment will be less costly and time consuming and likely more effective due to these already established databases and experience. Additionally, word of mouth may provide publicity to the program and encourage other students to utilize DARC resources at their school and return.

**Lesson #2:** Recruitment efforts should be broad in scope. Targeting specific kinds of students, particularly recruiting students by major or careers path, is ineffective.

Three of the four institutions encouraged students to enroll in several priority majors, including liberal arts degrees at William Paterson University and a labor market focused degree at Mercer Community College and Passaic County Community College. This was ineffective for two reasons. First, recruitment at all of the institutions proved more difficult than initially anticipated. Therefore, there was no need to give students in certain fields priority, and in two cases, even basic restrictions such as number of credits achieved, minimum GPA's, and years out of school were significantly relaxed. Second, institutions that attempted to guide returning students into priority fields found their efforts largely ineffective. Students generally wanted to finish the degree they came back for regardless of whether it was in a targeted area, and students who wished to change their degrees knew what degree they wished to change to.

**Lesson #3:** The most important parts of the DARC program include outreach/recruitment and staff services to help students succeed.

Recruitment and staff services are the single most important aspects of the DARC grants. Other services, such as book vouchers and childcare services proved to be only marginally useful or irrelevant in persuading students to return or helping them remain in school. Instead, staff proved to be integral in the recruitment and success of DARC students. Mass mailings and advertisement were important components in recruitment, staff outreach, individual outreach, including one-on-

one correspondence with disengaged students, proved to be one of the most successful methods of recruitment.

Additionally, DARC students, particularly students who had been out of school for longer periods of time, needed help navigating school bureaucracies. Because degree requirements, course offerings, and student services have changed over time, administrators needed to pay increased attention to DARC students and provide additional guidance and services. This included talking to other departments within the school in order to make sure that classes transferred and issues were properly resolved with the registrar. This was particularly true in cases where students were not familiar with electronic enrollment and billing. Unsurprisingly, a committed and knowledgeable staff is key in both the recruitment and success of returning students.

**Lesson #4:** When implementing the DARC program, institutions realized that preconceived notions and assumptions about the characteristics of their returning students were inaccurate.

When interviewing the institutions, all the staff communicated that one of the most important aspects of the DARC grant was that it gave the institutions more insight into the needs and nature of disengaged students. All institutions made presuppositions about services returning students needed, such as book vouchers, child services, and flexible course scheduling. To their surprise, returning students were reluctant to utilize nontraditional course offerings—such as online, weekend, and night classes, and instead generally wanted a traditional classroom experience. Additionally, extra services such as book vouchers, fee forgiveness, and childcare options were either underutilized or not utilized at all.

**Lesson #5:** The DARC program has provided two potentially important tools to administration that may prove to extend benefits beyond the current cohort of DARC students. First, institutions are now tracking and understanding the characteristics and needs of disengaged students. Second, staff can now be more cognizant of the underlying causes that may cause students to initially leave. While there are currently no measurable effects or official policy changes to any of institutions as a result of the DARC program, all the professionals have expressed sincere interest in incorporating further efforts into student retention and outreach. At William Paterson University, the DARC program and related efforts to make disengaged students a priority are being discussed by Administration in the Admissions Office. While we do not have this information for other institutions, the experience of William Paterson shows some indication that the DARC program has the potential to influence the internal policies and priorities of institutions receiving the grant.

# BENEFITS OF THE DARC PROGRAM AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Absent of any major policy changes, focus on disengaged students is a voluntary effort taken on by willing institutions. However, because a large number of institutions showed interest in the DARC grant, it is likely that there is considerable interest in sustaining the efforts to persuade students to return to school and complete their degrees. One of the primary services institutions who have received the DARC grant can provide is to share their experience with other institutions who are interested retaining students who are at risk of leaving or convincing disengaged students to return to school. Inviting interested institutions to a panel where key staff at current DARC institutions shares their strategies and best practices would likely be an effective learning tool for institutions wishing to start their own programs.

Additionally, DARC funds can be spread across larger number of institutions, with each institution receiving a smaller grant award. Institutions that are starting the program could be given larger amounts of money to establish databases and staff resources while continuing institutions are given smaller funds to continue the program.

Because staff services and related student support appear to be such important aspects of the DARC program while other aspects of the program are less useful, it may be beneficial to relax limits on the amount of funds that can be spent on staff services.

Funds spent on fee forgiveness, resolving financial obligations, and other direct student aid, while helpful, are not needs that are unique to disengaged students. Because disengaged students can access financial aid, scholarships, and loan programs, the DARC program should not focus on this kind of assistance to students. Instead, funds should generally be targeted to institutions, particularly recruitment and staff resources.

The final benefit of the DARC program is that it brings disengaged students to the attention of institutions. This benefit is by far the most tentative, as current graduation rates, particularly for community colleges, are relatively low. The DARC program brings a focus to student degree completion and graduation as a priority for the school. Current DARC schools have incorporated servicing these students into their larger mission. Implementing these programs and initiatives, even for a short amount of time, may yield longer institutional changes in both meeting the needs of these students and recognition of disengaged students as an important aspect of the school by official higher in the administration.

# APPENDIX AND TABLES

## TABLES RELATED TO THE DARC PROGRAM

### Number of Students who Expressed Interest but did not enroll in fall '09 or spring '10

Institution	Number of Students
MCCC	12
PCCC	12
Rider	7
WPU	65

### Number of Students Referred to other Institutions or Other Options during Recruitment Process

Institution	Number of Students
MCCC	0
PCCC	5
Rider	1
WPU	0

## STUDENT PROFILES

### Gender

Gender	Percent of Students
Male	37% (13)
Female	63% (22)
Total	100% (37)

### Race/Ethnicity by Institution

Institution	African-American	Hispanic/Latino	Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	White	Not Reported
MCCC	34%	16%	9%	34%	3%
PCCC	29%	46%	0%	20%	6%
Rider	28%	5%	10%	45%	13%
WPU	40%	0%	0%	50%	10%

### Student Age by Institution

Institution	22-29	30-39	40 and over
MCCC	41%	44%	16%
PCCC	14%	23%	63%
Rider	34%	33%	33%
WPU	70%	20%	10%

### Current Employment Status by Institution

Institution	Not Employed	Part-Time	Full-Time	Multiple Jobs	Decline to State
MCCC	22%	22%	53%	3%	0%
PCCC	29%	11%	57%	3%	0%
Rider	13%	3%	80%	0%	5%
WPU	Not collected	Not collected	Not collected	Not collected	Not collected

**Student Status by Institution**

Institution	Part-Time	Full-Time
MCCC	91%	9%
PCCC	70%	29%
Rider	97%	3%
WPU	90%	10%

**Number of Years Out of College by Institution**

Number of Years out of College	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10+
MCCC	0%	13%	28%	18%	13%	3%	9%	3%	0%	13%
Rider	15%	33%	13%	15%	8%	5%	5%	2%	2%	2%
PCCC	3%	20%	17%	14%	17%	6%	0%	0%	6%	17%
WPU	0%	40%	20%	20%	20%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

**Financial Breakdown of DARC funds**

Institution	DARC Funds Budgeted Expenditures for Personnel	Institution Funds Budgeted Expenditures for Personnel
MCCC	\$15,000	\$67,877
PCCC	\$18,500	\$24,750
Rider	\$0	\$29,888
WPU	\$18,750	\$33,100

**Recruitment**

Institution	DARC Funds Spent on Recruitment	Institution Funds Spent on Recruitment
MCCC	\$13,250	\$9,000
PCCC	\$32,500	\$0
Rider	\$10,000	\$0
WPU	\$33,849	\$0

**Money Spent on Financial Obligations**

Institution	DARC Funds Spent on Resolving Financial Obligations	Institution Funds Spent on Resolving Financial Obligations
MCCC	\$10,000	\$2,481
PCCC	\$0	\$0
Rider	\$20,500	\$10,000
WPU	\$0	\$0

**MCCC DARC Grant Budget**

Category	Money Budgeted	Percent of DARC Money
Personnel	\$15,000	20%
Professional Services	\$11,250	15%
Travel	\$5,400	7%
Limited Hardware/Software	\$0	0%
Instructional Materials	\$3,500	5%
Recruitment	\$13,250	17.5%

Resolving Financial Obligations	\$10,000	13%
Other	\$15,745	21%
Total	\$75,000	100%*

**PCCC DARC Grant Budget**

Category	Money Budgeted	Percent of DARC Money
Personnel	\$18,500	25%
Professional Services	\$2,125	3%
Travel	\$806	1%
Limited Hardware/Software	\$0	0%
Instructional Materials	\$10,500	14%
Recruitment	\$32,500	43%
Resolving Financial Obligations	\$0	0%
Other	\$10,250	14%
Total	\$75,000	100%

**Rider DARC Grant Budget**

Category	Money Budgeted	Percent of DARC Money
Personnel	\$0	0%
Professional Services	\$5,000	7%
Travel	\$0	0%
Limited Hardware/Software	\$7,500	10%
Instructional Materials	\$8,000	11%
Recruitment	\$10,000	13%

Resolving Financial Obligations	\$20,500	27%
Other	\$24,000	32%
Total	\$75,000	100%

**William Paterson DARC Grant Budget**

Category	Money Budgeted	Percent of DARC Grant Money
Personnel	\$18,750	25%
Professional Services	\$1,215	2%
Travel	\$186	<1%
Limited Hardware/Software	\$0	0%
Instructional Materials	\$21,000	28%
Recruitment	\$33,849	45%
Other	\$0	0%
Total	\$75,000	100%