

**THE ASSESSMENT OF THE  
DISENGAGED ADULTS RETURNING  
TO COLLEGE PROGRAM:**

**AN EVALUATION OF DARC I AND DARC II INSTITUTIONS**

**PREPARED FOR:**

THE NEW JERSEY COMMISSION ON HIGHER EDUCATION

**PREPARED BY:**

DANIEL BAUSCH, SEAN CAVANAUGH, NICOLE CORRE, DAVID DRESCHER  
JESSICA GODOFSKY, ROB HOUSTON, MEGAN MILHISLER & HANNAH WALKER

**ADVISEMENT OF:**

DR. CARL E. VAN HORN, PH.D.

Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy  
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

MAY 11, 2011

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:**

This report is commissioned by the New Jersey Commission on Higher Education and authored by Daniel Bausch, Sean Cavanaugh, Nicole Corre, David Drescher, Jessica Godofsky, Rob Houston, Megan Milhisler and Hannah Walker under the advisement of Dr. Carl E. Van Horn, Ph.D. The New Jersey DARC Program is a project of the federally-funded College Access Challenge Grant program, administered by the U.S. Department of Education.

The authors would like to extend thanks to Dr. Susan Schurman, Ph.D. and Dr. Cliff Zukin, Ph.D. for their guidance, as well as to the DARC program administrators for their cooperation.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Executive Summary**.....1

**Section I.** .....3  
Increasing Degree Completion Rate: A Growing Policy Issue

**Section II**.....4  
Overview of the DARC Program

**Section III.** .....6  
Methodology

**Section IV.** .....8  
Program Descriptions

**Section V.** .....16  
Evaluation of the DARC Program

**Section VI.** .....23  
Promising Practices for Increased Degree Completion

**Section VII.** .....26  
Key Findings and Recommendations

**Section VIII.** .....30  
Conclusion

**Appendices** .....31  
Student Survey Topline  
Student Focus Group Protocol  
Collaborative Programs Funded by the Lumina Foundation  
Quotations from DARC Students

**Bibliography** .....39

## Executive Summary

Increasing the level of college degree attainment among adults is an important educational priority of the federal government and the State of New Jersey. In 2009, the New Jersey Commission on Higher Education (NJCHE) began the Disengaged Adults Returning to College (DARC) program to provide annual grants to selected New Jersey colleges and universities to design and implement programs that identify, contact, re-enroll, and graduate adults that had previously attended the same institution, but had not earned a degree.

This report provides the NJCHE with an evaluation of the DARC program for the 2010-11 academic year. The goal of this report is to present key findings and recommendations that could improve the DARC program's effectiveness at re-enrolling students and increasing degree attainment among adult New Jersey residents. In May 2010, the Commission awarded DARC grants to the following eight New Jersey institutions:

- Cumberland County College
- Mercer County Community College
- Middlesex County College
- Ocean County College
- Passaic County Community College
- Rider University
- Sussex County Community College
- William Paterson University

To understand each institution's specific program, researchers studied program documents, interviewed program administrators from all eight institutions, surveyed 120 of the 364 students enrolled in the Spring 2011 semester at seven institutions, and conducted student interviews and focus groups at five institutions. All findings and recommendations presented are the products of research conducted by a team of eight graduate public policy students from the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University.

### *Key Findings*

- 1) According to data collected from school administrators, during the 2010-11 academic year, the DARC program contacted approximately 17,146 potential students, enrolled approximately 364 students in at least one class in the Spring 2011 semester, and is expected to have graduated 58 students by May 2011.
- 2) Targeted and periodic recruitment efforts were the most successful method of contacting and re-engaging students, while broad-based marketing efforts were generally ineffective.
- 3) DARC schools struggled to conduct effective marketing and recruitment efforts for the first semester of their programs because of the short time period between receipt of the grant funds and the beginning of the fall semester.

- 4) Most enrolled students indicated that they had an existing desire to return to school, and only 27% of surveyed students indicated that they decided to return because of financial aid incentives offered by the school.
- 5) Of the incentives offered by schools, students found the book vouchers/supply bundles to be the most appealing incentive (56%), followed by the personal and academic advising (23%).
- 6) Students highly value the personalized attention, assistance, and advisement they receive from their school's DARC coordinator and staff.
- 7) The part-time DARC coordinators struggle to address student needs and achieve program goals in the limited amount of hours they can devote to the program.
- 8) Students believe that increased scheduling flexibility and the opportunity to earn "life credits" for professional and life experiences would improve their school's program.
- 9) All schools have made or plan to make modest institutional changes as a result of the DARC program. These changes include greater cooperation among departments serving adult students, increased attention to student retention, and changes in academic models to better serve returning adult students and encourage student graduation.
- 10) Staff and administrators at both participating four-year institutions believe that major components of their programs are sustainable without additional funding; administrators at all six participating two-year community colleges do not believe current programs are sustainable without additional funding.

In response to these findings, the Commission should consider the following recommendations to improve the DARC program:

- **Recommendation 1:** Alter the grant requirements to encourage schools to conduct targeted marketing campaigns, rather than broad-based marketing efforts
- **Recommendation 2:** Develop a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) program to assist schools with targeted marketing efforts
- **Recommendation 3:** Provide DARC funding to recipient schools during the spring, rather than summer, to allow additional time for marketing and recruitment efforts for the fall semester
- **Recommendation 4:** Alter the grant requirements to encourage schools to hire a full-time, program coordinator, rather than a part-time coordinator
- **Recommendation 5:** Enhance the availability and consistency of Prior Learning Assessments
- **Recommendation 6:** Consider one more year of additional funding support for DARC I, and consistent with current protocol, consider additional funding for DARC II in the 2011-2012 academic year
- **Recommendation 7:** Solicit proposals for a third round of DARC grants at up to four additional colleges and universities for the 2011-2012 academic year
- **Recommendation 8:** Pursue additional grant opportunities that could provide increased funding to help sustain and expand programs that assist adults in returning to college and completing a degree

## Section I. Increasing Degree Completion Rate: A Growing Policy Issue

The United States workforce is one of the most highly educated in the world. Approximately 39% of Americans hold a two-year or four-year degree. While the attainment rate in the United States has held steady for nearly four decades, other industrialized nations have recently surpassed the United States, which now ranks ninth in the world for college attainment. Currently, only 57% of those who enroll in a four-year college graduate within six years, while approximately half that figure graduate from a two-year institution.<sup>1</sup> This growing education deficit threatens our global competitiveness and economic future.

To address this challenge, top policymakers and government officials have made college completion a top priority. In 2009, President Obama set a national goal that the United States achieve the highest rate of college completion in the world by 2020, calling for the support of state governors and education leaders across the country. On March 24, 2011, Vice President Joe Biden announced a plan of action along with a series of existing federal resource streams from which to draw.<sup>2</sup> As a part of this plan, the administration recently launched the 2011 Comprehensive Grant Program, which will provide a total of \$20 million to colleges to implement plans to improve productivity in post-secondary schools.<sup>3</sup> In its 2012 budget, the Department of Education also announced two major programs: the First in the World initiative and the College Completion initiative. The First in the World initiative would provide grants that support innovative practices to accelerate learning, increase completion rates, and constrain tuition costs. Secondly, states can apply for College Completion Incentive Grants, which would award \$50 million to states and institutions for undertaking reforms that produce more college graduates.

A significant component of increasing completion rates is improving student retention: that is, reducing the number of students that leave college without obtaining a degree. Research shows that students leave school for a variety of reasons, of which family obligations, financial issues, and employment are cited as the leading causes.<sup>4</sup> While many of these reasons are not easily addressed by policy solutions, literature on student attrition also indicates that students are more likely to leave school when they feel disengaged from their institution, and they are more likely to complete school if they view institutions as helpful and responsive to their needs.<sup>5</sup> Given the large population of individuals that did not complete a degree, this research suggests that targeted programs seeking to engage and support students can be an effective means of encouraging student completion.

New Jersey is well-positioned to tap into this pool of students. Although New Jersey has one of the nation's most skilled workforces, approximately 24% of New Jersey adults between the ages of 25 and 54, or approximately 1.39 million people, have attended college, but have not received a degree.<sup>6</sup> These individuals form a large group that has the potential to earn degrees relatively quickly. According to a recent forecast, by 2018 New Jersey will rank second out of all states in the number of jobs requiring a bachelor's degree, while it will rank 46<sup>th</sup> in the number of jobs that require only some college without a degree.<sup>7</sup> If schools can successfully re-engage and graduate these students, this population is large enough to move New Jersey into the top tier of college attainment in the United States and help meet the need for a robust workforce by 2018.

## Section II. Overview of the DARC Program

The NJCHE initiated the DARC program in 2009. Established in 1994 by the Higher Education Restructuring Act, the Commission operates as the primary overseer for New Jersey's 31 public and 33 independent higher education institutions, which together serve over 440,000 part-time and full-time students. The Commission operates under the authority of the governor and maintains an advisory role in the framework of New Jersey's higher education system.<sup>8</sup>

An expanding role of the Commission is to obtain and administer federal government grants for state higher education programs and initiatives. The College Access Challenge Grant Program, a three-year formula grant managed by the U.S. Department of Education, provided the funding for the DARC program. Its purpose is to strengthen partnerships among federal, state, and local governments in an effort to increase the participation of low-income and disadvantaged students in postsecondary education. All 50 state education agencies, the District of Columbia, and several U.S. territories currently participate in the program.

To receive funding, states were required to maintain previous levels of higher education funding and provide matching funds. In addition, states were required to submit annual performance reports that detail the activities and services provided by the grant, the level of student participation in funded programs, and the state's success at meeting program goals and objectives. Executive summaries of programs in states that participated in 2008-2009 are currently available on the Department of Education website.<sup>9</sup> Overall, total appropriations for the program in FY2009 were \$66 million, with New Jersey receiving approximately \$1.1 million.

The primary goals of the DARC program are to increase institutional focus on student completion and to provide the opportunity for adult New Jersey residents to return to school, obtain a degree, and improve their employment opportunities. To accomplish this goal, the DARC program seeks to identify, contact, re-enroll, and graduate adults who did not earn an Associate's or Bachelor's degree during their initial enrollment in a New Jersey higher education institution.

The NJCHE informed the state's public higher education institutions of grant funding through a Notice of Grant Opportunity in March 2009. Schools interested in applying were required to submit proposals. The NJCHE outlined stipulations for the eligible student population, presented conditions under which it would grant funding, and described the framework applicants should address in their proposals. Within these broad parameters, each institution was responsible for designing its own school-specific DARC program. Implementation and internal evaluation of these programs is the responsibility of individual schools, while the request for proposal established a list of reporting requirements to aid in external evaluation by the NJCHE and other sources.

---

**Eligible Student Population**

---

- Adults, 20 years or older
- Left NJ school within past 10 years (since 2000)
- Maintains good standing
- Did not earn a postsecondary degree
- Completed at least 50% of credit toward degree

---

**Conditions of Grant Approval**

---

- Selection based upon points-awarded system
- Flexible policies and procedures
- Creative Identification, Contact, Recruitment, and Marketing Methods
- Removal and streamlining of admission barriers and standards
- Personalized Returning Adult Services
- Lessons learned
- Institutional progress evaluation
- Development of an effective sustainability plan for continuation of program

---

**Request for Proposal Framework and Contents**

---

- Up to \$75,000 DARC funding per institution
- 50% matching contribution by institution
- One application per institution under a competitive process
- Approval of 2<sup>nd</sup> year funding predicated upon submission of timely reports
- Up to 25% of funding used for personnel and travel, not including full-time hiring, fringe benefits, or purposes outside stated DARC mission
- 75% of funding used towards stated purposes of DARC Program
- Descriptions of priorities/activities proposed to re-engage returning adults
- Proposal narrative
- Lists of required budgets, financial information, timelines, work allotments, and reports
- Strategies for specialized returning adult advisement and services
- Methods of providing instructional materials, purchasing additional program assets, and resolving outstanding financial obligations
- Development of new degree options and innovative activities to aid in implementation

The NJCHE's administration and oversight of the DARC program is currently in its second year. The announcement of grant awards for the first round of the DARC program (DARC I) occurred in May 2009. These first awardees included two county community colleges: Mercer County Community College and Passaic County Community College; and two four-year, Bachelor's degree-granting schools: Rider University and William Paterson University. Although the Commission approved the schools' applications in May 2009, the transfer of funds to the colleges did not occur until late summer and implementation of the DARC I program did not begin fully until the spring 2010 semester. Graduate students at the Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy conducted an evaluation of the DARC I program in the spring 2010 semester and published a report in May 2010.<sup>10</sup> This report explained the structure and purpose of the DARC I programs and highlighted common themes, challenges, and lessons learned during this first iteration of funding.

In April 2010, the Commission issued a Notice of Grant Opportunity that invited institutions to submit proposals for a second round of DARC grants (DARC II). In June 2010, the Commission announced that four county community colleges would receive DARC II grants: Cumberland County College, Middlesex County College, Ocean County College, and Sussex County Community College. All DARC II schools received grant funding in the summer of 2010 and were able to begin their specific DARC programs in the fall 2010 semester. Additionally, all four DARC I schools received a second year of continued grant funding, which consisted of exact or near approximations of the prior year's awards. This evaluation includes all eight institutions that received DARC funding for the 2010-2011 academic year.

## Section III. Methodology

This evaluation uses a case study approach that separately examines each participating institution using multiple methods of data collection. This strategy allows for in-depth observation of each distinct program and the extraction of common themes observed across institutions.<sup>11</sup> Four research teams each concentrated their efforts on two institutions. The teams worked together to develop research questions of interest, identify relevant data to collect, and analyze the results in order to maintain consistency across visits to each institution. This project uses a three-pronged approach to data collection, drawing on both qualitative and quantitative methods common in case study evaluations:

- Semi-structured, in-person interviews with administrators
- A mixed-mode, self-administered survey (paper and web-enabled) completed by 120 of the 364 students who enrolled in at least one class in the Spring 2011 semester
- Focus groups and individual interviews with students

The research team drew on multiple sources to construct the interview protocol, student survey, and focus group discussion guide. Sources include the Commission's request for proposal, the 2010 DARC I evaluation report, the schools' individual proposals, conversations with Betsy Garlatti of NJCHE, reviews of academic literature, and other web-based research.

### *Interviews*

Data collection at each institution included in-depth, semi-structured interviews with program administrators and staff lasting approximately two to three hours. The research team developed an interview protocol that served as a guide in gathering detailed program information. In addition to these in-person interviews, researchers conducted phone conversations and email exchanges to obtain further information from administrators.

### *Student Survey*

The research team designed the survey to assess general attitudes of participants about their experience, gauge their use of various program services, and gather demographic data.<sup>12</sup> Where appropriate, questions and response items were customized to the institution's particular program. The survey also provided some student data in the absence of more substantive interviews, which were not always possible. The team used multi-mode administration to accommodate a population in which computer access is inconsistent and to encourage the highest possible response rate. Email reminders and an extended fielding period further encouraged maximum response. Program administrators distributed the survey via an internet link, and either mailed or hand-delivered paper surveys during advising appointments or other interaction with students.

**Figure 1: Student Survey Composition**

	<b>Respondents</b>	<b>% of Respondents</b>
Cumberland County College	0	-
Mercer County Community College	9	8%
Middlesex County College	12	10%
Ocean County College	12	10%
Passaic County Community College	32	27%
Rider University	16	13%
Sussex County Community College	11	9%
William Paterson University	28	23%
<b>Total N</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>100%</b>

*See Appendix A for a detailed summary of responses and the questionnaire.*

## *Student Focus Groups and Interviews*

Another feature of this evaluation is the inclusion of focus groups and interviews with students at five institutions, which provide an in-depth perspective on student experience and contextualize student survey responses. Interviews and focus group discussions looked at barriers students face in returning to school, their experience with services provided by the program, and their ideas to improve the program. The resulting descriptive information gives insight into the degree to which the DARC program is able to re-engage, retain, and assist students toward the ultimate goal of graduation. The research team developed a protocol to guide the focus group sessions and interviews, but allowed student responses to direct the overall direction and tone of the interviews (See Appendix B for the focus group discussion guide).

## *Limitations*

In designing the methodology, the research team worked within a set of constraints that shaped the design approach taken and limit the conclusions drawn, including:

- **The absence of a counterfactual** – There is no comparison or pre-test group with which to compare observations; there is no data about those who did not enroll in the program, nor is there knowledge about what would have happened to the target population absent the program. Therefore, any observed outcomes discussed in this report cannot be attributed solely to the program.
- **Limited timeframe** – The research team worked under a short time frame of approximately three months to complete this evaluation from start to finish.
- **The absence of a centralized protocol directing program implementation** – Operating under a block grant, each institution designed, constructed, implemented, and evaluated its individual program, thus complicating the comparisons of results across institutions.
- **Programs in multiple stages of implementation** – Comparisons are made across DARC I and DARC II institutions; however, we expected the four programs in their second year of implementation to be qualitatively different from those programs in their first year.

There are also limitations to each individual method used. First, because administrators are likely to have a positive view of the program given their role in implementation, in-depth interview responses may be biased. A limitation of the student survey is the sample itself: program administrators often acted as “gatekeepers” in assisting the research team with administering the survey, serving as another source of bias. The small sample size, as well as the varied distribution of completed responses across institutions, also limits the conclusions that can be made about opinions, behaviors, and demographics of the DARC student population. Focus group participants were selected via convenience sampling, further biasing responses. Typically, administrators personally asked specific students to attend a focus group, and chose these individuals because of an established rapport with that individual. Therefore, these individuals cannot be considered to be representative of the entire student population. In addition, the time availability of the program participants, time constraints faced by the researchers, and difficulty contacting program participants all limited the ability of the researchers to organize such focus groups.

## Section IV. Program Descriptions

The descriptions of each participating institution's program are based on information provided from program administrators, grant proposals, program documents, and returning students. Schools in year two of funding are presented first, followed by schools in year one. Student qualifications, enrollment statistics, and incentives are shown below in Figures 2, 3, and 4 in order to compare program designs across institutions.

Figure 2 shows that all schools have similar student enrollment requirements, with little variation from the parameters stated in the grant. Figure 3 demonstrates similar enrollment and graduation outcomes across all schools. Figure 4 highlights the variety of incentives that schools offered to returning students, with nearly all schools providing book vouchers and fee forgiveness.

**Figure 2: Student Qualifications for Program Enrollment (2009-2010)**

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Period Since Prior Enrollment</b>	<b>Minimum GPA</b>	<b>Minimum Credits</b>
<b>First Year Grantees</b>			
Cumberland County College	Left in last 10 years	2.0	50% of credits towards degree
Middlesex County College	Left in last 10 years	2.5	50% of credits towards degree
Ocean County College	Left in last 5 years	2.0	50% of credits towards degree
Sussex County Community College	Left in last 10 years	2.0	50% of credits towards degree
<b>Second Year Grantees</b>			
Mercer County Community College	Left in last 10 years	2.5	50% of credits towards degree
Passaic County Community College	Left in last 10+ years	2.0	≥50% of credits towards degree
Rider University	Left in last 10 years	2.5	50% of credits towards degree
William Paterson University	Left in last 10 years	2.0	50% of credits towards degree

*Source: DARC program administrator interviews and program proposals*

Figure 3: Program Enrollment Statistics (Fall 2010 and Spring 2011)

Institution	Program Name	Potential Enrollees Identified	Potential Enrollees Contacted	Proposed Enrollment Goal	Enrollment					Expected Grads by May 2011
					F '09	S '10	F '10	S '11		
<b>First Year Grantees</b>										
Cumberland County College	<i>Return to Learn</i>	2,118	1,929	50	NA	NA	10	41		6
Middlesex County College	<i>CARE (Center for Adults Returning to Education)</i>	5,191	3,300	100	NA	NA	4	18		3
Ocean County College	<i>Adults Back @ College</i>	3,687	3,639	50	NA	NA	20	47		2
Sussex County Community College	<i>Return, Learn, and Earn</i>	1,574	1,207	25	NA	NA	19	19		4
<b>Second Year Grantees</b>										
Mercer County Community College*	<i>ARC (Adults Returning to College)</i>	Over 3,000	3,000		29	27	31	35		3
Passaic County Community College	<i>DARC</i>	1500	1200	50 (for June '09-June '10)	-	35	56	51		15
Rider University	<i>Return to Learn</i>	1800	717 (in 2009-10)	-	-	40**	-	91**		11
William Paterson University	<i>Online-Weekend-Evening (O-W-E)</i>	2,430 (in 2009-10)	2,154 (in 2009-10)	35 initially	0	10	72	62		14
<b>Subtotal</b>	-	21,300+	17,146	310	29	112	212	364		<b>58</b>

\*in its initial proposal, Mercer set a contact goal of 300 students

\*\*total student enrollment for full academic year

Source: DARC program administrator interviews and program proposal

**Figure 4: Program Incentives (2010-11)**

Institution	Fee Waiver/ Forgiveness Voucher	Book Loan	Book Supply	School Laptop Loan	Child Care	Other Financial	Remedial Courses/ Personal Tutoring	Non- academic Skills Workshops	Priority Registration
<b>First Year Grantees</b>									
Cumberland County College	✓	✓	✓	-	-	-	-	-	-
Middlesex County College	✓	✓	-	✓	-	-	-	✓	-
Ocean County College	-	✓	-	✓	-	-	✓	✓	✓
Sussex County College	✓	✓	-	-	✓	-	✓	✓	✓
<b>Second Year Grantees</b>									
Mercer County Community College	✓	✓	-	✓	-	-	-	✓	✓
Passaic County Community College	✓	✓	-	-	-	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rider University	✓	✓	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
William Paterson University	✓	✓**	-	-	-	-	-	-	✓

\*Tuition assistance provided by institutional sources only

\*\*William Paterson purchased books directly for the student

Source: DARC program administrator interviews and program proposal

## ***DARC I Institutions***

### ***Mercer County Community College***

Mercer County Community College began the second year of its *Adults Returning to College* program in the summer of 2010. After contacting over 3,000 students since the beginning of the program, administrators decided to alter eligibility requirements for the program by changing the GPA requirement and increasing the time period since students had left school. After initial contact through personalized mailings, emails, and open house events, administrators collected basic demographic information on students and gave them special priority for the registration process. Unfortunately, some potential students who expressed a desire to enroll into the program were not eligible for financial aid and could not afford to return. Program administrators believe that students were especially attracted to the program because of book vouchers and fee forgiveness, which was applicable to a variety of institutional and course-related fees.

In addition to the fee forgiveness and book vouchers, the program offered substantial personal advising to students through the *Adults Returning to College* team, which included the program director and a part-time advisor. This team assisted students with the registration process, monitored student progress, helped students navigate academic and institutional challenges, and provided updates and reminders on school events. Advisors also offered both daytime and evening/weekend advising hours to accommodate student schedules and promote ongoing contact with students. In addition to advisement services, the program offered various fee-related incentives not included in the original program design, including a College Level Examination Program (CLEP) study guide.

The primary challenges of the program cited by administrators were grant restrictions and the extensive time and effort needed to assist non-traditional, returning students that require a highly personal and motivating “touch” that differs significantly from traditional students. The DARC grant’s limitations in re-distributing funds prevented the College from advertising the program on its website or creating a program-specific brochure to assist with recruitment. In addition, program administrators think that increasing the role of the DARC coordinator would allow for more contact with continuing students and improve retention within the program. Administrators do believe that the program has helped the College recognize the importance of helping adults return to school and hopes to conduct a marketing campaign once per semester as well as continue to advise those currently in the program with its daytime advisor. They further plan to continue to provide adult student-specific services, such as encouraging students to pursue Credit by Experience and CLEP. Even so, it is doubtful that all other program elements can be sustained at Mercer without future funding.

### ***Passaic County Community College***

Passaic County Community College began the second year of its DARC program in the summer of 2010. Following the first year of the program, administrators modified the strategies used to identify, contact, and recruit students. To increase the number of eligible students, the minimum credit requirement was relaxed for the second year. The school identified eligible students and contacted them with personalized letters and telephone calls. While the school held an open house event in the first year of the program, administrators viewed it as unsuccessful and did not repeat it in the second year. In addition to directly contacting students, the program also advertised using flyers, newspaper advertisements, and the college’s webpage.

During year two of the DARC program, administrators continued several services to assist students with returning to school. These services include personal advising from the part-time program advisor, book vouchers, online classes, and workshops. As program administrators learned more about students’ needs, they initiated a non-credit math refresher course to help prepare students for the math placement exam. In addition, although the

program initially offered childcare vouchers, they were not used and administrators replaced them with limited tuition assistance.

The primary challenge that administrators faced with implementing the DARC program was the limited time that the DARC coordinator was able to dedicate to the program and to students. Administrators believe that students in the program are different from the overall student population, with a specialized set of needs that requires a full-time staff person. In addition, they believe more funding should have been allocated to student services, rather than advertising. Overall, the DARC program has the potential to be continued at Passaic if existing institutional resources could replace the advising services provided by the DARC program administrator. However, marketing and outreach will likely discontinue without additional funding.

### ***Rider University***

Rider University began the second year of its *Return to Learn* program in the summer of 2010. After initially identifying 1,800 eligible students, Rider contacted 717 potential enrollees that lived within 30 miles of the school using multiple personalized mailings, brochures, and phone calls. These outreach efforts invited prospective students to visit Rider's *Return to Learn* website, which provides personalized information about the program and collects information relevant to program goals. Program administrators report an extremely high enrollment rate of approximately 95% among those who completed the survey on the website.

The *Return to Learn* program offered several benefits and services to assist returning students. To provide financial support, the program offered returning students \$100 bookstore gift cards and waivers for re-enrollment fees. In addition to financial assistance, all returning students received counseling from the professional staff at the College of Continuing Studies. During the second year of the program, Rider added several online classes and its first online degree, a Bachelor's of Science in Business Administration. Although most students preferred to complete their prior major, online classes were popular with returning students. Program counselors took steps to offer students "life credits," such as those available for speakers of non-English languages, to promote student graduation. In addition, students with sufficient credits could receive an Associate's degree immediately, although only one student chose to do this.

Rider reported very few bureaucratic obstacles to implementing its program. Administrators believe that this is because the institution's student population already included many "non-traditional" students, and much of the *Return to Learn* program is an extension of existing programs targeting these students. Rider designed most of its program to be sustainable without external funding. The new online degree and courses will remain in place to serve students that find them more convenient. Program administrators hope that the data system established in the first year of the program will help identify likely re-enrollees and current students that are more likely to leave school without obtaining a degree. The College of Continuing Studies administers *Return to Learn*, and because the program uses the same staff resources as the College, its focus on graduating these students will continue after grant funding ends. Although the aggressive marketing efforts and financial incentives will end when the grant terminates, Rider hopes to extend its outreach to other area schools in an effort to recruit students likely to return to college.

### ***William Paterson University***

William Paterson University began the second year of its *Online-Weekend-Evening* program in the summer of 2010. William Paterson initially identified 2,430 former students and used a combination of letters, pamphlets and postcards to contact more than 2,000 of these potential students. Once students expressed interest in participating in the program, the school invited them to open house events to meet with staff and begin the re-enrollment process. Students were offered incentives such as priority course registration, books purchased by the school, faculty and peer mentor programs, and personalized academic advisement.

While the *Online-Weekend-Evening* program offered many of the same incentives in year two that it had offered in year one of the program, administrators made a number of significant changes. In spring of 2010, the school hired a full-time program administrator to provide personalized assistance to returning students in response to disappointing enrollment. This program administrator is a former graduate of William Paterson and provides a single point of contact for students currently enrolled in the program or those who are interested in enrolling. Through the program administrator's input, the university has redesigned advisement models, offered greater flexibility with degree requirements, and reduced the prior emphasis on enrolling returning students in a new "liberal studies" major. Although administrators initially planned to offer many online, weekend, and evening courses, they abandoned this strategy after finding that student enrollment in each course was too low. Administrators believe these changes improved program enrollment and retention during year two.

The main challenges faced by administrators were largely addressed by the changes made following the first year of the program. In addition to improved program performance and a dramatic increase in enrollment (from 10 in Spring 2010 to 62 in Spring 2011), administrators believe the program has led to notable institutional changes at William Paterson. Specifically, the University has improved retention efforts for current students by creating a new Vice President of Enrollment Management position and instituting a new advisement model for first-year students. While administrators believe that the University can continue the advising component of the *Online-Weekend-Evening* program, it is likely that the school will reduce or eliminate marketing efforts and the book-purchasing program without future grant funding.

## ***DARC II Institutions***

### ***Cumberland County College***

Cumberland County College launched the *Return to Learn* program in the summer of 2010. After identifying more than 2,000 eligible students, the school sent direct mailings and emails to students explaining the program and inviting students to participate. The school held several open houses prior to each semester, including one open house to inform local human resources managers of the program. Initially, marketing efforts included direct mailings, follow-up phone calls, flyers, a newspaper advertisement, and an appearance on a local television show. Program administrators believe that students are not attracted to the program because of one particular incentive, but because of the program package and personal attention they receive.

During the fall semester, the *Return to Learn* program offered several services designed to assist students with returning to school. A primary emphasis of the program was direct assistance from the program director and the Returning Adult Specialist, who guides students through the enrollment process, assists students with academic and institutional issues, and monitors student progress. In addition to advisement, the program devoted significant funding for fee forgiveness and book vouchers. Unfortunately, limitations on the amount of aid a student could be offered disqualified many students from receiving vouchers. Because of this restriction, administrators decided to start a book loan program in the spring to provide students with textbooks that would be purchased and owned by the institution.

The primary challenges administrators faced with implementing the program were limited time and resources for marketing and institutional/departmental requirements or restrictions that made student enrollment and graduation more difficult. Administrators substantially increased marketing efforts in the spring and actively worked to build institutional support for the program to address these issues. Administrators are confident that *Return to Learn* has led to important institutional changes, such as a greater emphasis on the initial step of student withdrawal, with an increased focus on requiring exit interviews for all students preparing to withdraw. In addition, the program has led to greater institutional flexibility with long-held requirements and rules. Current experience with *Return to Learn* leads administrators to believe that the program can be continued in the future.

## *Middlesex County College*

Middlesex County College began its *Center for Adults Returning to Education* program in the summer of 2010. After identifying eligible re-enrollees, Middlesex contacted 3,300 potential students with a combination of direct mailings and emails. Students were invited to open houses to meet with program staff and begin the re-enrollment process. In addition to these efforts, the program advertised using newspaper advertisements, flyers, and the college's webpage. Program administrators believe that the targeted database of eligible students and the various marketing efforts were integral in successfully targeting and re-enrolling students.

During the fall semester, the *Center for Adults Returning to Education* offered several services designed to assist students with returning to school. A primary emphasis of the program was direct assistance from a program coordinator, who helps facilitate the admissions process and assists with personal and career counseling, as well as any other institutional issues experienced by adult students. In addition to advisement, the program is dedicated to providing adult students with a waived \$25 application fee, a \$200 book voucher each semester, and workshops that focus on issues students identify as important to their success. While these services and incentives have benefited participating students, administrators noted that credit requirements have disqualified many interested and motivated students from participating in the program.

The primary challenges administrators faced with implementing the program were the limited staff time devoted to the program, and limited recruitment time for the fall semester. In response to recruitment challenges, the Middlesex team adopted a year-round recruitment effort, encouraging interested and eligible students to join the program at any time. Program administrators believe that the program coordinator should be expanded to a full-time position to address staff time limitations and enhance the availability of services to students. Despite these challenges, administrators are confident that the program has led to changes in Middlesex's approach to retention and re-enrollment. Administrators noted that the program has led to a greater emphasis on student services. Current reviews of the students' experiences with the *Center for Adults Returning to Education* program leads administrators to believe that the program is exceeding students' expectations and is extremely helpful in ensuring their success at Middlesex.

## *Ocean County College*

Ocean County College launched the *Adults Back @ College* program in the summer of 2010. After identifying students who had left the institution in the last five years without any unpaid financial obligations, more than 3,600 students were contacted by mail and invited to attend an open house event. The school held multiple open house events that allowed students to talk to program administrators and to re-enroll immediately. In addition to letters and open houses, Ocean advertised the program using a press release, brochures, and campus advertising. While other Ocean staff members referred a small number of students to the program, program administrators cite the initial letter to eligible students as the primary stimulus that motivated students to investigate the program and contact program staff.

The *Adults Back @ College* program offered a diverse range of services and incentives to attract and assist returning students. All students received priority registration, a school supply bundle, a book voucher worth at least \$300, and access to career counseling and a specialized program advisor. In addition, seminars on student success and specialized tutoring in math and English were also offered during the academic year. Although initially administrators planned to have a Returning Students Club, this did not materialize because students did not express interest in having a club. Administrators noted the popularity of book vouchers and said that they plan to allocate more funding to book vouchers in the future.

Program administrators highlighted the cooperation and support that the program has received from other departments at Ocean County College. Rather than noting institutional challenges that occurred during

implementation, administrators emphasized the need to devote extensive time and resources to assist returning students. One issue that administrators faced was deciding when to provide step-by-step assistance to a student and when to encourage them to address issues through traditional institutional means. Overall, administrators are confident that the program has led to a greater interest and concern in effectively serving adult students at Ocean. Because of the success of the *Adults Back @ College* program, administrators hope to expand the program and to obtain funding to continue the program.

### ***Sussex County Community College***

Sussex County Community College initiated the *Return, Learn, and Earn* program in the summer of 2010. After identifying 1,574 eligible students, a variety of methods were used to contact potential re-enrollees. These included personalized direct mailings, emails, brochures, and phone calls that explained program benefits and invited the prospective re-enrollee to meet with program staff. In addition to directly contacting eligible students, Sussex held an information session and advertised using radio, print, billboard advertisements, the school's website, and social media. Both administrators and returning students cited personal letters, specialized staff attention, and an existing desire to finish school as instrumental factors in motivating student re-enrollment.

Various services and incentives were offered to students enrolled in the *Return, Learn, and Earn* program. Two of the services characterized as essential by both administrators and students were the dedicated DARC program coordinator and the book voucher, which covered all textbook expenses for enrolled students. The DARC program coordinator took a proactive approach to engage, guide, and assist students in navigating the institutional departments and overcoming challenges with returning to college. The coordinator also created internal surveys and collected mid-term progress reports from professors. In addition to these services, administrators cited the expansion of online classes, the creation of a laptop loan program, and the availability of computer training assistance as important components of the program. In the future, administrators believe that tuition assistance, a peer mentoring program, meal and gas cards, computer skills workshops, and an online student forum would each be positive improvements to the program.

The primary challenges that administrators faced in implementing the program were related to the short length of time available to prepare for the fall semester and the absence of a full-time, permanent bursar when the program began. Administrators attempted to address these problems through several means, including hiring a capable coordinator, meeting with other DARC grantee schools to compare lessons learned, and maintaining good working relationships across all departments. The program has led school administrators to reexamine and modify existing policies and procedures to assist returning adults and increase the institutional focus on student retention. In the future, administrators hope to find ways to better target low-income students and expand the program to other eligible residents of Sussex County, as well as the whole state. While administrators doubt that the *Return, Learn, and Earn* program will continue in the same form without future funding, they are hopeful that the program's success will help to attract institutional and external funding that will allow the program to continue.

## Section V. Evaluation of the DARC Program

The research team evaluated the DARC program by examining each of the eight programs within the framework of five key themes: identifying eligible students, contacting and re-engaging students, retaining and graduating students, implementing institutional change, and sustaining the program beyond the grant period. These themes are each distinct program components that reflect the goals specified in the DARC grant. To distinguish between the continuation of specific program elements and the continuation of changes not explicitly included in a school's DARC program, references to the continuation of specific program elements are captured in the category of "program sustainability," while broader changes in institutional priorities and adaptations in school bureaucracy are defined as "institutional change."

### *Identifying Eligible Students*

All DARC schools were able to identify large numbers of prospective students that matched the criteria stipulated in the grant and in their proposals. Schools identified eligible students using available institutional records of students that had completed courses in the last ten years, but had not received a degree. Schools also purchased data from the National Student Clearinghouse, which provides updated student contact information and current data on school enrollment and degree completion. Prior to initiating contact and recruitment efforts, all eight institutions identified between 1,500 and 3,700 potential returning students.

Although all program administrators were able to identify a large group of eligible students that met the grant requirements, some administrators emphasized that grant requirements prevented them from identifying and targeting additional potential students. Because the DARC grant limits participating institutions to enrolling students who had previously attended the same institution, schools could not identify adults who did not attend the institution, but may live near the school and otherwise meet program eligibility requirements. In addition, the requirements that individuals must have left in the last 10 years, maintained a 2.5 GPA, and completed 50% of credits for a degree further restricted the potential pool of eligible students. Some schools relaxed these restrictions on a case-by-case basis in order to promote enrollment.

### *Contacting and Re-Engaging Students*

Schools attempted to contact prospective students using both targeted outreach and mass marketing. Unfortunately, the Commission did not disburse DARC funding to institutions until August 2010, restricting the amount of time available to market the program for fall semester. The effect of this delayed disbursement shows itself in the differences in enrollment numbers from fall to spring (see Figure 3). Even so, targeted outreach tended to be the most successful in re-engaging potential students; of the enrolled students surveyed, almost half (48%) first heard about the program through a personalized letter or brochure sent from the institution, while just 3% indicated that they heard about the program through a broad-based newspaper or radio advertisement. Student focus groups and interviews with administrators corroborate these findings, indicating that students responded best to personalized forms of contact that showed the school's specific interest in them.

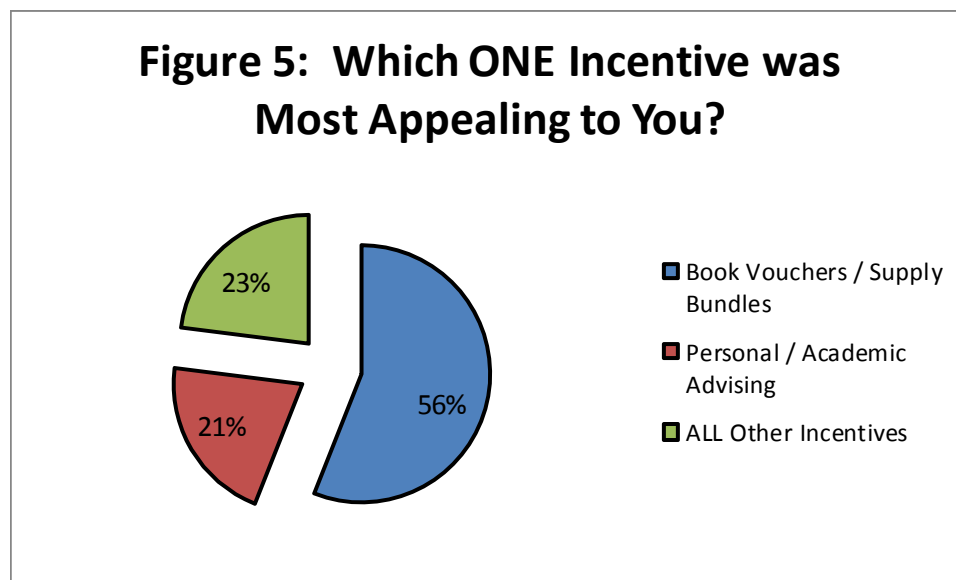
#### *From the Students:*

*"I originally earned 51 credits in the late 70's. I went back three years ago and was excited until I was informed I needed 18 - 21 credits for my associates' degree when I had 59 credits at the time. I gave up until I received the letter and decided to accept the invitation and try one more time. Thankfully, I got an answer I could work with and afford...I wanted a piece of paper for myself. I only need a lab science, English II and a tech course (10 credits)."*

*"I'm more determined now more than before to finish at PCCC. I see where in this economy having an education gives you more of an edge to get a job or be qualified for that position."*

Several program administrators emphasized that their institutions needed to contact identified students multiple times to effectively reach them and increase enrollment. At Middlesex, Sussex and Rider, administrators kept databases of all contacted students who expressed interest in the program in order to re-contact them in the future. Middlesex also used repetitious outreach. They hosted information sessions, followed by a mailing and targeted emails to transfer students throughout the school year, and distributed flyers at community centers.

While schools offered many specific incentives to attract students to return, according to the student survey, the incentives that students found most appealing were the book vouchers/supply bundles (56%) and the personal and academic advising (23%), as depicted in Figure 5. During focus groups and interviews, students emphasized that financial assistance and services were valued and appreciated.

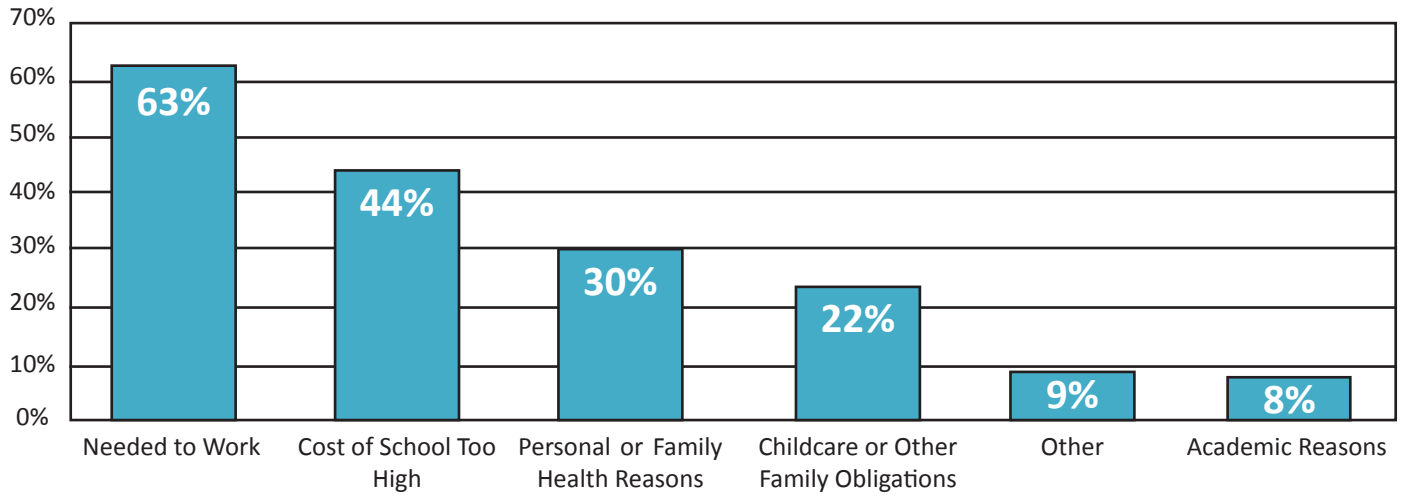


*n = 120; Source: DARC Student Survey, 2011*

Despite the popularity of these incentives, only 27% of students surveyed reported that financial incentives offered by the school were a reason that they decided to return. At Ocean County College, one student indicated that the nominal amount of the book voucher was less important than the gesture of the book voucher, which demonstrated that the school was supporting her and she could complete her degree.

Although DARC program administrators contacted 17,146 students, only 364, or 2% of those contacted, were actually re-enrolled for at least one class in Spring 2011 (see Figure 3). In attempting to understand this low ratio and what differentiates those who do not re-enroll from those who do, why students left school in the first place bears consideration. Data collected from the student survey indicates students did not leave school in the first place willingly or for lack of trying. As illustrated in Figure 6, more common reasons students left school included needing to work, inability to continue affording school, and personal or health reasons, as opposed to leaving for academic reasons.

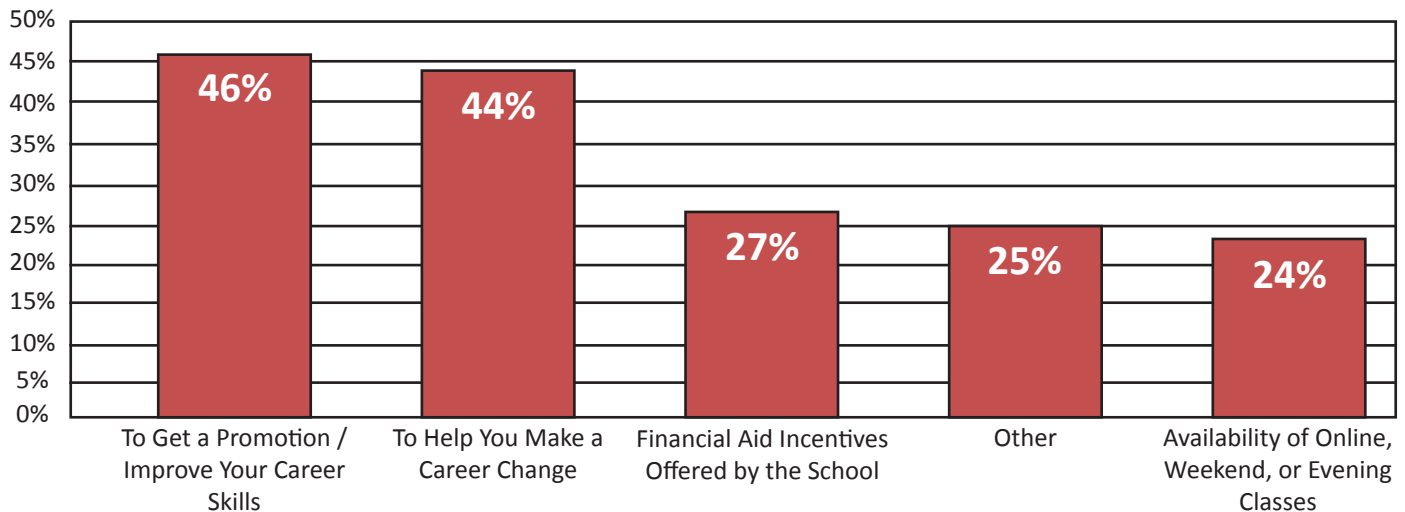
**Figure 6: Why Did You Initially Leave School?  
(Check All that Apply)**



*n = 120; Source: DARC Student Survey, 2011*

A common theme across schools for those who do choose to re-enroll is that these students were thinking about doing so already. This is an important part of understanding why personal outreach worked, because these efforts appeared to be most successful for those students who were already considering returning to complete their degree. In their survey responses, students indicated that they wanted “to finally finish,” to return to school “for personal growth,” or “to make a better life for myself;” these responses, specified by students in the “other” category of the question, are shown in Figure 7. This suggests that personalized outreach succeeded because it re-engaged students who already had an existing interest in returning to school.

**Figure 7: Why Did You Decide to Return to School?  
(Check All that Apply)**



*n = 120; Source: DARC Student Survey, 2011*

## Retaining and Graduating

The single most important program component that retains and graduates students is the provision of personal assistance and advising. Through both surveys and focus groups, students expressed strong appreciation for the administrative guidance, career assistance, academic advising, and personal counseling provided by program advisors and staff. Of students surveyed, 91% rate their experience with advising as excellent or good. While only 30% of students met with their advisor at least a few times each semester, students indicated both in survey responses and in focus groups that email and phone calls were an important means of communication between them and their program advisors, rather than in-person meetings. For example, at Cumberland, administrators said that students were often too busy to meet regularly at scheduled times throughout the semester, and tended to visit advisors when a specific need arose.

Students responded strongly to advisors that helped them navigate the school's enrollment process and address academic and personal concerns. Unsurprisingly, they responded well to staff members who are welcoming, engaging, friendly, actively involved in outreach, and effectively interacted with students and staff. For example, after talking with one student and learning of her concern with completing a college-level math course, the advisor at Passaic facilitated the creation of a non-credit math refresher course designed to help returning students place into college-level math courses. Students also attribute such services as assistance with transferring to a four-year school, course recommendations, and thorough transcript audits to this advisor.

### *From the Students:*

*"I love how my transition from being out of school for some time to coming back has been one that I didn't have to face alone. There is some real support behind my education and the individuals making this happen I cannot thank enough."*

*"I clearly remember the first and only meeting with the DARC people. It worked like a super-fuel for me. The things spoken that day motivated and energized all the cells working in the 'get the job done' process inside of me... Receiving warm and supporting words by strangers was like a force that accelerated me in the right direction."*

### *From the Students:*

*"Give us 'mature' students some 'life' credits. Additionally, taking algebra after almost 33 years is a stretch. Come up with some other type of math for us to take. SCCC [Sussex] does offer contemporary math and math concepts, but ONLY after you take two semesters of Algebra."*

*"Make classes more available at night and on the weekends. I work two jobs and I am currently a junior. The classes I need are only available during the day. I am a single parent with two children and that is not an option for me. I spoke with the head of the department and he said no to the classes at night and weekends because not everyone registers for them. What about me? I am to be left out and not counted for?"*

A dedicated staff to run the DARC program and assist returning students was considered so important that many schools expressed a desire for more resources to staff the program. Administrators at Mercer and Passaic reported that, in some cases, they simply did not have enough time to follow through with the small group of DARC students who failed to register for a subsequent semester. William Paterson was the only school to add a full-time staff member dedicated to the program. Mercer, Passaic, and Middlesex hired a new part-time employee to run the program. Rider, Ocean, Sussex, and Cumberland added duties to existing staff and faculty who were familiar with the institutions and could provide greater knowledge and assistance to students.

Returning students appear to be overwhelmingly satisfied with their experiences in the DARC program, as well as with their institution as a whole: 94% of students rate their overall experience returning to school as excellent or

good.<sup>1</sup> Although students had largely positive experiences with the program, there were two key areas where they saw potential for improvement. First, students thought schools should make “life credits” more available, reducing the amount of time and money they would have to spend overall. Students participating in the focus group at Passaic further wished they could waive out of the required “college experience” course that taught students things like how to manage their time, and instead get a college “refresher,” to learn about new course offerings and work on their writing skills. This desire to get credit for life experience and waive out of introductory courses was widely echoed in the open-ended questions on the student survey. Secondly, many students mentioned wanting more flexibility in scheduling options, despite claims by some administrators that students do not favor them. This conflict stems from the fact that the students served by the DARC program at each institution come from a variety of personal, academic, and professional backgrounds with varying needs, goals, and challenges; see Figure 8 for a demographic summary of students surveyed:

**Figure 8: Snapshot of DARC Students (n=120)\***

<b>AGE</b>	
Average (median)	37 years old
<b>EMPLOYMENT STATUS</b>	
Employed full-time	57%
Employed part-time	10%
Unemployed and looking for full-/part-time work	19%
<b>GENDER</b>	
Male	32%
Female	68%
<b>RACE/ETHNICITY</b>	
White/Caucasian	65%
Black/African-American	20%
Latino, Hispanic, or Spanish origin	30%
<b>YEARS OUT OF SCHOOL</b>	
1 to 2 years	21%
3 to 4 years	29%
5 to 7 years	23%
More than 8 years	28%

*\*selected statistics from Appendix A, percentage totals may not equal 100%*

This makes customizing any program to returning adults a difficult task. Some schools intended to develop programs that emphasized online, weekend, and evening courses, but demand for specific courses was rarely great enough to warrant creating them.

### ***Institutional Change***

All program administrators reported that their DARC programs influenced schools to make modest institutional changes to better serve returning adults and encourage student retention. Several schools reported improvements in the relationships among different administrative units that had previously not worked together as often. This is particularly true among schools where there was an active advisory board which brought together a broad array of representatives from across the institution. Schools used their advisory boards as a tool to reevaluate methods of implementation periodically. Ocean and Sussex both used their advisory boards regularly, which allowed them to leverage other resources available at the school to assist DARC students.

<sup>1</sup> Please see Appendix D for quotations collected from DARC students detailing their experiences with the program.

Many important institutional changes focus on student retention, as administrators indicated that encouraging degree completion for all students is becoming a greater priority at their schools. William Paterson has taken the largest institutional steps to promote retention: it has added a Vice President of Enrollment Management, whose job is to identify and monitor students at risk of leaving, and gather data through exit interviews in an effort to improve retention. Further, the school has employed a new advisement model for incoming students of all types, in response to concerns that the old model was cumbersome and confusing for students. William Paterson now has professional counselors for all first year students, whose job is to focus on institutional navigation rather than academic issues. Staff at Sussex found that methods employed to attract returning adult students highlighted the need to focus on preventing attrition to begin with, rather than trying to re-engage students who have already left. Another initiative is Rider's new data system, which organizes data on students who leave school or may be at risk of doing so, in hopes that this data will help administrators intervene at the first sign a student may be considering leaving. Finally, administrators at Rider, William Paterson, and Cumberland are placing increased emphasis on exit interviews for students who prematurely withdraw in order to better understand what the school can do to maintain enrollment.

Three schools have adapted their academic models in unique ways to accommodate returning students. Passaic created a new program providing academic assistance, separate from its normal remedial courses. After discovering a need, the program administrator pioneered a non-credit, non-graded math refresher course intended to prepare students for placement exams. William Paterson has changed the requirements in its General Education major to be much more flexible, thus allowing some students with diverse course credits to graduate without having to complete a more specific major. Rider has added a new online degree, the Bachelor's of Science in Business Administration, to accommodate students with particularly difficult schedules. Several schools are progressively adding more online, weekend, and evening classes to accommodate the schedules of students with other commitments during daytime hours.

### *Program Sustainability*

The institutional changes described above resulted from the focus on this population through the DARC initiative, but they were not specifically part of the original program design. Administrators at all eight schools reported that they would like to maintain some of the specific elements of their programs that catered to returning adult students; however, only two expect to be able to sustain these ongoing activities without external funds. This ought to be a concern for the NJCHE, as one of the goals of the DARC program was to create sustainable programs.

A coordinator with principal responsibility for re-engaging and assisting returning students is an essential component of all of the schools' programs. Most schools hired an individual specifically to administer program functions, including marketing and advising, who also worked with an existing school administrator. When the grant ends, existing administrators will remain on staff, but some schools may not be able to retain the individual hired with the specific purpose of managing the DARC program. Even in schools that plan to keep their program staff, it is not clear in every case that the dedicated staff will continue to provide the same proportion of their time to serving returning adults, or will continue to be available during evenings or on weekends.

Several program administrators perceived that they had overemphasized marketing in their program budgets. This stems from their experience, which indicated that expensive broad-based marketing efforts were much less successful than less expensive targeted marketing efforts. Some administrators felt that their marketing efforts had reached a point of diminishing returns, and thus plan to discontinue them. However, other administrators feel that continued marketing would be productive, but they are limited by the cost of such a campaign, thus only conducting mailings and other forms of contact on a per-semester basis.

Financial incentives such as fee forgiveness and book vouchers for returning students are another popular, but costly, part of the program. According to the proposals, schools expected total costs of these incentives to range from about \$17,000 to \$45,000, though these numbers may have changed upon implementation. No administrators expressed confidence that these programs could continue without ongoing external funding.

Due to differences in program designs, schools vary in their ability to sustain parts of their programs. More than any other grant recipient, Rider designed its program around up-front costs; its faculty training, online courses and degree, and data system will not require ongoing funding to benefit the school and students. William Paterson quickly found that its original plan to expand online, weekend, and evening courses was impractical, and administrators chose to abandon it; however, the advisement component of the program will remain intact. Administrators at Mercer are doubtful that they can sustain any major aspect of its program without additional funding, and only plan a per-semester marketing campaign and some daytime advising hours for continuing DARC students. At Passaic, sustainable program elements are those that are already part of the larger institution, such as academic advising. Because Cumberland, Middlesex, Ocean, and Sussex are eligible for an additional year of funding from the DARC grant, they are under less pressure to determine particular elements that they will be able to sustain without the grant. Administrators at Sussex and Ocean have indicated that they plan to apply for grants through other foundations, such as the Lumina Foundation, to support their programs into the future.

## Section VI. Promising Practices for Increasing Degree Completion

Initiatives throughout the country are focusing on re-enrolling and graduating adult learners at both two-year and four-year institutions. In some states, all public post-secondary institutions have collaborated to better serve adult learners, allowing them to leverage resources and maximize impact. States that target adult learners at the institutional level generally offer programs that are similar to the DARC grantees. It is important to note that many efforts around the country are in their early stages, like the DARC programs; for instance, in the fall of 2010 the Lumina Foundation announced a number of grant recipients for the Adult Degree Completion initiative. A review of some of these programs provides tactics that institutions in New Jersey could employ as they seek to improve their DARC programs.

### *Collaborative Efforts Funded by the Lumina Foundation*

Some of the grantees funded by the Lumina Foundation through the Adult Completion Program, announced in the fall of 2010, demonstrate collaborative approaches that might be beneficial for the NJCHE to consider. Collaboration among institutions in New Jersey might be helpful, in a similar way that a program in Minnesota is poised to benefit from conducting a cohesive statewide outreach effort, scaling up marketing efforts, and making the process more efficient. It is clear that the DARC schools have been operating in silos, struggling with challenges that a consortium effort could address more effectively and at lower cost. The challenges DARC schools faced in areas such as marketing, transferring credits, and identifying the smoothest path to completing a degree might be remedied by adopting statewide collaborative efforts similar to those being funded by Lumina. Information on specific programs is provided in Appendix C.

### *Promising Practices at the Institutional Level*

Demaree Michelau, Director of Policy Analysis for the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE), highlights successful approaches that schools have taken at the institutional level to help adult learners re-enroll and complete their education.<sup>13</sup> Institutional efforts that Michelau advocates for adult learner success are:

1. Providing a “conciierge,” or single point of contact, to connect returning students with enrollment and student services
2. Offering flexibility in addressing financial holds on registration
3. Offering a preliminary transcript evaluation
4. Offering a rigorous prior learning assessment (PLA) program
5. Finding creative, low-cost ways to extend student services beyond business hours

Each of the DARC grantees incorporated some of the above mention elements in their programs. The single point of contact is often the Returning Adult specialist; many schools reached an agreement with the bursar’s office on financial holds; school counselors evaluate transcripts of returning students; and schools are finding ways to extend student services beyond business hours. The one element that was not emphasized is the PLA program; while all of the DARC grantees offer students the opportunity to earn credits through the College Level Examination Program (CLEP), a PLA program that uses other assessments for learning outside of the program would be particularly helpful to students in the DARC program.

## *Offering a Rigorous Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) program*

The NJCHE can draw on a few current PLA programs to model a statewide effort. There is a national pilot program funded by the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning, which will launch an online portal for adult learners to access PLA information from 100 participating schools. Sacred Heart University, in Connecticut, is one participant in the pilot program, and it offers two approaches to PLA for adult learners. Learners can pass an exam in a subject to earn credit, or they can create portfolios that demonstrate their experience and expertise in a field. In New Jersey, Thomas Edison State College offers a thorough PLA program to adult students. In this program, adult students work with a mentor to develop a portfolio to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in a specific area, thereby earning them college credits. Thomas Edison offers 70 PLA courses, and adult learners are also invited to suggest a new PLA, but the student must choose an area of study currently being offered by the college.

Both Thomas Edison and Sacred Heart allow for a variety of experiences to be considered for PLA assessment, including work experience, volunteer work, self-education, professional certification, in-service training, and management work. Both schools limit PLA credit to courses of study offered by the school. It might be a worthwhile investment to use federal funds to explore existing PLA programs to develop an approach that can be implemented statewide, helping to expedite graduation for adult learners with prior learning experience.

The US Department of Education's recently published "College Completion Toolkit" suggests that states use funds provided by the federal College Access Challenge Grant (CACG) program to implement a PLA program. In fact, CACG funds for states have increased recently to a minimum grant of \$1.5 million. The document highlights the utility of PLA's:

"These assessments can range from national examinations to locally administered, institution-specific portfolio assessments... according to a recent study, adult undergraduates who receive "prior learning credit" are more than twice as likely to graduate as their non-prior learning credit peers. Moreover, they complete a bachelor's degree 2.5 to 10 months faster and an associate degree up to 4.5 months faster than their non- prior learning credit peers." <sup>14</sup>

The suggestion provided in the College Completion Toolkit is particularly useful for New Jersey because the state could benefit greatly from a centralized PLA process. Understanding that this process is costly, it could be

### *The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning Presents Various PLA Models:*

- Experiential Learning Assessments: also known as individualized student portfolios or interviews
- Evaluation of Local Training: program evaluations done by individual colleges of non-collegiate instructional programs
- American Council on Education (ACE) Guides: published credit recommendations for formal instructional programs offered by non-collegiate agencies, both civilian employers and the military
- Challenge Exams: local tests developed by a college to verify learning achievement
- Advanced Placement (AP) Exams: a series of tests developed by the College Board initially for AP High School courses - 34 exams in 19 subject areas
- College Level Examination Program (CLEP) Exams: tests of college material offered by the College Board
- Excelsior College Examination Program, (formerly, Regents College Exams or ACT/PEP Exams), offered by Excelsior College, NY
- DSST Credit by Exam Program (Formerly known as the DANTES Program): owned and administered by Prometric, tests knowledge of both lower-level and upper-level college material through 38 exams

launched with the use of CACG funds, and then sustained by charging a fee for using the service to students who apply for credits through the PLA system. Susan Schurman, Dean of University College at Rutgers University and an advocate for a PLA model in New Jersey, suggests the creation of an independent council to implement the PLA process.<sup>15</sup> According to her proposal, all schools in New Jersey would be required to participate in the council, and faculty from each school would help evaluate PLA applications for other schools. Using CACG funds may make it more feasible to implement a system such as the one that Schurman recommends. The DARC program would then have a powerful tool to better serve the population of students in its program that have work experience or other forms of training outside of the college classroom.

## Section VII. Key Findings and Recommendations

After analyzing the survey results from 120 students, anecdotal evidence, information from school administrators, promising practices, and research from other states and programs, many interesting findings emerge which can help to identify the successes and shortfalls of the DARC program.

### *Key Findings*

- 1) According to data collected from school administrators, during the 2010-11 academic year, the DARC program contacted approximately 17,146 potential students, enrolled approximately 364 students in at least one class in the Spring 2011 semester, and is expected to have graduated 58 students by May 2011.
- 2) Targeted and periodic recruitment efforts were the most successful method of contacting and re-engaging students, while broad-based marketing efforts were generally ineffective.
- 3) DARC schools struggled to conduct effective marketing and recruitment efforts for the first semester of their programs because of the short time period between receipt of the grant funds and the beginning of the fall semester.
- 4) Most enrolled students indicated that they had an existing desire to return to school, and only 27% of surveyed students indicated that they decided to return because of financial aid incentives offered by the school.
- 5) Of the incentives offered by schools, students found the book vouchers/supply bundles to be the most appealing incentive (56%), followed by the personal and academic advising (23%).
- 6) Students highly value the personalized attention, assistance, and advisement they receive from their school's DARC coordinator and staff.
- 7) The part-time DARC coordinators struggle to address student needs and achieve program goals in the limited amount of hours they can devote to the program.
- 8) Students believe that increased scheduling flexibility and the opportunity to earn "life credits" for professional and life experiences would improve their school's program.
- 9) All schools have made or plan to make modest institutional changes as a result of the DARC program. These changes include greater cooperation among departments serving adult students, increased attention to student retention, and changes in academic models to better serve returning adult students and encourage student graduation.
- 10) Staff and administrators at both participating four-year institutions believe that major components of their programs are sustainable without additional funding; administrators at all six participating two-year community colleges do not believe current programs are sustainable without additional funding.

Based on these findings, the research team proposes several recommendations that the NJCHE should consider that could improve the DARC program.

**Recommendation 1:** Alter the grant requirements to encourage schools to conduct targeted marketing campaigns, rather than broad-based marketing efforts

The NJCHE should de-emphasize the role of broad-based marketing in future DARC programs, and take this into consideration when evaluating future applications for funding. Student surveys, interviews, and focus groups showed that individualized letters were the way that most students who had returned to school heard about the program initially (48%), while only 3% heard of the program through a broad-based newspaper or radio advertisement. Given the substantial cost of these broad-based advertising efforts, we recommend that schools eliminate these efforts and focus on increasing targeted outreach efforts.

**Recommendation 2:** *Develop a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) program to assist schools with targeted marketing efforts*

The development of a Customer Relationship Management software program, distributed to all public colleges and universities in the state by the Commission, will help schools identify potential individuals who are interested in returning to college and target them in a much more cost-effective way than traditional marketing efforts. A CRM program could be programmed to automatically follow up with interested parties through email, social media, or other means, as well as catalogue individual preferences supplied by students and customize messages that are sent to students based on these preferences or demographic information. The framework developed at Rider University provides an example of how a program of this nature can help recruit interested parties and track outreach efforts and student preferences, which could be replicated at other institutions. Additionally, the NJCHE could distribute this software to other state institutions that do not participate in the DARC program. The state should consider this approach and obtain estimates for distributing the program that would be customized to meet each institution's needs.

**Recommendation 3:** *Provide DARC funding to recipient schools during the spring, rather than summer, to allow additional time for marketing and recruitment efforts for the fall semester*

As the 2009-2010 DARC program evaluation report indicated, a delayed distribution of DARC funding to recipients hampered these institutions' abilities to conduct a successful program in their first year. This finding is further supported by the realization that the DARC II programs struggled to recruit students and get their programs up and running due to the short time-frame between the distribution of funds and the start of a semester. DARC I schools reported similar problems in the first year of their programs, but had made significant progress by year two. Measures should be taken to ensure that DARC program funds will be distributed promptly after the institutions receive approval in May/June. It is recommended that these funds be distributed no later than the end of June so the schools can have ample time to allocate funds to needed areas.

**Recommendation 4:** *Alter the grant requirements to encourage schools to hire a full-time, program coordinator, rather than a part-time coordinator*

The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education has recommended a "concierge," a single point of contact for returning students, as a promising practice, and the research has confirmed the positive impact that this individual can have on a program. Students who currently participate in the program are very appreciative of an advisor that helps them navigate their return to school, from re-enrollment through graduation. Students that return to school after many years away may require help navigating newer applications such as online course registration, the institution's website, or other student services. Having one person who students know can help them either by directly answering their questions or referring them to the proper outlet is an invaluable resource to

these students. For example, William Paterson University's hiring of a full-time coordinator for returning students had a major impact on students in the program, many of whom credited this individual as the primary reason for the success of the program. However, this useful position is not available at all institutions, in part because the DARC program allows no more than 25% of grant funds to be spent on personnel. Raising this level to 50% will encourage future grant recipients to consider hiring a full-time concierge to aid their DARC program participants, which will likely improve recruitment and retention efforts.

***Recommendation 5: Enhance the availability and consistency of Prior Learning Assessments***

Prior Learning Assessments may be an additional way to entice additional DARC program participants, and to speed their progress to a degree. Many of the students surveyed in this report indicated that they should receive "life experience credits" as part of the program. The addition of this incentive will not only satisfy these participants, but will most likely attract additional individuals who did not enroll, as the availability of PLAs will decrease the amount of credits needed for qualified students. Using College Access Challenge Grant funds to form a statewide council to design a consistent PLA program to apply to all academic institutions would allow for increased access to the life credits that are valuable and efficient for adult learners. The PLA council should be comprised of faculty at each school who will assess PLA applications from students at other schools; this will ensure that all schools participate equally in the process, and will provide all institutions with independent auditing of PLA applications, so that they will not be accused of approving PLA credits simply to increase their own revenue. Such a council would bolster the efficacy of the DARC program, and also expedite graduation for adult learners.

***Recommendation 6: Consider one more year of additional funding support for DARC I, and consistent with current protocol, consider additional funding for DARC II in the 2011-2012 academic year***

DARC I schools (Mercer County Community College, Passaic County Community College, Rider University, and William Paterson University) have already received two years of DARC funding through the grant cycle, which gave them time to establish a sustainable program. Rider and WPU believe that they have built sustainable programs, though marketing and outreach efforts will be dramatically curtailed if grant funding is no longer available. Mercer and Passaic do not believe that their programs are entirely sustainable, but they do not have the strong institutional structures such as the College of Continuing Studies at Rider or the full-time DARC Coordinator at WPU. Therefore, in order to afford Mercer and Passaic additional support for their programs, the Commission should consider offering a one-year grant of \$25,000 to these institutions for the expressed purpose of investing in a full-time DARC program coordinator.

DARC II schools should be given the same opportunity to build a sustainable program and provide incentives to new adult students as the DARC I programs had. As a result, it is recommended that the Commission evaluate DARC II schools for continuation funding after the grant cycle ends on a case-by-case basis, consistent with current protocol.

***Recommendation 7: Solicit proposals for a third round of DARC grants at up to four additional colleges and universities for the 2011-2012 academic year***

A third round of DARC grants should be offered to other qualified colleges and universities that believe their institution could construct a sustainable program targeted at disengaged students. Grants should be offered at rates similar to the DARC I and DARC II programs (a \$75,000 grant to each of four schools).

***Recommendation 8: Pursue additional grant opportunities that could provide additional funding to help sustain and expand programs that assist adults in returning to college and completing a degree***

The NJCHE should consider applying for additional grants from the federal government, such as the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education Grant and the College Completion Incentive Grant, or from nonprofit or private organizations like the Lumina Foundation. The State of New Jersey would have a good chance at winning these competitive grants, as it has demonstrated evidence that it can produce successful programs to promote adult re-enrollment and graduation. The funds could be used to provide funding to more schools on a yearly basis, so that eligible individuals in areas of the state that do not currently have a participating DARC institution can have access to the DARC program and its benefits.

## **Section VIII. Conclusion**

Overall, the DARC program in the State of New Jersey has been reasonably successful in getting students to re-enroll and graduate from their respective degree programs, playing a role in addressing the federal government's priority to promote college completion at post-secondary institutions across the country. This evaluation found that returning adults express overwhelming satisfaction with the program, and administrators report that their institutions are becoming more responsive to the needs of this population.

In order to better serve returning adults in the future, the New Jersey Commission on Higher Education should promote targeted, cost-effective marketing campaigns to tap into the state's pool of adults over 25 years old who are without a college degree; encourage the use of Prior Learning Assessments to incentivize students to re-enroll and in some cases, promote more rapid degree completion; and using some DARC funding, permit the hiring of a full-time concierge who can achieve program goals and help students navigate from re-enrollment to graduation. Additionally, the NJCHE should restructure the timing of grant payments and award future funding in support of sustaining programs at existing DARC I and II schools, while also initiating a third round of the program. Given that the DARC program has demonstrated some evidence of success in re-enrolling and graduating students at each participating school, the NJCHE should also pursue grant opportunities from external funding sources such as the federal government and the Lumina Foundation.

As expressed by the NJCHE, encouraging degree completion contributes to the strengthening of New Jersey's workforce and positions these individuals for better success in the working world. If the Commission follows these recommendations, the DARC program can continue to serve disengaged adults returning to college in New Jersey, improving its ability to identify, contact, re-enroll, re-engage, and ultimately graduate these students.

# APPENDIX A:

## Student Survey

Topline Document

**Self-administered: internet and paper-based**

**Field dates: March 1, 2011 – April 15, 2011**

**Sample size = 120**

**Due to rounding, percentage totals may not equal 100%.**

**- = No responses collected**

The goal of the survey was to understand the general attitudes and behaviors associated with students' experiences in the DARC program, as well as obtain a sense of the demographic composition of the population being served at all eight institutions. This convenience sample is not representative of the larger DARC student population because of the selection method used. Responses were combined across institutions to increase the sample size; therefore, the validity of comparisons made across schools (DARC I vs. DARC II grantees and two-year vs. four-year institutions, for example) is limited. In addition, other practical difficulties associated with conducting a survey may introduce error, including question wording and the order of questions.

### 1. Which institution do you currently attend?

	Sample size	% of Sample
Cumberland County College	0	-
Mercer County Community College	9	8%
Middlesex County College	12	10%
Ocean County College	12	10%
Passaic County Community College	32	27%
Rider University	16	13%
Sussex County Community College	11	9%
William Paterson University	28	23%

### 2. Why did you decide to return to school? (Check all that apply)

Financial aid incentives offered by the school	27%
To get a promotion/improve your career skills	46%
To help you make a career change	44%
Availability of online, weekend, or evening classes	24%
Other (please specify)	25%

*The majority of "other" responses include such comments as "to complete the degree," "to finally finish school," "for a better life," and for "personal growth/to reach goals," among others.*

### 3. How did you initially hear about the [ ] program? Please choose ONE answer.

Letter	48%
Phone call	6%
Email	3%
Friend, co-worker, or family member	11%
Newspaper or radio advertisement	3%
School website	12%
Other (please specify)	17%

*The majority of "other" responses include being referred when calling the school and/or visiting with an advisor. A small number report attending an Open House or seeing a flyer.*

**4. Of the different incentives offered by [ ] which ONE of these was most appealing to you?<sup>2</sup>  
(ALL INSTITUTIONS COMBINED)**

Book vouchers or gift cards/supply bundle	56%
Personal or academic advising/counseling sessions/personalized advisement	23%
Other	4%
Online degree options	3%
Fee forgiveness <sup>3</sup>	3%
Streamlined admissions and registration process	3%
Tuition waiver/debt forgiveness <sup>3</sup>	3%
Individualized success plans	2%
Career planning program	2%

**5. Why did you initially leave school? (Check all that apply)**

Cost of school too high	44%
Needed to work	63%
Academic reasons	8%
Personal or family health reasons	30%
Childcare or other family obligations	22%
Other (please specify)	9%

*“Other” responses include moving out of the area, serving in the military, and being unsure about choice of major.*

**6. When you re-enrolled, how many classes did you need to complete your academic program?**

1 to 5 classes	22%
6 to 10 classes	40%
More than 10 classes	31%
Don't know	8%

**7. For each of the following, how would you rate your experience?**

	Excellent	Good	Only Fair	Poor
Academic/personal advising	57%	34%	7%	3%
Financial aid	42%	33%	14%	11%
Other school services (parking, library, computer access)	31%	55%	11%	3%
Experience overall	42%	52%	6%	-

**8. How often do you meet with your designated [program] advisor throughout the semester?**

I never meet with my advisor	22%
Once or twice a semester	48%
A few times during the semester	18%
Several times during the semester	12%

**9. Other than providing you with additional funding, what could the school do to improve the program? [OPEN-END RESPONSE, TEXT BOX]**

<sup>2</sup> The response items in this question were customized according to the incentives offered by each institution, therefore the most popular incentive chosen by students may vary according to institution.

<sup>3</sup> Only offered by Sussex, and was chosen by half of Sussex students

**10. What is your age?**

MEDIAN (adjusted average):	37 years old
MEAN (average):	39 years old
RANGE:	23 – 80 years old
MODE (most frequent response):	26 years old

**11. How many years were you out of school before enrolling?**

1 to 2 years	21%
3 to 4 years	29%
5 to 7 years	23%
More than 8 years	28%

**12. What is your marital status?**

Never married	36%
Living as married	2%
Married	45%
Separated, divorced, or widowed	17%

**13. Do you have any children under the age of 5 living at home?**

Yes	22%
No	78%

**14. What is your current employment status?**

Unemployed and looking for full-/part-time work	19%
Unemployed and not looking for work	13%
Employed part-time	10%
Employed full-time	57%

**15. What is your gender?**

Male	32%
Female	68%

**16. Are you of Latino, Hispanic, or Spanish origin?**

Yes	30%
No	70%

**17. What is your race?**

White/Caucasian	65%
Black/African-American	20%
Asian or Pacific Islander	3%
Native American or Alaskan Native	-
More than one race	5%
Some other race	8%

**18. If you have any additional comments regarding your experience returning to school, please feel free to share them with us. [OPEN-END RESPONSE, TEXT BOX]**

# APPENDIX B:

## Student Focus Group Protocol

### *Purpose of the Focus Group:*

To consider the following three topic areas with students who have reenrolled in their institution's respective DARC program:

1. Opinions of the program and the institution
2. Confirm and discuss subjects considered by program administrators in individual interviews with the Rutgers researchers
3. To get into a broad discussion of why these students dropped out in the first place, what brought them back, and their plans for the future

### *Guidelines:*

We hope to meet with no more than 12 students/no less than 4 students per group. We are comfortable using college administrators to obtain access/contact these students, as well as collaborating with administrators to schedule the focus group and/or distribute surveys in conjunction with a student life event. We may ask students to fill out our self-administered survey before beginning the focus group – this may be ideal as we can answer any questions that might have about the survey instrument.

### *Protocol:*

#### **I. Introduction**

Introduce researcher(s) moderating the group and purpose: Thank you for taking the time to sit down with us! We are graduate students from Rutgers University and we are evaluating the program as a final capstone project to complete our Master's degrees. We invited you because our goal is to get a better understanding of your program, and to talk about your experience returning to college with your peers. We hope that our discussion today will help give officials at your school some student input that will help improve the program for you and for students in the future.

Ground rules for the session: Please feel free to make both positive and negative comments about the topic we are discussing. There is no right or wrong answer for any question, as we are looking to hear your opinions and attitudes. Of course, please respect differences of opinion among the group, as interactive discussion among all of you about the program is part of our goals. There's no need to raise your hand, and feel free to comment as long as one person is talking at a time. While we want to hear from everyone at some point today, you don't have to answer every question or chime in on every topic. As moderators, we're here just to keep the conversation going, learn, and listen – we may cut you off once in a while only because we have a list of topics we want to cover. And please feel free to direct any comments or questions to each other!

Let's begin. Why don't we go around the room (researchers included) and tell the group your first name, what town you live in, and what you are studying here at the college.

## II. Main Discussion

- **Let's first talk about your experiences coming back to college.** How is it going so far? How are you adjusting? Are classes easier or more difficult than the first time you attempted to complete your degree? How is life as a college student today the same or different compared to then?
- **So what made you decide to come back to college, and how did you get to where you are now?**
  - o What about the program? Was there anything specific about it, like financial aid that attracted you? (Other options – to improve skill, career change, personal interest, economic situation)
  - o How did you initially hear about the program? Did you attend any events about the program or meet with school officials before you came back? Did school officials help you during the enrollment process? What was your experience with some of the recruiting events? What was the most/least effective tactic used by the college in convincing you to enroll, if at all? Any ideas on how to improve them?
  - o Did you have any concerns about the program prior to enrollment?
  - o Why did you withdraw from school in the first place (financial constraints, academic reasons, a need to work)? What did you need from the institution back then that you did not get, and did you think you were going to get this from the program?
  - o Had you considered returning to school prior to hearing about the program? If not, why?
  - o How did you decide what major or path to pursue now that you're back?
- **So now that you have been a student in the program, what is your overall assessment of the experience?**
  - o Generally speaking, what do you find to be the best/most difficult thing about going back to school?
  - o Do you use any of the services that are specifically offered to you as program participants to help you? What services do you use, and how do they help you navigate your way through finishing school? Any differences now, compared to when you first began school? In fact, did you get assistance from program staff when you were going through the process of *becoming* re-enrolled?
  - o What kinds of services do you wish were provided, either by the college or the specific program itself? How do you believe the program could be better improved overall to help students like yourselves?
  - o How often has program staff communicated with you during the semester to discuss your progress, such as in person or e-mail? Do you visit with academic advisors or other advisors related to the program, why or why not? Are advisors and other program officials accessible and helpful?
  - o Do you interact with one another or other students? If why - how often, what do you do? If not, why not?
- **We're sure everyone is thinking about the day when they ultimately finish their degrees and move forward.**
  - o How confident are you that you will be able to complete your program? When do you think that will be? Are you planning for it?
  - o What are your goals for yourself after graduation? Do you have a career plan?

## III. Closing

- Thank you again for participating. We very much do appreciate your time.
- Does anyone have any final comments, thoughts, or ideas you'd like to share with the group before we adjourn?

## APPENDIX C:

### Collaborative Programs Funded by the Lumina Foundation

#### **Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (Illinois)**

*Title: Maps to Credentials: Creating an Integrated Prior Learning Assessment Model to Accelerate Postsecondary Attainment*

The American Council on Education and the American Association of Community Colleges have been awarded a grant by the Lumina Foundation to “design and pilot credential road maps to accelerate postsecondary attainment through effective integration of comprehensive prior learning assessment methods.” The effort is not only going to be undertaken at learning institutions, but rather is a collaboration among selected community colleges, training providers, and employers in order to construct road maps towards expeditious degree attainment while also promoting career mobility.

**Minnesota State Colleges and Universities** will create the RAPID Completion Program, which will increase re-enrollment, degree progress and degree completion among former system students who did not earn degrees. Key strategies include: 1) mining student data records to identify the target population; 2) conducting a statewide outreach campaign to increase awareness of credit for prior learning options and adult-centered programs such as individualized and accelerated programs with flexible start dates; and 3) expanding postsecondary institutions’ capacity to assess and offer prior learning assessments and offer academic courses/ programs to enable returning students to complete degrees.

*Source: Lumina Foundation Adult College Completion Network, [www.adultcollegecompletion.org](http://www.adultcollegecompletion.org)*

## APPENDIX D:

### Quotations from DARC Students

“The voucher for books really helps a lot when you’re {faced} with other economic issues. I’m very grateful for the help and wish I had used it before. I would have taken more classes. The prices of books are {astronomical} and that’s also a discouragement when you don’t know where the money is coming from to pay for them.”

“Thanks for offering the program to me. I appreciate getting the books that I need for free. It is a big help! I wish I could {have} qualified for a reduction in tuition, but since I work full time and am married I do not. But every little bit helps and believe me, this helps! Thanks.”

“I was very excited when I received the letter in the mail that this program was being offered as I am recently divorced and finances are tight for me. My degree and my education is something I always wanted to complete, so the \$300.00 voucher was a huge help financially since I am currently enrolled in Anatomy & Physiology II and the total cost of the class with lab supplies and books came to approximately \$1200.00! I am very appreciative and grateful for this program!”

“I really need to express what the DARC program did for me. Returning back to school was a decision that took over a year to commit to. As I attempted to register, I discovered {the program coordinator} and the DARC program. Feeling overwhelmed and out of place, {the program coordinator} used the DARC program to assist me in registering, making me feel comfortable, and also allowed me an opportunity to receive funds to purchase my books. The DARC program made the transition practically painless. It...has allowed me to focus on my groups. I am currently doing extremely well in both classes, and I have to say thank you to {the program coordinator} and the DARC program. You have lessened the financial burden and were there when I needed help the most. My only wish is that the program would remain longer. Thank you so much for all you have done.”

“I am happy that the {program coordinator} helped me re-enroll back into college by scheduling me ahead of registration, helping me decide which program was best for me, and offering assistance from start to finish. Honestly if {the program coordinator} did not make the re-enrollment process as easy as she did I would not have come back to {school}. As of now, I only have 3 classes before I graduate with my Business Accounting degree and when I began last summer I had 9 classes left. I should be walking the graduation stage in May 2012.”

“I really appreciated all of the help that {the DARC program coordinator} provides. He is always there for my silly questions and very, very patient. The school needs more people like him. He is a great help to me.”

“The program is great to help bring former students back to finish their degrees. Unfortunately it is very difficult to finish a degree with today’s costs of living in addition to the cost of school. It’s sad that this program and the little financial assistance that was supplied is not being continued because...the cost of living is high and every bit helps...in addition to the advisement that was offered was very valuable especially for adults who have not been in a school setting for a long time.”

“If it wasn’t for this program, I wouldn’t have returned to school! My contact at {the college} was extremely helpful in getting me up and running.”

“{The DARC program coordinators} helped me have and succeed in an opportunity to return to school. I am done next year and because of their guidance will continue to further my higher education.”

“The program has made the difference between returning to college...or not. That is huge.”

“I started with the DARC program last semester. I was extremely grateful to have an opportunity to return to school. Now that I have a child I want to set an example and be a role model to him. I just want him to know that it took me 12 years to go back, but...I will finish. I am especially grateful to {the DARC program coordinator} for helping me get into the swing of things. She was truly helpful with financial aid {and} book vouchers. I am very grateful to her and the DARC program.”

“It’s a wonderful program, it has me totally focused, not just educationally, but on me as a person and has helped to encourage me and other people to be a better person in general. I just feel the love and caring from this program and it feels like an extended family. Everyone here is genuine and cares.”

“It’s a lifelong dream to have gotten a college degree. I will have achieved a dream with the help of this program.”

“If it wasn’t for the support of this program, I wouldn’t have remained this focused to stay with the program.”

- 
- 1 Lewin, Tamar. 2010, July 3. "Once a Leader, US Lags in College Degrees." *The New York Times*.
  - 2 This initiative document, "The College Completion Tool Kit", details ways in which each state could implement specific strategies to increase the college completion rate in their state. The toolkit identifies "seven no-cost or low-cost strategies that governors can use, fifteen related action steps, and a series of existing federal resource streams from which to draw" (See U.S. Department of Education, 2011, "College Completion Toolkit," <<http://www.ed.gov/sites/default/files/cc-toolkit.pdf>>.). This initiative does not only intend to serve and improve the lives of students, but also to improve each state's workforce, and thus the economy as a whole. Echoing this sentiment U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan has said, "We all know that the best jobs and fastest-growing firms will gravitate to countries, communities, and states with a highly qualified work force" (Lewin, 2010).
  - 3 Deadline for Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education Comprehensive Grant Program is May 23, 2011 (See U.S. Department of Education, April 2011, <<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/fipsecomp/applicant.html>>.).
  - 4 Hoyt, Jeff and Winn, Bradley. 2004. "Understanding Retention and College Student Bodies: Differences between Drop-outs, Stop-outs, Opt-Outs and Transfer-Outs." *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 41(3), 395-417.  
Berger, Joseph B. and Braxton, John M. 1998. "Revising Tinto's Interactionist theory of student departure through theory elaboration: Examining the role of organizational attributes in the persistence process." *Research in Higher Education*, 39(2), 103-119.  
Scoggin, Donna and Styron, Ronald. 2006. "Factors Associated with Student Withdrawal from Community College." *Community College Enterprise*, 12(1), 111-124. <<http://www.schoolcraft.edu/pdfs/cce/12.1.111-124.pdf>>.
  - 5 Berger and Braxton, 1998.
  - 6 American Community Survey, 2009. U.S. Census Bureau.
  - 7 Anthony P. Carnevale, Nicole Smith, and Jeff Strohl. June 2010. "Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2018." *Center on Education and the Workforce, Georgetown University*. <<http://www9.georgetown.edu/grad/gppi/hpi/cew/pdfs/fullreport.pdf>>.
  - 8 "About the Commission." State of New Jersey Commission on Higher Education. <<http://www.nj.gov/highereducation/about/index.html>>.
  - 9 See the College Access Challenge Grant website, U.S. Department of Education. <<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/cacg/performance.html>>.
  - 10 Jason Toedter, Laura Montas, Shannon O'Hare and William Gayle, with Dr. Carl E. Van Horn. May 2010. "The Assessment of the Disengaged Adults Returning to College Program." Prepared for the Commission on Higher Education, State of New Jersey. <<http://www.state.nj.us/highereducation/grants/Disengaged.htm>>.
  - 11 John W. Creswell. 1997. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among the Five Traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
  - 12 The research team developed the survey instrument under the tutelage of Dr. Cliff Zukin, a professor at the Bloustein School and leader in the field of survey research.

---

13 WICHE, established in 1953, is a regional consortium of 15 states in the west. WICHE was formed in order for higher education institutions in western states to collaborate and share resources to improve higher education in the region. WICHE has established a CACG consortium and CACG Network to facilitate information sharing among WICHE states that received CACG funding. (See “Bringing Adults Back to College: Designing and Implementing a Statewide Concierge Model.” November 2010. *Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education*. Non-Traditional No More: Policy Solutions for Adult Learners Series. < <http://www.wiche.edu/pub/14608>>. )

14 College Completion Toolkit, U.S. Department of Education, 2011.

15 Phone interview with Susan J. Schurman, Ph.D., Dean, University College at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, New Jersey. April 22, 2011.