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A New Community College Keeps Students on Track With Structure

By Seth Zweifler
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Alfred Rojas wasn’t sure what to expect when he decided to enroll at Guttman Community College. On one hand, he says, there was much to be excited about. If he graduated, he would become the first on his mother’s side of the family to earn a college degree. Participating in class every day, he thought, would help him overcome his fear of public speaking. And a college education would help him land a job, he reasoned.

But Mr. Rojas, who grew up in Queens, N.Y., was also nervous. It was the fall of 2012, and Guttman, the newest community college in the City University of New York system, was getting ready to welcome its inaugural first-year class. What if the college wasn’t what Mr. Rojas thought it would be? What if its experiential first-year program didn’t work?

"Looking back, I know I made the right choice," says Mr. Rojas, who will graduate as a member of the inaugural class in August.

More than a year and a half after Guttman opened its doors, many administrators, faculty and staff members, and students say that the Manhattan institution’s first-year program—its academic hallmark—appears to be working. The program is an intensive, highly structured experience aimed at improving student engagement and retention rates. First-year students must attend full time. The curriculum draws upon the city itself, in courses that look at urban issues like sustainability and immigration, and spells out specific learning outcomes as goals.

The program caters to a predominantly low-income, first-generation student body; 77 percent of first-year students receive Pell Grant support, with 54 percent of that group receiving the maximum Pell amount, according to the college.
"After they complete a summer bridge program, they have a very programmed first year," says Scott E. Evenbeck, Guttman's founding president and a prominent expert on education assessment. "If we know that choice shuts many students down, why do we so often give them a catalog with 10,000 courses and tell them to pick some?" During the bridge program, students are introduced to learning communities called "houses." Each house consists of several cohorts of students, who attend all of their classes together.

The college's inaugural first-year class saw a retention rate of nearly 75 percent from the fall of 2012 to the fall of 2013, on target with the 75-percent goal. Nationally, community colleges located in large urban centers have averaged a one-year retention rate of 57 percent, according to CUNY data.

Guttman is expecting to graduate around 20 percent of its inaugural class in late August. The college is examining why the gap between its one-year retention rate and two-year graduation rate is as large as it is. Its three-year graduation-rate target is 35 percent.

In the fall of 2008, when the first paper laying out the foundation for Guttman was published, only 11 percent of the full-time, first-time freshmen who were enrolled in associate-degree programs in the CUNY system graduated within three years, the paper noted. A major driver of Guttman's founding, it said, was "the belief that a community college structured differently might better address the persistent challenges of improving graduation rates and preparing students for further study and job readiness."

Administrators hope the Guttman model may one day catch on elsewhere across higher education. "Right now, we want to find out what transportable elements from our college may also benefit other institutions," Mr. Evenbeck says. "In some cases, I think there may be a lot."

Many first-year students say that Guttman's rigid structure, while at times constraining, has kept them on track to graduate and enroll in a four-year college or pursue a job. "It can be a bit tedious, but it's helped me stay focused," says Shikari
Clayton-Hall, a first-year liberal-arts major from the Bronx. "I was lost when I graduated high school."

On a recent Thursday in April, during his "Labss" course—Learning About Being a Successful Student—Mr. Clayton-Hall worked on polishing his résumé as he spent time discussing his interest in becoming a professional photographer with Eddy Dure, his student-success advocate. Staff members who serve as advocates are a staple of Guttman’s system of academic and social support. They work closely with students in the classroom and join professors as members of instructional teams that meet weekly to discuss student progress and learning outcomes.

Students also have access to a network of peer mentors. They provide support during the admissions process and summer bridge program, and continue to serve as academic resources to enrolled students.

A highlight of the first year is the "City Seminar," which aims to get students engaged with New York while improving their reading, writing, and quantitative-reasoning skills. Students spend their first semester in the course discussing themes related to environmental sustainability. The second semester is built around the theme of immigration.

"You want to pick themes that are relevant and apply to their lives," says Joan M. Lucariello, interim provost and vice president for academic affairs.

Some students have taken walking tours of Manhattan’s Lower East Side to learn more about immigrant communities. Others have visited museums in the city for the first time. And others have learned about sustainability as they walked the High Line, an elevated park in Manhattan, formerly a rail platform, that has been redesigned and replanted as a greenway.

"It’s one thing to listen to that in a classroom," says Laura M. Gambino, a professor and scholar of teaching, learning, and assessment at Guttman. "It’s another to see it for yourself."