

Improving Retention, Graduation and Workforce Preparation Through a Service Year: A Promising Community College National Model

The Franklin Project

This column by Josh Young is part of a series of three columns written by individuals from the winning teams of the recent Higher Education + Service Year Innovation Challenge hosted at the Aspen Institute. [The Franklin Project](#) at the Aspen Institute along with the National Conference on Citizenship and the Corporation for National and Community Service announced Wednesday that the winners of the Service Year + Higher Education Innovation Challenge were Drake University, Miami Dade College, and the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. Prizes were awarded in three categories: private university, public university, and community college with each winner receiving \$30,000. The winners for each of the categories were Drake, UMass Dartmouth, and Miami Dade respectively. Miami Dade received an additional \$10,000 for receiving the audience choice award, which was voted on by those attending the event at the Aspen Institute. The prizes were awarded to these institutions for outstanding and innovative plans to create new university-based service year positions connected to academic credit. The prizes were made possible thanks to the generous support of the Lumina Foundation. The purpose of the challenge was to generate innovative new ideas that integrated the service into the higher education experience. You can read more about the Challenge at: www.sychallenge.org. This column was written by Josh Young on behalf of the Miami Dade College team.

"The support I received at Miami Dade College has changed my life. Now I want to be a member of the Service Year Changemaker Corps to help others change their lives, too."

This quote is from a Miami Dade College (MDC) student who emigrated from Haiti when she was 9 and then had to overcome homelessness, poverty, lack of family support and many other obstacles in order to reach her dream of enrolling in college. She is a student who at times felt like giving up, but through the extra support she received, and her involvement in community engagement, she was able to overcome many obstacles and become a stellar student on track for success. Our experience at MDC has proven that engaging students in service - both as part of their academic courses and through extra-curricular opportunities - helps students like Claudia stay in school, graduate, and be prepared for success in the workforce and as citizens. MDC is proud to be part of the Franklin Project's Service Year + Higher Education Challenge which aims to make a service year a common expectation and opportunity for all college students, with the goal of increasing degree attainment, employability, and long-term civic engagement through service.

Community colleges enroll approximately half of all postsecondary students in the United States and are a critically important gateway to college for millions of under-represented disadvantaged students. Many community college students, and the majority at institutions like MDC, enroll with a number of risk factors such as under-preparedness, first generation in college, challenges of balancing school with family and work responsibilities and economic insecurity.

Unfortunately, but understandably, these at-risk students struggle to stay in school and graduate. For example, 70 percent of community college students test into one or more developmental education courses, and less than 25 percent of them earn a degree or certificate within eight years. There is also growing commitment to the important role higher education plays in providing opportunities for civic learning and service to ensure the future health of our democracy. Retention, graduation, workforce and civic preparation are top priorities for community colleges, but finding workable solutions is not easy.

So, what are promising and scalable solutions to these priorities and challenges? At MDC, we know that the most underutilized resource on our campuses are other students. We also know that peer mentoring, as developed in Campus Compact's Connect to Complete model, is an effective strategy to foster civic leadership and engagement, build social capital and positively impact persistence, retention and graduation among students who are least likely to succeed. Therefore, in response to the Service Year + Higher Education Innovation Challenge, we have developed a Service Year peer mentoring model called the Changemaker Corps.

Our Service Year Changemaker Corps is a peer-to-peer mentoring program that focuses on a specific cohort of our most disadvantaged students - the more than 300 MDC students who are transitioning out of foster care. Nationally, an estimated 24,000 foster youth age out of care each year and attempt to live independently. The transition to adulthood for youth who age out of foster care is burdened with challenges. Less than 50 percent of this population graduates from high school, 40 percent will be homeless within 18 months of aging out of foster care, 25 percent will be incarcerated within two years of exiting the program, and only 1 percent will graduate from college. We know that more specific support and services are required to help them overcome extremely difficult circumstances and that education is the leading predictor of adult success. The MDC Service Year Changemaker Corps helps college youth who have aged out of foster care mentor and support other former foster care system students, with the goal of helping them stay in school, graduate and develop workforce and civic skills. The program strives to change, one student at a time, the course of the lives of our students who were impacted by the foster care system.

As we begin our Service Year program this summer, we will recruit Changemaker Corps members who were formerly in the foster care system, who are in their second year at MDC and who are on track for success. These Corps members will receive extensive training, serve 20 hours a month for nine months, take two courses that enhance their leadership and workforce skills, attend monthly professional development sessions and serve as advocates and success coaches for their peers. The Corps members will also organize co-curricular service-learning experiences for participants. It will be led by MDC's Single Stop program (a unique one-stop-shop that provides coordinated access to a safety net and connects MDC students and their families to the resources they need to attain higher education, obtain good jobs and achieve financial self-sufficiency) and by our community partner, Educate Tomorrow, which is a Miami based 501(c)(3) organization whose mission is to create independence for disadvantaged and foster youth through education, mentoring and life-skills programs.

As the nation's largest college, MDC is committed to leading the way in developing innovative programs to alleviate common challenges that our students face. The Service Year Changemaker Corps program will be a catalyst in the college's pursuit to increase student success. We are honored to be recognized and selected for the Service Year Higher Innovation Challenge, and we look forward to helping build a model that can be replicated at community colleges across the nation.

Josh Young is the director of Miami Dade College's Institute for Civic Engagement and Democracy (iCED) where he oversees all service-learning and America Reads activities, as well as numerous other campus-community partnership and civic engagement initiatives. Josh has a bachelor's degree in sociology from the University of Virginia and master's degrees in social work and public administration from Florida State University. He served two tours with the Peace Corps in Mali, West Africa and Paraguay, South America, and he ran summer community service programs for youth for four summers in the Dominican Republic with Visions International. He has been with Miami Dade College since 1994. MDC's service-learning program now involves more than 300 faculty, 7500 students, and 200 community partners annually. Josh has been a national service-learning mentor with the American Association of Community Colleges and has extensive experience leading workshops for faculty, students, community partners, and administrators around the nation. Josh has been a volunteer with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Greater Miami for 17 years and was named the "2010 Big Brother of the Year" for the State of Florida and received the 2012 Dr. Charles R. Dassance Student Development Advancement Award from the Association of Florida Colleges.