



PRESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

Supporting
Student Success

SUMMER
2010

From the desk of Dr. Angelo Armenti, Jr.,
president of California University of Pennsylvania



FROM THE PRESIDENT

I was in high school before I knew I could do math.

That may sound surprising coming from someone who eventually earned a Ph.D. in theoretical physics. But until I reached 10th grade, I believed that mathematics was beyond my abilities.

For me, a classroom mentor made all the difference. A very special high school teacher believed I had an aptitude for numbers. She was the best teacher I had ever encountered and, in her classes, math began to make sense.

In fact, she convinced me to study physics — and she instilled the confidence I needed to succeed.

Fortunately, I found other great teachers and mentors as my education

continued. But I have never forgotten that high school math teacher. She changed the way I thought about learning, and in doing so she literally changed my life.

At California University, we recognize the power of such personal connections. They are the heart of the “student-centered academic experience” promised in our Mission Statement.

That experience starts with world-class professors whose knowledge and enthusiasm instill a desire to learn. Complementing our faculty is a corps of skilled advisers, counselors and committed volunteers who also promote academic success.

For instance, faculty in the Department of Academic Development Services help students sharpen their study skills and make the adjustment to college life. In the Office of Student Retention and Success, facilitators keep track of students’ academic progress, while tutors provide support in reading, writing and math.

And because students often respond best to their classmates, peer mentors offer underclassmen advice about all aspects of college life.

From First-Year Seminar through our lifelong Career Services, the University offers resources to guide and support our students. As you read more about them, I hope you will be reminded of a teacher or mentor who made a difference in your life.

In the spirit of Cal U for Life, I also ask you to consider how you might “pay it forward” by becoming a mentor, too.

With warm regards,

Angelo Armenti, Jr.
President, California University of Pennsylvania



Academic Support for our Students

A NETWORK OF RESOURCES HELPS STUDENTS ACHIEVE THEIR GOALS

A diverse, caring and scholarly learning community, dedicated to excellence.

Those few words from Cal U’s Mission Statement sum up the student-centered academic experience at California University.

Here, a highly qualified and energetic faculty teaches thought-provoking classes, engages students in academic research and inspires a love of learning. Since 2000, the University has hired 169 permanent, tenure-track faculty, most with terminal degrees, and the number of programs achieving national accreditation increases annually.

As the University’s academic ambitions rise, so do the demands on its students.

College-level coursework is challenging, particularly when a job or family commitment competes with

study time. Adjusting to campus life isn’t always easy, especially for young adults who are living away from home for the very first time.

The challenges are even greater for first-generation college students or those from disadvantaged families.

Students arrive at Cal U increasingly well prepared for higher education. The average

SAT scores of incoming freshmen rose from 962 in 2000 to 1028 in 2008. Yet even those who excelled in high school may require assistance once they reach the University.

Cal U is prepared to help.

“The University has developed a strong, comprehensive student support services network which fulfills the institution’s mission of building character and careers.”
— Evaluation team, Middle States Commission on Higher Education

“Through a varied spectrum of student services ... the institution is able to provide students with resources necessary to support and enhance both the in-classroom and out-of-classroom experience,” wrote the evaluation team representing the Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

The Middle States team visited Cal U this spring, during the final phase of the University’s reaccreditation process. Among the findings in its draft report: “The University has developed a strong, comprehensive student support services network which fulfills the institution’s mission of building character and careers.”

Achieving success

The road to academic success begins with First-Year Seminar, a one-credit class required of nearly every first-time student. Designed to smooth the transition to the University environment, the course presents an overview of campus life and introduces students to resources such as the library, the Office of Student Retention and Success, and Career Services. The seminar ends with individual evaluations and appointments for every participant.

The next stop for many students is the Office of Student Retention and Success, based in Noss Hall. At this “one-stop” support center, our students can meet with highly trained Student Success Facilitators to discuss scheduling or academic concerns.



Writing consultant Alicia Morris, a secondary English major, works with technology education major Drew Terpin in the Writing Center in Noss Hall.

In the Reading Clinic, the Writing Center and the Math Lab — all conveniently located in Noss Hall — staff and volunteers provide tutoring and academic support in one-to-one or small-group sessions.

A proactive “early warning” program tracks each student’s academic progress, so facilitators can reach out to struggling learners as soon as they need help. Mid-term grade reports make students aware of their standing well before they receive final grades.

In 2009-2010, students made more than 20,000 individual visits to the retention office, which also offers placement testing, advising for undecided majors and other services.

Sharing space in Noss Hall is the Peer Mentoring program, which matches first-year students with upperclassmen trained to offer effective peer-to-peer advice and companionship. Last fall, 940 first-year students signed up for this growing program.

The Department of Academic Development Services also is dedicated to helping our students succeed. In addition to First-Year Seminar, the department offers a class in Career Planning, designed for students who are struggling to select a suitable major.

Further support comes from the academic departments responsible for the disciplines of mathematics and writing. Faculty members in these areas teach “developmental” classes for students who need to brush up on the basics. In the fall 2009 semester, for example, nearly 200 students enrolled in DMA 092, an introduction to algebra, and more than 450 took ENG 100, an introduction to college-level English composition.

Graduate students and volunteers at the Tutoring Center in Manderino Library offer supplemental instruction in a variety of subject areas, and online tutoring holds promise for students who have difficulty accessing campus resources.

Since the late 1960s, low-income, first-generation college students and students with disabilities have received counseling and additional services through the federally funded Student Support Services programs.

Pre-college programs such as Upward Bound and the R. Benjamin Wiley Partnership Program also prepare students to succeed.

Four-Year Graduation Plan

From their first days on campus, all Cal U students are encouraged to “begin with the end in mind” — Habit 2 in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* — by creating a Four-Year Graduation Plan and using the Career Advantage Program to identify goals and move step by step toward a rewarding career.

By helping new students complete a bachelor’s degree in the traditional four years, the graduation plan offers incoming freshmen a route to guaranteed savings in both time and tuition.

A first-time, full-time undergraduate agrees to select a major and work with University staff to develop an academic plan, take courses in the correct sequence and maintain an acceptable grade-point average.

For its part, the University agrees to provide advising and scheduling services, to monitor the student’s progress, and to alert the student if he or she is falling short of expectations.

In addition to offering appropriate courses, the University makes the Career Advantage Program available to every student. The step-by-step program includes career planning, personal mentoring by alumni and employers, and job shadowing, co-op and internship opportunities.

As graduation nears, Career Services advisers coach students on resumé preparation and job interview techniques. And in the spirit of Cal U for Life, assistance with networking and job placement continues as a lifelong benefit for Cal U alumni.



Cathy Gmiter, Cynthia Young and Crystale Fleming, Cal U’s Student Success Facilitators.

Educational excellence

Of course, student support is just one element of a high-quality education. To advance its academic aspirations, Cal U needs:

- Scholarly professors whose expertise and energy can ignite a love of learning.
- Well-prepared students who are eager to learn and willing to face new challenges.
- “Smart” classrooms equipped with technology that facilitates education. Our pre-service teachers, in particular, must learn to teach capably in a high-tech environment.
- A campus climate that respects intellectual activity and fosters meaningful interaction between professors and students.

After years of effort on the part of many, many people, we are bringing these critical elements into alignment. Cal U is poised to take a giant leap forward in terms of academic ambition.

At the same time, we recognize that student success is the reason — and the reward — for all that we do. As our University Mission Statement makes clear, promoting student achievement and success will always be our first and foremost goal as Cal U continues to build character and careers.

More Support

IN ADDITION TO ACADEMIC SUPPORT AND MENTORING, CAL U OFFERS:

- **An Activities Transcript.** Mirroring the academic transcript issued by the University, this official document verifies participation in clubs, organizations and community service.
- **The Strong Interest Inventory,** a career-planning tool used at universities across the country. This highly reliable assessment generates a list of occupations a student is most likely to find rewarding.
- **The Family Portal,** a special area of the Cal U website where parents and other family members can learn more about the University and campus life. Look for “Information for... Families & Parents” at the top of the homepage.
- **Free training** in the principles outlined by Dr. Stephen R. Covey in his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People.*
- Through AAA, free limited roadside assistance for every student with a CalCard — a service of special importance to commuter students.



Dr. Gwen Perry-Burney: 'It's important for me to educate, empower and challenge students.'

Partnership maps the road to higher education

In college, success begins with the basics: *Wake up in time for class. Sit up front, where the professor can see you. Take careful notes. Don't be afraid to ask questions.*

These are among the strategies Dr. Gwen Perry-Burney shares each summer with teens in the R. Benjamin Wiley Partnership Program, a multi-year effort to help urban high school students prepare for, attend and do well in college.

"The majority of Partnership students don't see themselves going to a university," says Perry-Burney, an associate professor in Cal U's Department of Social Work. "We show them what they have to do to get accepted, and how they can succeed."

Ten universities in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) take part in the Partnership program, which began in 1989. Cal U, a participant since 2000, received a PASSHE grant of \$97,200

to continue its role in the program this year. An additional \$10,000 from the state Department of Community and Economic Development supports a Robotics Summer Camp for Partnership students.

Steps to success

Nominated by their high school guidance counselors, students apply for the Partnership program in 10th grade. Those who are accepted spend two weeks of the summer at a PASSHE university close to home, where team-building exercises boost self-esteem and placement tests provide feedback about academic skills.

Partnership meetings continue in 11th grade, and counselors help students select courses to prepare them for college.

In the summer before 12th grade, Partnership students attend a PASSHE university far from home. Perry-Burney

rides the bus that brings them to Cal U from Harrisburg, Reading, Easton or other eastern Pennsylvania cities.

Each student is permitted only two bags. "These are mostly first-generation college students, and this is the first time many of them have been away from home," she explains with a smile. "I want them to learn to do laundry."

At Cal U, the students study history, math, English composition, robotics and multimedia technology with University professors, while Perry-Burney teaches "strategies for success," including time management, study skills and self-discipline.

"The first day, I take them to classes," she says. "By the second day, they're on their own."

Evening activities keep students busy with bowling, shopping or a trip to Kennywood Park. There's also a field trip to a college fair that introduces students to all 14 PASSHE universities.

Transition to college

As 12th graders, Partnership students concentrate on choosing a college, gaining admission and obtaining financial aid.

"There are no guarantees of admission," Perry-Burney says, "but they know what they have to do to get accepted."



Entering a PASSHE university during the summer session gives R. Benjamin Wiley Partnership students a head start on their first-year classes.

MAKING THE GRADE

From 2002-2009, a total of 2,836 students participated in the R. Benjamin Wiley Partnership program.

2009 figures for the program, statewide:

- 227 students completed Phase 1.
- 169 students completed Phase 2.
- 176 students graduated from high school and completed the first portion of Phase 3. Of those, 84 students (48 percent) entered a PASSHE university.

SOURCE: R. Benjamin Wiley Partnership Program



Partnership students admitted to PASSHE schools must enter during the summer session. The program provides up to \$2,000 for tuition, room and board, fees and books for this term. Students take one or two courses, getting a head start on class work.

Beginning in fall, each Partnership student receives a grant of \$250 per semester. Perry-Burney checks in with her students regularly throughout their Cal U career.

"As a social worker, it's important for me to educate, empower and challenge students to meet their potential," she says. "When they accept the challenge, you can see their whole demeanor change. They are more comfortable with who they are and more confident in themselves.

"You can see them growing."

This year 42 Partnership students will attend Cal U, and Perry-Burney has high hopes for their success. The average grade-point average for a Partnership student at graduation is 3.0, the program reports.

"We give these students the skills and the confidence they need to succeed in college," Perry-Burney says. "And once they come to Cal U, they want to stay."

Mentoring follows the 'peer-to-peer' model

Karen Posa was a secretary for the Department of Elementary Education in 1996 when she organized informal focus groups seeking ways to support new students.

"Why not assign an upperclassman to share experiences with each newcomer?" a student suggested.

"It sounded like a good idea," Posa recalls, "but the challenge was to convince upperclassmen to volunteer their time to help new students. However, after talking to some of our students, 38 students volunteered to serve as mentors in the pilot mentoring program.

"After that, it became contagious," Posa says. "The student mentors loved helping other students, and the spirit of mentoring continued to grow with the department."

By 1999, it was clear that a student-to-student support system worked — and that the University as a whole could benefit.

President Angelo Armenti, Jr. promised financial support, Posa was hired as director of University-Wide Mentoring, and the program continued to grow, including two additional staff members and student work-study positions.

This year, it is anticipated that about 1,000 protégés and more than 700 mentors will take part in the Cal U Peer Mentoring Program, based in Noss Hall.

"Our goal is to help students make the transition to Cal U," Posa explains. "We want to help new students achieve their academic and social goals, so they can be successful in the classroom and as members of the Cal U community."

Although the program was not conceived as a retention effort, Cal U research shows that first-time, full-time students who receive mentoring are 13 percent more likely than non-mentored freshmen to return for a second year of college.



Students from the 2009-2010 mentoring program included (clockwise, from top left) Keith Davis, Shane Assadzandi, Hayley Simpson, Yahnae Weldon, Lauren Vitt, Mike Bonnono, Sarah Shadron and Dayna Damaso.



Karen Posa, director of University-Wide Mentoring, holds a bachelor's degree from Cal U and a master's degree from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. She is working toward a doctorate in Educational Leadership in Higher Education at West Virginia University.

"Sometimes people think you make a match between two students and the magic just happens," Posa says. "That's not the case."

She personally pairs each first-year student who enters the program with a volunteer mentor, taking into account their academic majors, living situations and outside interests, and she continues to facilitate the relationships throughout the academic year.

"A mentor can help a student with the same major," she says, "but sometimes it's another interest that makes a good match. For example, members of the band often have a lot in common.

"Commuter students may have different concerns than students who live in the residence halls, so I take that into account, too. I know the impact this program can have if it's done right."

First-time mentors attend a two-hour training session late in the spring semester. They learn communication techniques, review campus resources, discuss the importance of confidentiality and create a list of "The Top 10 Things I Wish I'd Known As a Freshman."

Mentors connect with their protégés even before the fall semester begins, and they are asked to make contact weekly throughout the academic year. They also report their interactions to a peer mentor coordinator, or PMC — one of 15 work-study students who keep records, conduct student satisfaction surveys and serve as resources themselves.

Posa, in turn, reaches out to them all. "I feel a responsibility to be a role model," she says. "I have to find time to be a mentor, too."

She sends weekly e-mails to both the student mentors and their protégés, offering gentle advice as the school year progresses. She meets regularly with the PMCs, providing leadership and helping them work through difficult situations.

In addition, she spreads the word about peer mentoring. She recently was selected president-elect of the International Mentoring Association, a nonprofit group that provides access to research and information about best practices in mentoring in education, businesses and community organizations.

PEER MENTORING PARTICIPATION

Based on federal cohort*

	FALL 2007	FALL 2008	FALL 2009
Federal cohort*	906	933	940
Mentored	468	643	576
Non-mentored	438	290	364
Participation rate	51%	68%	61%

*First-time, full-time students seeking a bachelor's degree

"With the Cal U Peer Mentoring Program we hoped to create a mentoring culture on our campus, and I believe we've done that," Posa says. "It fits right in with the Cal U for Life initiative, which stresses sharing your time and talent to help others.

"I'm just the catalyst that helps to make the connections," she adds. "I just love what I do."

Over lunch or by text, students share experience

As a student, Shane Assadzandi '10 wanted to make a difference. "I enjoy working with people, helping people," he says. "Peer mentoring was the first thing I did to get involved on campus."

Assadzandi, who graduated magna cum laude this spring with a bachelor's degree in psychology, volunteered for the Peer Mentoring Program near the end of his freshman year. He completed the training program and met his first protégé as a sophomore.

"We didn't mesh 100 percent," he admits, "but we kept in touch by phone and through e-mail."

Peer mentors are asked to touch base with new students at least once a week,

Assadzandi explains. They might have lunch together or meet in a residence hall, but some prefer to connect through phone calls, e-mail or instant messaging.

When matching students, the Peer Mentoring Office has begun to consider their preferred style of interaction.

"One of my protégés mainly liked to communicate by texting," Assadzandi recalls. "My phone plan has unlimited text messaging, so it worked. Sometimes we used Facebook, too."

New students have plenty of questions even before they arrive on campus. They don't know where to shop, where to eat or how to register for classes. CalCards, ShopDollars, SIS Web and Desire2Learn — mentors explain unfamiliar terms and tell students where to find help.

"Freshmen always want to know where the Wal-Mart is," Assadzandi says, laughing. "They want to know where they can work, where they can park. They ask about campus e-mail — and 'What's an advisement seal, anyway?'"

"As mentors, we help them get oriented to the University."

Some new students find friends easily, but others struggle to meet new people.



Senior Psychology major Shane Assadzandi

Often, freshmen are living apart from their families for the first time, and some battle homesickness.

Mentors may include their protégés in group activities or invite them to campus events.

"Sometimes they become good friends. Some even end up as roommates," says Assadzandi, who mentored five students in all. "Other times it's more casual. Every relationship is different."

Karen Posa, director of the Peer Mentoring Program, says mentors often get as much out of the process as their protégés.

Assadzandi agrees. In his junior and senior years, he grew more comfortable and adept as a mentor. He worked in the campus Welcome Center and became a community assistant in his residence hall — work he describes as "mentoring on a broader basis."

Now that he's earned his diploma, Assadzandi plans to work for a year or so, then begin graduate studies in counselor education or social work.

"I can see the change in myself since I made that first phone call to a total stranger," he says. "This is a really good program."



Dayna Damaso and Shane Assadzandi know that peer mentoring is about more than academics.

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