

Bringing “Dropouts” Back to College

The University of New Mexico's Graduation Project is the first of its kind among the nation's public universities

By Robert A. Jones

ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO

THE STORY OF ARELLANA CORDERO is all too common here: An honors student in high school, Ms. Cordero entered the University of New Mexico in 1993 with high expectations of becoming a college graduate. Five years later, with only 15 credits remaining to receive her baccalaureate degree, she abandoned her goal and dropped out.

Cordero's problem was not low grades or a lack of money. Rather, she left because, after five years, her college career had gone astray. She lived at home, felt disconnected from the university and had begun to doubt she would ever receive a degree, however close it might be. So when outside pressures of a job and marriage began to tug at her life, she walked away from college.

At the University of New Mexico and many other public universities, more than half of each freshman class will fail to graduate. Traditionally, these departures have been attributed to academic failure or personal problems, and dropouts have been regarded as the unfortunate losers in the Darwinian struggle for a higher education.

But recent surveys here and elsewhere suggest that a surprisingly large percentage of dropouts more closely resemble Cordero. These students—especially those who leave in their junior or senior years—maintain at least decent grades and lead otherwise productive lives while in college. They depart because something more subtle goes wrong: They get lost on the path to a degree, can't reconcile competing

pressures from jobs and families, and eventually surrender to the accumulated difficulties. The unraveling takes place slowly, ending not with a bang but a whimper.

Across the nation, little is done to rescue these students once they've left college.

But an innovative

An innovative project at the University of New Mexico is proving that many dropouts can be enticed into returning for a second shot at a degree.

project here at UNM is proving that many such dropouts can be enticed into returning for a second shot at a degree. And these students, once returned, are graduating at startling rates.

The Graduation Project, as it is called, is the brainchild of Associate Provost David E. Stuart. Founded in 1996 with a tiny budget and tinier staff, the program has systematically tracked down nearly 2,000 departed students and lured them back to campus. Thus far, fully 68 percent of the returnees are earning

their bachelor's degrees, and the program's graduate total has hit 1,068. In addition, 44 of the participants have gone on to graduate school or have earned a graduate degree.

Stuart, a burly 37-year veteran of the university who is also a professor of anthropology, says the high graduation rates prove that many of the myths about college dropouts are simply false. “We find that many of these people are good students and motivated,” he said. “They want that degree, and they will get it if given a decent chance.”

Because of the myths, Stuart says many of his colleagues were dubious when he first proposed the program eight years ago. “I'm sure the administration was humoring me when they said OK,” he explained. “They were thinking, ‘Here's Dave Stuart being himself again, so we'll play along. The program won't be successful, and we'll let Dave find that out for himself.’”

That skepticism has long since evaporated. The university's regents recently asked Stuart to expand his efforts, applying the techniques of the Graduation Project to current students who are in danger of dropping out. And university President Louis Caldera says that the Graduation Project's practice of forging personal relationships with its student participants, a key feature of the program, is “something that we need to clone in other areas.”

Caldera, who took over as president only last August, added, “I inherited the Graduation Project and can't take credit for it. But I can cheer them on. The program is so important because it helps us meet our mission, which is to educate young people and encourage them to think of their lives in the long-term and about the difference that a college degree can make.”

The Graduation Project has attracted attention not only because of its success but because it appears to be the first of its kind among the nation's public universities. In fact, when Stuart first began organizing the project in 1996 he searched for similar programs that could be used as models. He found

Photos by Jake Schoellkopf, Black Star, for CrossTalk



The University of New Mexico's dropout rescue program enabled Linda Marmon to return to campus and earn a bachelor's degree.



Associate Provost David Stuart has run the Graduation Project at the University of New Mexico since it began in 1996.

none and soon realized he would be forced to invent the program piece by piece.

The task was daunting. How would the university locate former students, some of whom had been gone for five years or more? What enticements would be effective in luring them back? And which dropouts would be recruited?

The last question was answered first. Stuart and senior program manager Danita Gomez decided they would seek only those dropouts who had earned 98 credit hours (124 are needed for graduation) and maintained a grade point average of 2.0 or better. The target group, in other words, would be composed of former students who were reasonably close to graduation and had left in good academic standing.

“Even with these cutoffs, we identified about 3,000 students that fit the model,” said Stuart. “We were surprised to see the group had an average GPA of 2.8, so clearly the students were not leaving for academic reasons.”

The trick of locating long-gone students turned out to be simpler than expected. The university contracted with TransUnion Inc., a credit reporting company, to run their student names through the company’s database. Because of the potential credit impact of such searches, the university required the company to construct a firewall that would separate the student search operations from its normal activity.

The approach worked. Soon the university had addresses and phone numbers for virtually all of its targeted walk-aways at a cost of \$1.90 each.

Then came the delicate business of approaching the former students. The university decided the first communication would be made via letter. But what should the letter say?

Stuart decided to offer a re-entry that would be as hassle-free and low-cost as possible. The strategy was based on his interpretation of university surveys of departing students taken in the mid-’90s. Those surveys showed some surprising results. Many students walked away because they felt defeated by the university bureaucracy and its complex, often shifting graduation requirements.

Many of these respondents fell into the “non-traditional” category, meaning they worked full-time, were married or had children, and usually lived off-campus. On many state university campuses such students are now the norm rather than the exception. It was these students, Stuart found, who were being defeated by the university bureaucracy.

Incredibly, said Stuart, many reported they often could not identify which courses they needed to graduate. And, even if the courses could be identified, the students frequently could not get into those classes because they were oversubscribed.

“They were befuddled, rudderless,” Stuart said. “They were saying, ‘I don’t know what it takes to get out of here and I’m tired of trying.’ And maybe they’d been offered a raise at their job and decided, ‘That’s what I’m doing, I’m outta here.’”

Stuart added, “I’m a UNM supporter, not a UNM slammer. But, boy, are we opaque. And there are a lot of other state universities out there, judging from their graduation rates of 36 percent to 42 percent, that have the same problem we do.”

So Stuart sat down to write his letter, in the belief that he had a fair understanding of the problems of the walk-away students. They needed to see a simple, direct path to a degree, and they needed a little help in getting there. He decided to offer them just that.

“We at the University of New Mexico care about the academic success of our students,” the letter began. “If you are still interested in pursuing that dream, we would like to help.”

The letter then detailed the enticements: a shortened re-admit application with no fee; a “degree summary” that would state exactly which courses were needed for graduation; priority enrollment in classes; and personal assistance when problems arose.

Then came the financial kicker. If the returning student had an old GPA of at least 2.5, or achieved it after returning, they would be eligible for a special Tuition Assistance Program whereby the university would pay half their tuition per year, up to \$800, over a two-year period.

The letter touched the right buttons, and in the weeks following, about 800 inquiries poured into the project office. Eventually 180 of those enrolled as returned students.

The project did not attempt to create a “class” of returnees. Rather, the strategy was to help each student individually and speed them toward a degree as fast as possible. One of the returnees was Linda Marmon, who now describes her dropout story as “classical.”

Marmon had left the university after getting married, with only 24 credit hours remaining for a degree. Financial problems had dictated the departure but she also felt stymied at the university. “Those 24 more hours had begun to seem huge,” she said. “You know, this is a big university and it can be overwhelming. There is an intimidating quality about it.

At the University of New Mexico and many other public universities, more than half of each freshman class will fail to graduate.

You're almost afraid to ask questions, and you don't know who to ask, anyway. So you get frustrated and you quit?"

For Marmon, the Graduation Project made good on its promise to ease those frustrations. The atmosphere of the project office was personal rather than bureaucratic, and it was oriented toward problem-solving.

"They showed an interest in me," Marmon said. "They called me, they sent letters. Their message was, 'You can do this, and we will help you.'"

Danny Hernandez, another member of the first class of returnees, said the experience was "like going from a class that has 40 kids to a class that has ten. They knew my name in the office, and they stayed in touch. Actually, they practiced a little light nagging that really helped."

Marmon graduated in May 2003, and Hernandez expects to receive his degree this year. Marmon says she is so enthusiastic about the Graduation Project that she has become an informal recruiter with friends who have dropped out. "I tell them, 'If you need me to take you by the hand and introduce you to the people in the office, I'll do it.' That piece of paper (the diploma) is really important to me, and I've learned how much it can mean to someone's self-confidence."

Several of the Graduation Project participants have especially poignant stories. One young woman believed she had actually graduated when, in fact, she had received an "incomplete" in a single course necessary for a degree. When she applied for a job she listed herself as a UNM graduate. Her boss checked and could find no record of a degree.

She was about to be fired for lying when she was contacted, coincidentally, by the Graduation Project. Staff members arranged for her to re-take the course and helped to smooth things over with the boss. She got her degree and kept her job.

In other cases—about 300, in fact—project participants have not actually attended classes at all. After entering the program, they discovered they had already satisfied all the requirements for a degree. Project staff members helped them move the paperwork through the bureaucracy, and they graduated.

And some participants need prodding. "Occasionally a student will come back to school, take one class, and leave again," said one project staff member. "They may be only three credit hours short of a degree. So we call him again and ask, 'What happened?' We don't give up."

The descriptions of letter-writing, hand-holding and problem-solving by the Graduation Project suggest an elaborate enterprise conducted by a sizable staff. After all, some 246 returned students are participating this year, and virtually all of them will lean on the office staff at one time or another.

But the project, in fact, operates on an extraordinarily lean budget. Besides Stuart, who also oversees the university's evening and extension classes, the staff now consists of a single project coordinator and two part-time student workers. A study conducted three years ago concluded that the project spent \$530 per student, excluding tuition aid.

Vanessa Shields, the project coordinator, laughs when asked how the small staff manages to convey such an impression of personal service. "You get very detail oriented.

You take care of many small things," she said. Besides, she added, everyone in the office has had his or her own problems in working toward a degree at the university. "The compassion level is high, you might say. Everybody knows what it's like," she said.

The benefits of the program extend not only to the returned students but also to the state as a whole, says university President Caldera. The difference in earning power between a high school graduate and a college graduate is dramatic, and higher wage earners pay higher taxes. In addition, he said, the state legislature in New Mexico is showing a renewed interest in getting the biggest bang for its education buck.

"The legislature wants to see a systematic increase in our six-year graduation rate. They've given us benchmarks, and some of our funding will be contingent on meeting those benchmarks," he said. "A program like the Graduation Project helps us along the road to meeting those goals."

Across the nation, many state universities face problems similar to New Mexico's. Nationally, the six-year graduation rate for public universities now averages about 54 percent, according to a University of Oklahoma study, and this figure has remained essentially flat over the last decade. But that average conceals sharp disparities between universities.

"That piece of paper (the diploma) is really important to me, and I've learned how much it can mean to someone's self-confidence."

—Linda Marmon, University of New Mexico graduate



University of New Mexico President Louis Caldera says the Graduation Project will help meet legislative demands that the six-year graduation rate be increased.

About 300 Graduation Project participants discovered they had already satisfied all the requirements for a degree. Project staff members helped with the paperwork, and they graduated.

The University of Virginia, for example, has a six-year graduation rate of 93 percent, and UCLA graduates 85 percent. In general, highly selective public universities such as these maintain graduation rates equal to those of top private universities.

The majority of public universities, however, fare considerably worse. In rural or poor states, public institutions have had difficulty raising their graduation rates above 43 percent.

According to John Gardner, director of the Policy Center

on the First Year of College at Brevard College, in North Carolina, many factors contribute to a high dropout rate, but the demographics of poor, rural states such as New Mexico put them at a distinct disadvantage.

"In these states the universities have large percentages of students who come from minorities, who are the first generation in their family to attend college, who must work

to pay their college costs, who do not live on-campus," said Gardner. "All of those factors affect retention. The white, male, residential student is a distinct minority at these schools."

Many public universities have now initiated programs encouraging students to remain in school. Those attempts range from the creation of cohort groups among freshmen, to mentor programs and special advisers for students in trouble.

But few, if any, universities have imitated New Mexico's program of retrieving dropouts from the larger community. Nor have they adopted the Graduation Project's strategy of helping students cope with jobs, marriages and children while they struggle their way toward a degree.

Stuart admits his frustration. "The problem of these kids trying to cope is national, and that is evident from the graduation rates," he said. "But I haven't been able to sell the idea. The conversation isn't being taken up at the large publics who are having versions of the same problem."

Stuart attributes the lack of interest to several factors, including the increasing focus on research at large public universities and the resulting lack of exposure among senior faculty to undergraduates. In addition, he says, there is "convenient denial" of the reality that many departing students are high-performing.

UPDATE **Back to College** **July 2007**

THE GRADUATION PROJECT at the University of New Mexico has been in operation for ten years now. Although David Stuart, who founded the project, is no longer there, his "brainchild" is still going strong. Vanessa Shields, the project coordinator, said that since Stuart retired, "new staff have to be constantly reminded to keep the word out there about the project, so students know that we're there for them."

The Graduation Project now has a few imitators, including programs at California State University, Long Beach, the University of Texas at San Antonio, and the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh.

Shields, who has been with the project since 2003, said that 69 percent of returning students go on to complete a bachelor's degree, and that their number will have grown from 1,068, at the time of *National CrossTalk's* original article in 2004, to more than 1,500 this year. "Each semester we have between 180 and 260 currently enrolled students," Shields said.

The Tuition Assistance Program, for returning students who meet specific academic standards, has

also expanded. "We increased the amounts because tuition has gone up significantly," Shields explained. "We give 50 percent of tuition, to a maximum of \$500 per semester, up to a total benefit to the student of \$2,000." And there are plans to increase those contributions further.

When Stuart began the project in 1996, he could not find any

examples in the country of existing programs of the type he envisioned. But the Graduation Project now has a few imitators, including programs at California State University, Long Beach, the University of Texas at San Antonio, and the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, according to Shields.

Three years ago we reported that some 300 students had been helped by the project to receive their degrees without even taking any additional courses. With the right guidance, they were able to graduate with the credits they had already earned. Since then, more than 80 additional students have fallen into that category.

Attempts to create an "early warning" system that could preemptively identify students who are at risk of dropping out have not yielded useful results. "It's still in the works," Shields said. "Right now there isn't a pattern that we can identify." And there are few resources to commit to such research. The Graduation Project has a minimal staff that includes one full-time person, a work-study intern, and a woman who came to work there quarter-time after she retired from the registrar's office.

"When this program started, they thought it would fizzle out, but it didn't," Shields said. "They thought that we would catch up to the demand, but it is steady business, good and bad. This project shows that there are some kinks, where the university is losing students. But those students want to come back."

—Todd Sallo

Attempts to create an "early warning" system that could preemptively identify students who are at risk of dropping out have not yet yielded useful results.



The University of New Mexico Graduation Project has a lean budget and a small staff, one of whom is Project Coordinator Vanessa Shields.

“If you don’t admit that they can be good students, you don’t have to take them seriously,” he said.

Another factor may be the traditional mindset of college administrators. “Universities tend to focus on recruitment of good students as a way of ensuring academic success,” said Jack Kay, associate provost at Wayne State University. “They’re not in the habit of thinking about stop-outs or dropouts as a source of graduates.”

But at UNM the enthusiasm for Stuart’s approach remains high. At the request of the university’s regents, his office has begun to investigate whether its dropout strategy can be expanded to include current students who are in danger of leaving.

As the first stage, Stuart has proposed an analysis of hundreds of dropout transcripts to search for telltale academic patterns that preceded the decision to drop out. Already, an informal survey of transcripts has suggested that such patterns

exist. Cynthia Stuart, David Stuart’s wife and the dean of admissions at New Mexico, joined in the informal survey and described the results.

“You see a gradual process,” she said. “It’s not like you’re looking at the transcript of a great student and then suddenly—boom—he’s gone. You see the student

taking some incompletes, cutting back his hours, the grades falling a notch. The student is reducing his involvement in the university. He is giving these signals long before he finally leaves, which means there’s an opportunity to take corrective action.”

If the early warning system succeeds, Cynthia Stuart says,

the student’s adviser could be notified in time to take that action and perhaps forestall the departure.

At present, David Stuart said, that preemptive move is not possible. “Right now, no one at the university is calling them up and asking, ‘What’s going on here? Is there a problem that we can help you with?’” he said. “We want to change that.”

In the meantime, the Graduation Project itself continues to feed returned students back into the system. The current group of 246 students includes Arellana Cordero, the honors student who dropped out needing only 15 credits to graduate.

After she left the university, Cordero began raising a family and built a real estate business in Albuquerque. By any standard measure, her life was successful. But the lack of a degree nagged at her.

“I have always been an overachiever type, and the idea that I never finished college just bothered me,” she said. “But re-applying to UNM presented so many obstacles. Once I even thought of trying the University of Phoenix (a commercial institution that offers degrees through correspondence courses) and then thought, ‘Nah, I can’t do that.’”

When Cordero learned about the Graduation Project she was startled to learn that it seemed designed to solve the problems she was facing at UNM. She quickly enrolled and began taking the classes she needed for a degree. She now expects to graduate in May.

And then? “I plan to get my master’s in business administration,” she said, and laughed. “And right away, this time.” ♦

Robert A. Jones is a former reporter and columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*.

Nationally, the six-year graduation rate for public universities now averages about 54 percent.