

SEATTLE CENTRAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

This community college pushes diverse students to work together in small teams

By ANDREW GOLDSTEIN

College recruitment brochures typically look like Benetton ads. Come to our school, they seem to proclaim, and you'll learn as much from your multicolored classmates as you will from your professors. In most cases this is a fiction. Colleges tend to do a poor job of attracting minority students, and it's rare to see genuine interaction among different groups. If you were to visit Seattle Central Community College, however, you might just find a 40-year-old Hispanic mom designing computer software with a lanky, blond, 24-year-old snowboarder. Or maybe you will run into Gil Reynosa, 31, a deaf student from Mexico, building a boat with Rhonda Pence, 50, a former teacher. At Seattle Central, diversity is real, and so are its benefits.

The secret is a first-year curriculum that is carefully designed to inspire repeated, meaningful interactions among its students. This is no easy task: as with many community colleges, everyone at Seattle Central lives off campus, and 80% hold full-time or part-time jobs. In many places with such an untethered, multitasking student body, it can be easy for freshmen to feel lost and alone. So Seattle Central encourages faculty to emphasize group work and keeps all its classes small. Average size: 22.

Seattle Central has also created one of the nation's most expansive programs of "learning communities" courses that are centered on a common theme and bring together students and faculty from different disciplines. And the college gives course credit for community-service. Culinary-arts students help train the homeless for jobs in the restaurant industry; students preparing to become opticians go to rural Thailand to distribute eyeglasses.

All this group work wouldn't be so important if most of this public college's 10,000 students were alike. But with 52% from minority groups, Seattle Central is one of the most diverse colleges in the U.S. And the diversity goes beyond race: 26% of the students are age 35 or older, 25% are immigrants, and about 65% are the first in their family to go to college. It helps that Seattle Central is situated at the meeting point of Seattle's historically black Central district, the mostly Asian International district and the mostly white business district. But just as important are the nearly 200 scholarships the school gives each year thanks to alums who are far more loyal than most community-college grads. Seattle Central also boasts a faculty that's 28% minority, nearly three times the national average.

The most bustling spot on campus is the computer center, which offers the open space and frantic energy of a brokerage trading floor. Most Seattle Central students don't have their own computers, so they come here to work, socialize and surf the Web. They also come for the free tutoring—a program that college President Charles Mitchell credits with keeping many freshmen from dropping out. This is where Dora Hunter, 37, a business-technology student, became friends with fellow freshman Nhu-y Pham, 60, who came to Seattle from Vietnam in 1993.

Hunter, a former crack addict, is a single mother with five boys. To make ends meet, she works for a collection agency from 8 a.m. until 1 p.m., when her classes begin. She often thinks about quitting college to earn more money. But her friendship with Pham has kept her focused on her goal: to get a bachelor's degree in business. "For the first time since I can remember," says Hunter, "there are people besides my family that I can talk to."

Mixing all sorts of different people together in their first year of college doesn't always turn out so smoothly, however. And that may be part of the point. One of Seattle Central's learning communities is called Integrated Media Communications, in which 70 students from the departments of photography, graphic design and printing meet for six hours every Friday. For the final project in May, instructors divided the class into teams and matched students with others from different fields. Each group had to create an original brochure for a real nonprofit organization.

Mary Cunningham, 40, a mother of three, found herself teamed with Jenna Geary, 23, a professional printer, and Jake Dehnert, 19, a talented, carefree high school graduate hoping to become a graphic designer. The trio's brochure, for a diabetes-research group, turned out brilliantly: the nonprofit is planning to distribute it widely. But getting there involved a series of sometimes bitter clashes, with Dehnert's becoming fed up with Cunningham's bossiness and both women's lashing out at what the two considered Dehnert's lack of responsibility. Says Cunningham: "When you're a mother, you're a mother. You tell people what to do. I had to learn to be more flexible." Dehnert, whose artistic talent helped make the brochure a success but who also slept through the group's final presentation, says working so closely with Cunningham changed him. "Mary raised the bar. I'm more professional because of her."

Nearly 650 Seattle Central students a year sign up for learning communities, and for these students the retention rate is a remarkable 97%. The college's overall retention rate is 70%, a strong number for a community college serving such a low-income population. But there's no numerical formula for measuring how much students learn from the diversity of their peers. Consider Jennifer Strickland, 17, a humanities student from Bainbridge Island, a wealthy, secluded suburb of Seattle. By the spring of her first year, she had become so involved in the college community that she joined a group of students in a march to protest the fatal police shooting of an unarmed black man. "Seattle Central has kind of made me realize I had been living in a bubble for the past 10 years," says Strickland. "Now I see political injustices and want to change them."