

 LEADING STRATEGIES

Influencing the Mindset of High-Risk Students Early in the College Experience

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The Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) implemented a plan in 2019 to improve the mindset of at-risk students with the goal to increase their overall success. In developing their plan, BMCC's Enrollment Management team explored behavioral science research in order to gain a greater understanding of the sociological and emotional challenges that students face as they begin their college journey. Several strategies were successfully implemented to improve communications and relationships with students.

Mindset and Poverty

The Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) is a large urban community college that serves 26,000 students from all five New York City boroughs. Seventy percent of students come from families with household incomes of less than \$30,000. More than 53 percent of students are first in their family to attend college, and many struggle with issues such as food and shelter insecurities. Research conducted by Claro, Paunesku, and Dweck (2016) identified the dangerous impact that poverty has on academic achievement:

Socioeconomic background is one of the strongest, best established predictors of academic achievement. It is well-known that economic disadvantage can depress students' academic achievement through multiple mechanisms, including reduced access to educational resources, higher

levels of stress, poorer nutrition, and reduced access to healthcare (2).

BMCC saw how the economic disadvantage of high-risk students played out on campus. In reviewing the progress of first semester students, the college found that 22 percent of students went on probation. When looking at this group that was stopping out, the college learned:

- 34 percent of Black students went on probation;
- 32 percent of Hispanic students went on probation;
- 18 percent of White students went on probation; and
- 47 percent of students with a College Academic Average (CAA) lower than 70 went on probation.

The enrollment management (EM) team began to consider how they might start influencing students earlier in the admissions and enrollment process to help ensure that they get off to a positive start. The team observed the work their advising and faculty colleagues were engaged in around growth mindset theory and questioned whether using mindset theory would help how they approached students. The research (Claro, *et al.* 2016) summarized the following:

Numerous studies have found that students fare better if they believe that their intellectual abilities can be developed—a belief called growth mindset—than if they believe that their intellectual abilities are immutable—a belief called fixed mindset)...Students with a fixed mindset tend to avoid situations in which they might struggle or fail because these experiences undermine their sense of their intelligence. In contrast, students who have a growth mindset tend to see difficult tasks as a way to increase their abilities and seek out challenging learning experiences that enable them to do so. As a consequence, students who have a growth mindset tend to earn better grades than students who hold a fixed mindset, especially in the face of difficulty (3).

Optimistically, the study went on to suggest that students from lower-income families who did not possess a positive growth mindset could be positively influenced and enjoy the same academic benefits as their wealthier peers if they were able to transition from a fixed mindset to a positive mindset. The EM team realized that providing tips to students and encouraging tenacity could help those overwhelmed with the college's admissions and financial aid processes focus instead on their studies—not the complicated business of attending college.

Faculty and advising teams at BMCC were already using growth mindset theory to help students believe they are capable of learning and were providing tips on how showing them tenacity combined with good habits could generate positive results. The EM team began to consider how they might influence the positive mindset of students during the admissions and enrollment process so they could reduce the number of students dropping out the first semester.

Imposter Theory

In addition to growth mindset theory, the college's enrollment leaders considered the impact of imposter theory on their students. Sakulku and Alexander (2011) pointed out in the *International Journal of Behavior Science* that 70 percent of people admit to feeling like an imposter at some point in their life. The study maintains that these feelings can sneak into one's mind, reminding the individual that he or she is not good enough and does not deserve success. Similar are the feelings of a first-generation college student at orientation or those of an underrepresented male student as he enters nursing class on the first day of college. Focusing specifically on those insecurities that surround the transition to college, the team looked at work by psychologist Bradley Busch who offered four ways to help students overcome the sense that they don't belong:

- *Attribute successes to the student's actions*—it takes more than luck to be successful at college.
- *Discourage comparisons with other students*—students are used to being compared to other students. Encourage students to focus on their own learning and how their progress is improving.
- *Remind students they are a work in progress*—young brains are still growing and developing, and encouraging students to feel comfortable growing is important.
- *Teach students to fail better*—after all, don't we learn more from our mistakes than from our successes?

(Busch and Lucas 2017)

These concrete actions gave the EM team some specific practices that could be implemented in student conversations and communications to help give students a greater sense of belonging.

Liminal Theory

Another factor influencing BMCC's incoming students and their ability to connect with college is described by Liminal Theory and explored in a study by Palmer, O'Kane and Owens (2009). This study suggests that students, at a very early point, determine whether or not

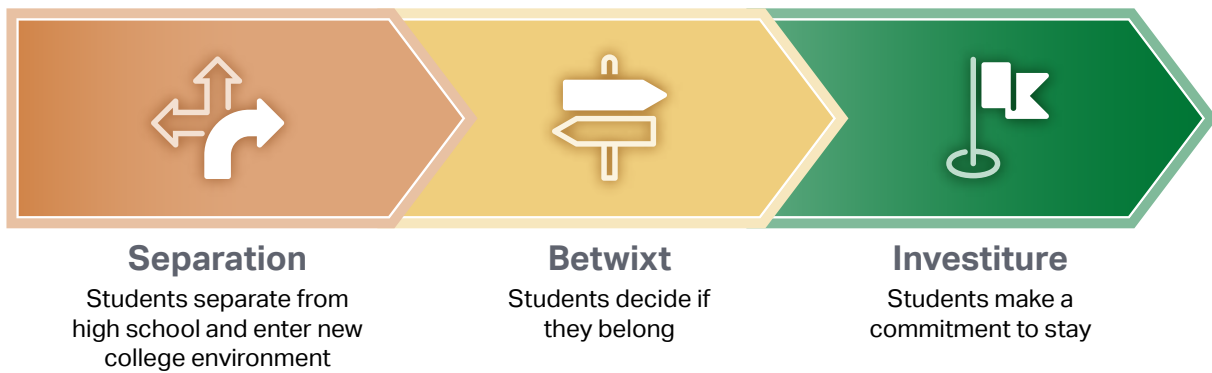


FIGURE 1 ► Three Stages of Liminal Theory

they belong at a particular institution and, sometimes, whether or not they belong in college at all. The study further explores *betwixt spaces* and turning point experiences for students in their first year of college. It explains how students go through an emotional process that separates their past life of attending high school and transitions them to a “betwixt” stage where they are uncertain if they belong. The research emphasized that in the life of a college student, this betwixt stage is relatively short, lasting only about six weeks. It is only if the student bonds with the college during this critical time that they will progress to the third stage, where they make their investment to stay.

Figure 1 shows the three stages of Liminal Theory and the psychological phases students go through in their early college career. By focusing on this critical six-week period of internal restlessness and understanding growth mindset and imposter theory, BMCC chose to target their messaging and speak to students’ needs, supporting them when they were most vulnerable. With a deeper understanding of the emotional challenges that so many students were facing, the college began to develop strategies that could influence behavior early in the college process. The approach included the following steps:

- Audit all student messaging
- Include language that reinforces the *beauty of blunders*
- Demystify the college process and elucidate planning and next steps

- Reinforce the importance of early connection with professors, peers, activities
- Dial up the quality of care

Auditing Student Messaging

Their first step was to take a very real look at the communications the college was sending to students. BMCC discovered that there was not only inconsistent messaging, but letters and emails that were cold, rigid, authoritative, and very often punitive. It soon became clear that the staff was primarily reaching out only when the school required something of the student (such as to make an appointment, send a deposit, or fill out a FAFSA). Other communication seemed to be centered around those times when students had already done something that resulted in a negative consequence (such as missing a deadline, being placed on academic probation, or an account being sent to collections). Consistent, task-oriented, corrective messaging resulted in low open rates, disengaged students, and—perhaps most damaging—a perception among students that the college was a source of stress and angst, rather than a source of support and assistance. It soon became obvious to the BMCC team that this type of communication (sparked by institutional requirements or student missteps) established an overall negative tone for the crucial relationship the college was attempting to create with students. With these types of messages being the dominant (or only) attempt at communication, one began to see the significant impact words and tone might have

on a student's level of anxiety and self-doubt. Missing from most of the BMCC communications were words of support and encouragement, glimpses of humanity, and sincere gestures of interest in the students' educational and personal well-being. At the end of their communications audit, one thing was made clear to the team: a significant overhaul was needed.

Using Reinforcing Language

The team established a comprehensive repository of their enrollment communications (admissions, financial aid, registrar), and created a rubric that assessed the message's tone, call to action, and clarity of next steps. The team looked at the level of personalization of the message, the tone of the pivotal introductory sentence, and the transparency and breadth of the options presented. In reviewing many of the college's letters, prior administrative writers had simply presented the option that he or she perceived to be "in the student's best interest" rather than giving the student multiple options from which to choose. By linking to key websites for more information, students were given the benefit of choosing a path that best fit their needs, without being overwhelmed with text and directives from college administrators. Not only does this type of transparency establish a greater amount of trust, it allows the student greater control over his/her future and reinforces the importance of learning outside of the classroom. Next, it was time to gather the division's best writers and grammarians to ensure that each letter contained an element of growth mindset theory, reinforced a positive message, and fostered a sense of belonging to their campus community. One of those writers was Director of Admissions and Outreach Lisa Kasper, who spent several years as an adjunct English instructor. Kasper noted similarities between this exercise and the measures taken to minimize the psychological damage to new college freshman upon receiving a graded writing assignment riddled with negative feedback. She recalled, "When I taught my very first freshman writing course, I was warned by a fellow instructor, 'Don't comment on the negatives without first finding a positive, and, above all else, stay away from red pens!'" That advice

was pivotal in converting anxious and insecure college freshmen into fearless writers and thinkers. The feedback they received provided a balance of positive encouragement, information, and direction to successfully navigate them to next steps in writing. After fifteen weeks together, not only had they possessed the academic competency to face the challenges of another semester, but the incalculable advantage of having a positive intellectual and psychological mindset. Kasper applied the very same principles to BMCC's division-wide *Communication Rewrite Campaign*.

Although it can sometimes be challenging to use reassuring, supportive language when delivering the not-so-enjoyable details of admissions denials, financial aid verifications, and academic action, it is not entirely impossible. The first step is to refrain from certain words that seem to set a negative tone for the message being delivered. In an effort to be clear, concise, and efficient, enrollment management professionals may be inclined to deliver a message using words like *regret*, *rejection*, *denial*, *probation*, or *revoked* with relatively few qualifying or kind words to soften the blow. These negative words can often make a student feel bad about themselves and deflate their spirit, making them question whether or not they really belong at the school, or maybe even whether or not they belong in college at all. These words tend to focus on the recipient's failure and the consequences of that failure—failure to follow instructions, failure to accomplish a goal, failure to respond to one of our rules or policies. Often the tone is set from the very first word. The BMCC team was quite surprised to learn that more than 20 percent of their communications began with the word "Unfortunately," and a few even opened with "We regret to inform you." Although neither opening is deliberately harsh, both deliver a negative tone that could prevent a student from reading further details. Communications that open with a foreboding tone can have the very same effect on a student's self-confidence as a writing instructor's dreaded red pen.

One of the team's greatest successes was the transformation of the admissions denial letter. As an institution that embodies the very mission of *access*, the 2.0

grade point average requirement for transfer students was a difficult standard to communicate to students who were eager to make a fresh start at BMCC. The original message was certainly clear, but it lacked both empathy and options, and failed to add the critical elements of motivation and, a human touch:

Thank you for your interest and application to the Borough of Manhattan Community College. After careful consideration of your application and supporting transcripts, we regrettably are unable to offer you admission to the College.

Thank you for your interest in BMCC and I wish you the best in your future endeavors.

Sincerely,

Office of Admissions

In exploring the possibilities of rewriting such a letter, the team was well aware that the elements of encouragement, recourse, concern, and care were much needed. However, they were also able to see the very real possibility of reuniting the institution with its mission. The result was the creation of a Second Chance Program that has assisted more than 600 students since its inception over the past two years. The BMCC denial letter was not just revised; it was revolutionized. What was originally the educational equivalent of a *Do Not Enter* sign was at once transformed into a supportive, encouraging *Welcome*:

Thank you for applying to BMCC. After a review of your application, we are unable to offer you transfer admission at this time. As you are probably aware, transfer admission at BMCC requires a minimum 2.0 GPA.

Don't worry, this doesn't have to be the end of your college dreams! Though GPA is a major factor in determining student success, we know that sometimes a GPA does not tell us the whole story. Some of the things that can affect a GPA have less to do with intelligence or motivation, and more to do with factors that exist beyond the walls of a classroom—often not within a student's control. As a result, we have created a Second Chance Program. If you believe that your GPA is not an accurate reflection of your academic potential, go to bmcc.cuny.edu/secondchance to learn more about our Second Chance Program.

Wishing you all the best in your future academic endeavors,

Lisa Kasper, Director of Admissions

Changing those negative words to ones that are a bit more optimistic can also change the way students respond. Positive words and tone should focus on the recipient's *potential for success*, as well as the *beneficial consequences of the process of learning* (sustained effort, planning, and strategy), as well as the *reinforcement that the student is more than a GPA or a test score*—greater than the sum of his/her parts. Focusing on each student's potential for success and using phrases like *when you accomplish this*, *when you boost your GPA*, *when you are in good academic standing* can help students to believe in themselves and feel that their college believes in them too. Looking to the future as partners in the educational process and using the collective *we* can also help reinforce the team approach to success: *we will work together; we will try another approach; we may want to consider.*

Through all of these conscious communication shifts, BMCC's EM team accomplished more than simply delivering messaging with greater sensitivity and tact; they reestablished a new state of mind. In many instances, they reinvented the concept of failure, using it as a rite of passage, redefining it as the ultimate inspiration for further growth and eventual success. This is certainly a new concept for higher education professionals and students alike. Living in a world that typically focuses on winners, success stories, and perfection, one rarely has the opportunity to see the multiple, often devastating, losses that come before the big win. Embracing the inner educator inside us all, it is vital to share this valuable lesson with our student audience. It is up to us to create messaging and support interactions that focus on the lessons learned throughout the process and not solely on the victory or defeat. Asking questions like *What would you do differently next time?* *What went right/wrong?* *Who might you have turned to for support or guidance?* is an invaluable part of the process, critical to self-assessment and self-awareness. Not only do these questions help the student to critically reflect on the

process, they can assist them in gaining control and power over the situation for the next time.

Demystifying the College Experience

As communication continues throughout the admissions and onboarding process, transparency and expectation-setting become key components. Providing students information on next steps and what to expect during the first weeks at college helps to reduce anxiety and fortify a relationship. In order to incorporate such elements into the first semester experience, the enrollment management division assembled a peer outreach team and created a special communication plan that focused on the most at-risk new students—those who enter college with a CAA lower than 70. First, the outreach team made phone calls to this group with no particular call to action, just one student welcoming another student and having a conversation around one simple question: “How’s it going?” Students’ response to this exercise was so positive, that they began visiting the admissions office to continue these conversations in person. Next, a targeted communication plan was launched that focused on: fun events and activities during the first few weeks; support services (both academic and social/emotional) during the next few weeks; and tutoring and library hours during midterms. The cycle was repeated for the second half of the semester, highlighting different programs, activities, and opportunities for campus involvement. After two semesters, this program improved the retention rate of this at-risk group to match that of the college cohort.

Additionally, the Student Affairs division at BMCC had great success with a program called Panther Partners. This program matches first-generation students with first-generation staff mentors. Many members of the BMCC EM team are Panther Partners. The benefits of the program work both ways; students are provided additional mentoring, especially in the first semester, and administrators hear first-hand accounts of what students are experiencing on campus. This provides the team with the unique opportunity to view their division’s service shortcomings and other challenges

through a student lens. Unfortunately, the view is not always a good one.

As higher education professionals, we understand the rules, regulations, and policies that govern our students’ enrollment experience. We are experts in application processing, course management, and financial aid verification, and we know the difference between non-degree and visiting students. But to our students, this seems like a different language. For many first-year college goers who have never had to explore the landscape of higher education, it’s like entering a foreign country for the first time. In choosing to use our unique higher education language when working with students, we are not meeting them where they are. Feeling overwhelmed by new surroundings, new people, and a new language can surely cause a student (especially a first-generation college student) to think, “Clearly, I’m not college material, and I don’t belong here.” Over the last several years, at the end of each add/drop period, BMCC surveys their new students about their experience with the enrollment process. Students often share their frustrations of not knowing all of the steps needed to enroll, the lack of access to information on what they need to do, and the wait time to meet with staff members. At BMCC, it became apparent that the service model needed to change in order to meet students where they were and eliminate the barriers that caused them to feel disconnected and alone on their journey.

Dialing up the Quality of Care

Students have been quick to express their frustration in receiving conflicting messages from different offices. They especially do not appreciate when something they perceive to be a quick visit or quick call turns into an issue that takes significantly more time to resolve. They also told staff that they prefer meeting with the same staff member upon their return and for all of their enrollment needs. The BMCC EM team responded by establishing consistent customer service standards to ensure that all of their students have similar experiences, each and every time they visit or call our offices.

One of the first steps the team took was to expand the service offered in the contact center. Initially, the

contact center only handled inbound calls related to admissions but realized there was a need to expand call services to all facets of enrollment services. Over the course of two years, the expansion grew to include registrar, financial aid, testing, and bursar-related calls. Finally, a student was able to call one number and have all of their questions answered by one agent. Next, they implemented a similar, all-inclusive model of the contact center for in-person visits by creating a one-stop enrollment center that was designed to service students with registrar, admissions, and financial aid needs. The unit, which opened in July of 2019, was met with overwhelmingly positive responses from students. Both the one stop and the contact center were created to uphold the standards of student service demanded by the enrollment management leadership team. BMCC chose to adhere to three main principles of operations in an effort to uphold those standards: 1) centralize the three service offices into one front facing service unit, 2) establish service standards of excellence, and 3) foster staff trust and belonging. By combining registrar, admissions, and financial aid services, enrollment specialists were finally able to connect all of the chapters in each student's *enrollment story*.

In 2019, BMCC's Contact Center collaborated with Benchmark Portal, an organization that uses twelve quantitative and qualitative key performance indicators to audit the efficiency and effectiveness of a service unit. Now, for the first time, BMCC's Contact Center has been officially recognized as a Center of Excellence for the quality of training, customer service, and delivery standards they offer to students.

And what about immediate delivery of in-person customer service? After hearing students express their frustrations about waiting in lines for service, BMCC implemented QLess, a virtual line management tool for students to use when seeking the services of the one stop. For the first time, students were able to virtually be assigned a place in line instead of physically standing in line to meet with a specialist. In addition, the data analytics provided by QLess allowed BMCC to assess wait time, service time, repeat visitors, staff output, and student satisfaction on service. This instant feedback

allowed the team to provide instant coaching to staff on service standards and support student feedback on wait times, which was never a priority before. It didn't take long for BMCC to realize that the implementation of service standards helped provide a more positive student experience and encouraged students to remain enrolled during their first semester.

In establishing service standards, the contact center staff began following introductory and closing scripts, ensuring that each caller has the same experience. Calls are monitored throughout the week and used for on-the-spot feedback training. A quality assurance team of part-time staff has been established as well. This team calls back students, at random, to ask further questions about their call experience. In the one stop, all students are asked to complete a four-question survey after visiting the unit. This information is to be shared with staff to understand the students' experiences and expectations and to establish a standard for all team members. Staff are encouraged to ask the students about their semester and their studies, to reinforce the importance of academics and doing well in classes. Students are provided a canvas bag, pen, and notepad on days where the wait time is longer than usual, as a way to thank students for their patience and understanding. Finally, Federal Work Study students were hired to serve as greeters to the one stop. These greeters welcome students, assist them in signing into the QLess system, and direct them to meet with appropriate staff members. Before greeters, the percentage of arrived students (students who signed into QLess and saw a staff member) was 81.4 percent. After adding the greeters, the arrived percentage increased to 85 percent. In addition, the no show rate (students who signed in but did not show up when it was their turn to see a specialist) decreased after the addition of the greeters.

While listening to student feedback and instituting unit-specific customer service standards, Enrollment Services managers have made a very conscious decision to encourage an atmosphere of trust and care. It becomes increasingly important to establish trust when working with a student service team, as it is imperative that staff trust each other and trust the information

that is being shared with students, ensuring the most consistent voice possible. This provides a positive work environment where team members can depend and rely on each other. Taking it one step further, the “Be Nice” campaign within the contact center launched earlier last year and provides opportunities for staff to show their support of one another by being *nice*. The goal of the campaign is to encourage staff to support each other in a variety of ways, such as random acts of kindness, kudos for support, thanks for going above and beyond, and acknowledgements of quality calls from the management team. Essentially, the department leaders believe that if their staff are in a warm and caring environment that feeling will translate over the phone to callers.

In another effort to build morale, the one-stop unit implemented a weekly MVP (Most Valuable Panther) where staff nominate another team member who has gone above and beyond. Staff submit their nominations before the weekly staff meeting. One team member reads the nomination, and the MVP is given the opportunity to guess their nominator. This initiative has established trust, encouragement, and recognition among the team, resulting in staff who are more willing to assist each other when working with escalated issues with students.

The most evident first win was a shift in the staff mindset about what is good service and why it is im-

portant to create a welcoming environment for students. Through the development of thoughtful training programs and a lot of practice, the BMCC service teams are building their skill as care agents for students. Two years ago, staff struggled to recognize language and service practices that demotivated students. Now, staff members are quick to identify messages and practices that fail to connect and reassure students that they can succeed at college. This shift in staff mindset will continue to empower the EM work teams to provide positive and welcoming services for students who are seeking a sense of belonging and need reinforcement to know that they made the right choice in coming to college.

In establishing a plan to improve the culture of care for students, the college will spend the next year assessing the outcomes of the plan. Retention numbers will be assessed to see what impact the plan had on student engagement and enrollment. Survey data will continue to be collected from students to review the services offerings of the one stop and the contact center. Annual audits will be established to review the communications and ensure they are up to date and engaging with the student audience. BMCC is optimistic that these initiatives will help create a welcoming and supportive environment that students want and need to positively support their college success.

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Prior to her time at BMCC, she served as Director of Admissions at Ocean County College (New Jersey), Director of Undergraduate Admissions at Montclair State University (New Jersey), and Manager of Enrollment at the Culinary Institute of America (Hyde Park, NY). She

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Diane Walleser, Ed.D., is Vice President for Enrollment Management at Borough of Manhattan Community College, which serves 26,000 students as part of the City University of New York system. Walleser oversees the offices of admissions, financial aid, the registrar, and enrollment services.

Previously, she served as Vice President of Enrollment Management and

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Walleser has an Ed.D. in higher education leadership from Edgewood College (Wisconsin); an M.B.A. from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, a bachelor of science in business administration from Viterbo University (Wisconsin), and an associate of applied science in finance from Western Technical College (Wisconsin).



Kristin Waters

Kristin Waters, Ed.D., served as the Director of Enrollment Services at Borough of Manhattan Community College from 2017–2020 where she managed the Panther Station, the one stop enrollment center focused on registrar, admissions, and financial aid inquiries. She also oversaw the Contact Center that manages enrollment and bur-

sar related calls with the goal of offering wrap around student services to increase satisfaction for BMCC's 26,000 students. She now serves as the Assistant Dean of Student Services for The Graduate School of Education, Bank Street College. In this role, Kristin is responsible for implementing a one stop service center for financial aid, registrar, and bursar student needs, creating a positive student

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