

Operation Graduation

An Interview with
Dr. Margaret M. McMenamin, President, Union County College



Union County College students are transforming their futures and their community as they target graduation.

EDITORS' NOTE Dr. Margaret McMenamin was appointed to her current position in July 2010. She began teaching as an instructor at Lehigh Carbon Community College in Pennsylvania in 1984. She rose to full professor, Dean of Faculty, and Vice President of Academic and Student Affairs at Lehigh Carbon. In 2005, Dr. McMenamin was named Executive Vice President of Educational Services at Brookdale Community College in New Jersey. From November 2009 to April 2010, she served as Acting President of Brookdale. Dr. McMenamin is a Commissioner and Chair of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. She has served as an adjunct professor at Rowan University and is currently a member of the American Association of Community Colleges' Presidents' Academy Executive Committee, the International Commission for the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, and the National Junior College Athletic Association Executive Committee. Dr. McMenamin attended Temple University and graduated cum laude. She earned a masters from the University of Scranton and a doctorate in educational leadership from Lehigh University.



Margaret M. McMenamin

INSTITUTION BRIEF Union County College (ucc.edu) is an open-access public comprehensive community college. The college operates campuses in Cranford, Elizabeth, Plainfield, and Scotch Plains, New Jersey. Union County College enrolls almost 20,000 credit and non-credit students. Union County College educates many undergraduate allied healthcare professionals in New Jersey.

What excited you about leading Union County College and what were your priorities for the College?

I was excited about leading the oldest two-year college in New Jersey and helping our students achieve their dreams. But when I arrived in July 2010, I realized that the college was underperforming in important metrics that mattered, not only to students and their families, but also, frankly, to the country. I'm talking about graduation rates and promoting economic mobility for our students.

My priority became improving our student success outcomes. We had to set the institution on a new course – a student-centered course.

The college regarded itself as one of the best community colleges in the country. However, since our graduation rates didn't show that, I knew we had to make massive changes.

Will you highlight the steps you took to change the course for Union County College?

I started by refocusing the entire institution on our mission of educating students. I figured that was common ground that everybody – administrators and faculty – could agree on.

We implemented a program called Operation Graduation. It was a whole new approach to student advising. It was data driven. I didn't want to hear anecdotes about how one student's life was changed. We needed an approach that we could take to scale, one based on research, best practices, and data. I wanted to focus on the numbers. The numbers don't lie.

Instead of a sink or swim approach, we engaged in what's called "intrusive intervention." We paid attention to our students in a way that was unprecedented. We were proactive and didn't wait for a student to ask for help. We tracked our students. When they missed class or struggled with a test, our advising team contacted the student and got them the help they needed. We said to our students, "you didn't go to class. What's going on? You had trouble on your test, let's get you some tutoring." If necessary, we walked them to the tutoring center.

The result? Graduation rates nearly doubled. For the first time in over 20 years, we were in double digits. We were cautiously optimistic, but not convinced that it was real. Over the next year we expanded Operation Graduation and saw another dramatic jump in graduation rates. At that point we knew we had something special.

What was happening with Operation Graduation was revolutionary. There was one problem, however. When we peeled the onion, we discovered something troubling. The graduation rates for most of our students went up, with the exception of our black male students. Their rates essentially did not move. We had a significant achievement gap.

Nothing we were doing – none of our intervention strategies – had an impact on our black men. Some would have accepted the outcome and moved on. At Union County College, we call that "the soft bigotry of lowered expectations." We reevaluated what we were doing

and why it wasn't working with these students. We discovered that while many of our students were close to graduation and needed just a little help, most of our black male students had not earned enough credits to be close to graduation. Evidently, we had allowed them to meander around the curriculum without direction. It was outrageous, and we knew we had to find a solution. That's when Project Achievement was born.

We engaged the community. I went to African American leaders on our board and said, "Here are the numbers. This is eventually going to be on the front page of the Star Ledger. Is this something that you want to help us do anything about or should we just say this is the best these young men can do?"

They shared my outrage and generously said, "What can we do to help? How can we help you?" They connected us to other successful African American leaders in the community, including the Omega men. These professionals met with our Project Achievement students. Whether it was a state police major telling them how to handle themselves when they get pulled over, or a Fortune 500 company executive talking about how he moved up – it resonated with our students. You could see the spark in our students' eyes – something clicked.

We restructured our interventions to address the unique challenges faced by these students. We reassigned advisors to work exclusively helping them. We paid attention to them in an exceptional way and it worked.

Our graduation rates for black males doubled in the first year of Project Achievement and has now quadrupled.

What is the ultimate goal and how do you define success?

Our ultimate goal is economic mobility for our students. If anybody tells you any different, it's baloney. It's great to memorize the prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, and to master quadratic equations, but for college students today, it's about economic mobility and access to the American dream. We have our sights set on achieving a 50 percent graduation rate and eliminating the achievement gap.

Success? I believe we have succeeded when everyone who is willing to work for it has an opportunity to go to college and achieve their dreams. College changed my life and I want to do that for our students. This is their best shot – their big opportunity. Success is getting our students across the finish line. ●