

Advancing Toward a Four-Year Degree

BY PRIYANKA CHAMPANERI, BA '05, MFA '10

For community college students looking to transfer to a four-year institution, the roadblocks they encounter along the way are often too much to overcome. ADVANCE is looking to change that—and create a model for other institutions across the nation to follow.

Of the 80 percent of community college students nationally who say they want to complete a bachelor's degree, only 20 percent actually do so after seven years. For the rest, the obstacles they face—credits that don't transfer, money and time lost, a lack of connection at the four-year school—far too often leaves them feeling further behind than where they started, in debt, and unable to move forward professionally.

George Mason University and Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) wanted to find a better way. They wanted to build a bridge for those students—and they wanted to do it together.

“Our region is booming and CEOs can't find enough talent,” says **Michelle Marks**, MS '93, PhD '98, vice president for academic innovation and new ventures at Mason. “We knew we had to work harder to take down barriers that prevent talented students from completing their degrees.”

The result is ADVANCE, a Mason/NOVA partnership that provides a more seamless and affordable path from community college to a four-year degree, saving students time and money—an average of \$15,000 on the cost of a bachelor's degree for most students.

Mason and NOVA have a lot in common. As the largest institutions of their kind in Virginia—NOVA the largest two-year institution, and Mason the largest public research university—together, they serve more than 110,000 students. The student populations at both are highly diverse in ethnicity, age, and employment status.

Mason enrolls almost twice as many transfer students as any other Virginia four-year institution. Each year, 3,000 students come to Mason directly from NOVA.

ADVANCE welcomed its inaugural class of 319 in fall 2018. One year later, student enrollment had shot up to 692, almost 20 percent higher than projected goals. By 2030, enrollment could swell to more than 6,500 students.

The ADVANCE Program is quickly becoming a national model for the transfer process. In 2018, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* named the NOVA-to-Mason path “one of the nation's most successful transfer partnerships.” The National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition also recognized the partnership with its 2019 John N. Gardner Institutional Excellence for Students in Transition Award.

IDENTIFYING THE OBSTACLES

According to Ashlie Prioleau, executive director of ADVANCE, data show that students starting their postsecondary education at a community college—an option that comes at a lower price point than most four-year institutions—clearly had the drive and intention to continue their studies and earn a bachelor's degree. So what was stopping them?

“Students were saying it's because so many of their credits wouldn't transfer. Or they don't

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PHOTO BY L. THAN COUMAS

Success coach Sharon Kim divides her time between Mason's Fairfax Campus and Northern Virginia Community College's Annandale Campus.

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have enough money to cover the new and surprising cost of a four-year degree. So many of these students are also working parents, along with other unique circumstances that we in higher education can't just overlook," says Prioleau.

When the curriculum between two institutions does not align, students trying to transfer literally end up paying the price in both money and time. A 2017 U.S. Government Accountability Office report estimates that students transferring between institutions in the years 2004 to 2009 lost an average of 43 percent of their credits.

Yet the advantages of having a bachelor's degree when job hunting are proven. According to the Center for Education and the Workforce, 65 percent of jobs in 2020 will require, at minimum, either a bachelor's degree, an associate's degree, or some college credits. And when that degree is earned in a region like Northern Virginia, already a hub for major employers in high-demand fields, the benefits only compound.

"It's not just about opening the door to a four-year degree," Prioleau says. "It's about upward social mobility."

A NEW MODEL OF TRANSFER

ADVANCE was designed to be a joint admissions program: NOVA students signing up for AD-

VANCE automatically clear Mason's admissions process. The other aspects of the program are tailored to bypass most obstacles.

Prioleau says that the pathways—an aligned curriculum with detailed course plans—are key to the program's success. "It just creates so much less stress for the students."

An aligned curriculum for specific majors ensures that students waste neither time nor money on excess credits at both NOVA and Mason as long as they follow the course plan outlined in their pathway. ADVANCE's 102 pathways focus on areas where regional employers initially expressed a need for talent, including health care, teacher education, and technology, but have grown to encompass majors such as computer game design and neuroscience.

"Faculty are the superstars of ADVANCE," says Marks. "Each pathway is a result of Mason and NOVA faculty working together to ensure that courses align and move students forward in their programs. You can't overstate the value of these collaborations. The two-to-four-year disconnect exists between higher ed institutions across the country, and our faculty has been able to overcome it."

ADVANCE students are treated like Mason students from their first day, receiving a Mason

ID card and immediate access to all Mason services, including University Libraries and Career Services. Dedicated support staff guide the students every step of the way.

A WORLD OF SUPPORT

As an ADVANCE student success coach, **Sharon Kim**, BA Psychology '03, MEd '08—who divides her work week between Mason's Fairfax Campus and NOVA's Annandale Campus—is often listening more closely than students realize. “I try to pay attention to questions students ask, or stories that they share, so that I can identify specific support that students will need,” she says.

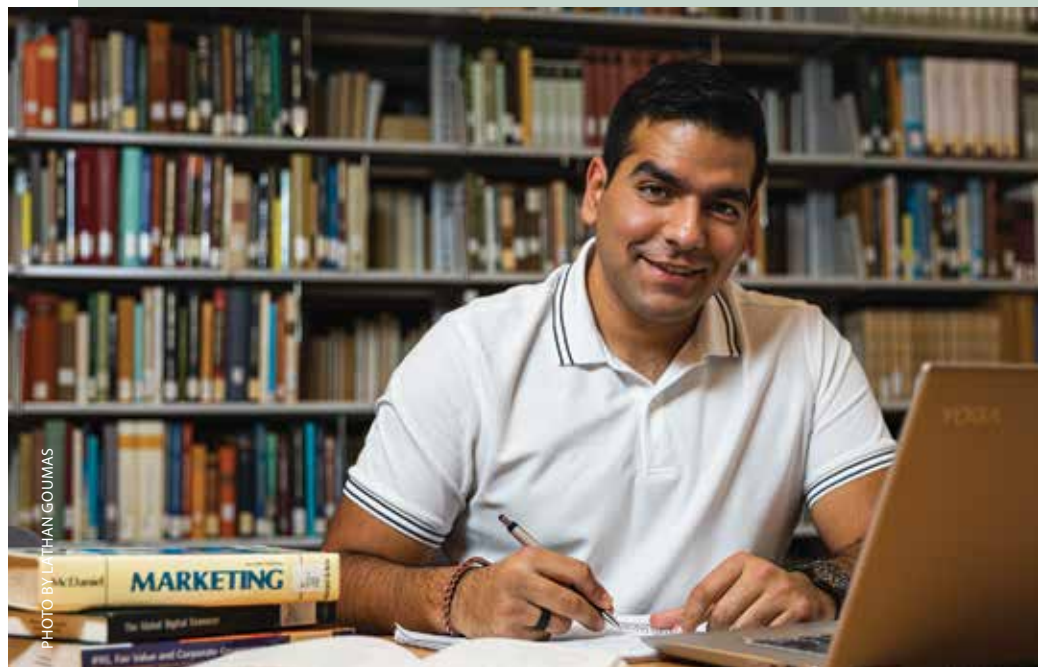
This means that when a student is sharing a personal anecdote, the wheels in Kim's head are turning, and those stories turn into opportunities to point out resources, whether they be child-care options, learning strategies, or career resources. Kim's current caseload of 350 includes online students, adult learners, student-parents, international students, and more.

“We look at the whole person,” says Kim, who was also a transfer student from NOVA before earning her Mason degrees. “It's not just about academics. We try to empower students to remove barriers. Every student's knowledge varies, and meeting them where they are is key to providing support.”

As part of a three-year partnership with ADVANCE, InsideTrack student success experts will work directly with Mason and NOVA advisers, faculty, and counselors to provide training, development, and the certification of coaches, managers, and program partners. InsideTrack is also developing an ongoing training, certification, and quality-assurance program, as well as a success coaching handbook tailored to ADVANCE students' needs.

GROWING FOR THE FUTURE

The program's initial successes have not gone unnoticed, with external support and recognition coming from multiple areas. The Strada



DIEGO ORTEGA BUSINESS MANAGEMENT PATHWAY

After spending four years in the U.S. Marines, Diego Ortega took an aptitude test as part of his transition out of the military. To his surprise, one of the possible career fields he matched for was human resources. With that knowledge in hand, he enrolled at NOVA, where he found himself thinking, “If you know exactly what you want to do, there should be something that helps guide you down that path.”

Then one day at NOVA, a poster caught his eye. It was for ADVANCE. “I was trying to set myself apart and trying to be one step ahead of my peers, and it seemed like something I could really take advantage of.”

After joining the program's inaugural class in fall 2018, he began using all the opportunities he now had at his fingertips. Through Mason's University Career Services, he procured an internship with the Patriot Pollinator Coalition. He's also attended several campus events.

But the best part, Ortega says, is the way the ADVANCE pathway has created a map to lead him exactly where he wants to be. “It's taken a lot of stress out of the equation.”



PHOTO BY LATHAN GOUMAS

SOFIA ESCOTO BIOLOGY PATHWAY

As a student in the biology pathway, Sofia Escoto is clearly enamored of her subject, citing classes she's taken in cell biology and genetics as further stoking her interest.

She joined the inaugural ADVANCE class in fall 2018 after graduating from Oakton High School in Vienna, Virginia. She knew she wanted to one day go to Mason, and she liked that ADVANCE streamlined all of her course requirements.

While she knew what field she wanted to focus on, she wasn't so sure about her future career after graduation. Enter her success coach, Sharon Kim.

"I was talking about what classes I would need to take, because I wasn't sure what I really wanted to do after school, and she told me to take a career test," Escoto says.

The test suggested she consider a career in teaching. Kim then suggested Escoto work at the tutoring center at NOVA as an initial tryout of the field. "That's where I work now," Escoto says. "She gave me the idea to apply there."

Escoto began her first semester at Mason in spring 2020.

Education Network awarded ADVANCE a \$1 million, three-year grant in early 2019. The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation announced a \$250,000 award, to be shared jointly between ADVANCE and the Early Identification Program (EIP), in September 2019.

Area employers have also pledged their support. A gift from the Northrop Grumman Foundation will establish a scholarship fund for ADVANCE students pursuing science, technology, engineering, and mathematics degrees. Support from the Micron Technology Foundation will provide both stipends and coaching support for NOVA engineering students transferring to Mason, as well as ADVANCE outreach into local high schools.

Prioleau emphasizes the push for a more direct pipeline taking students from graduation and straight into jobs with area employers. "Our goal in the second year of the program is to build out more and more of these [employer] connections," she says. "We're working on more commitments for these employers, who have given us funding already, to hire our students."

And, like the students it serves, ADVANCE has big dreams of its own. "The purpose is to create a national model for other institutions to replicate," Prioleau says. She's had several conversations with other universities and community college systems, all interested in learning how to implement a similar program at their institutions.

"ADVANCE has certainly achieved more than we expected, faster than we expected, and there's still plenty of work ahead," says Marks. "Mason's goals are always big, but they're also individual. Every ADVANCE student that makes it across the finish line and earns a degree—that's a major win for students, families, and our region. It's what our program and our university are here to do."

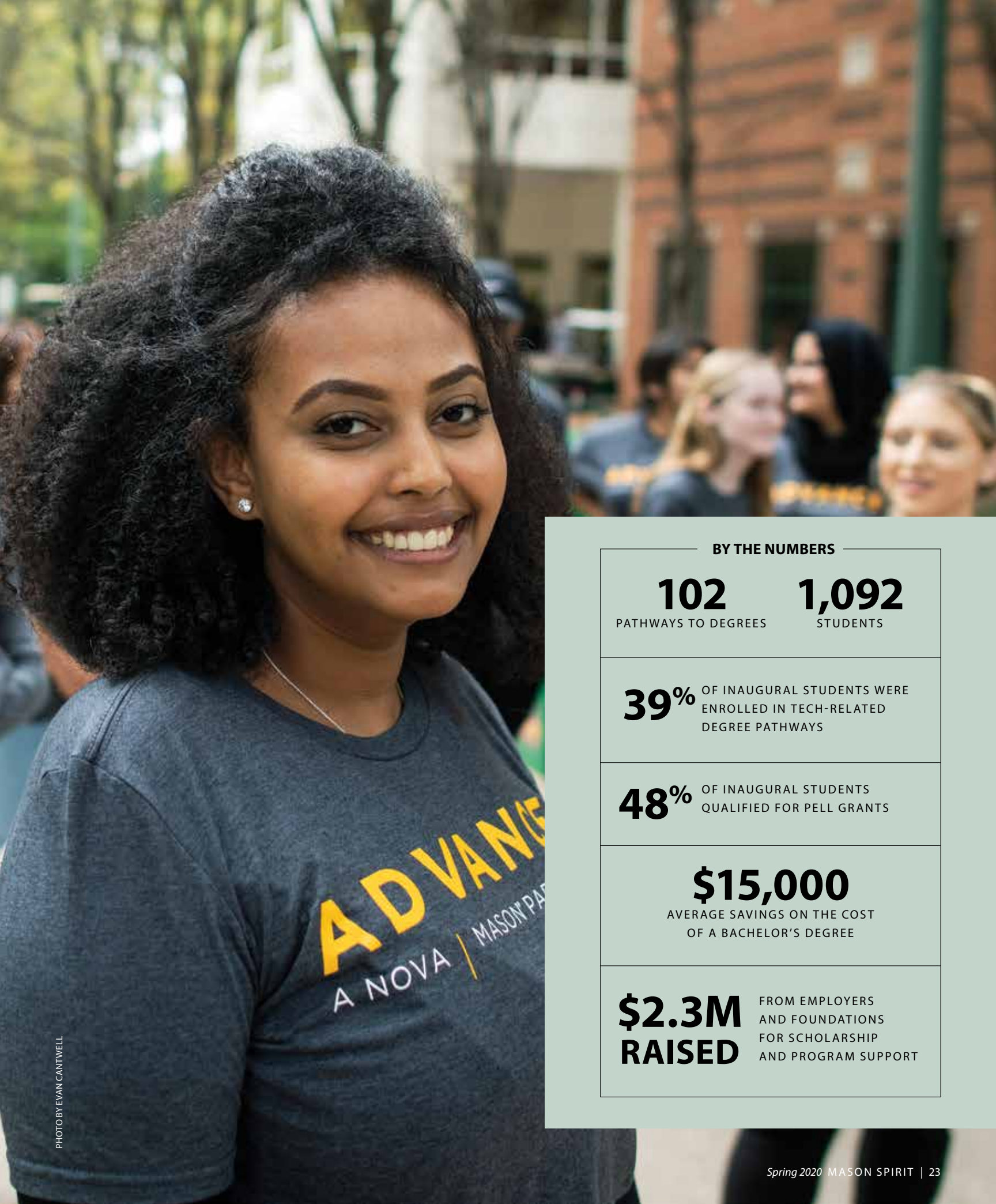


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BY THE NUMBERS

102

PATHWAYS TO DEGREES

1,092

STUDENTS

39% OF INAUGURAL STUDENTS WERE ENROLLED IN TECH-RELATED DEGREE PATHWAYS

48% OF INAUGURAL STUDENTS QUALIFIED FOR PELL GRANTS

\$15,000

AVERAGE SAVINGS ON THE COST OF A BACHELOR'S DEGREE

**\$2.3M
RAISED**

FROM EMPLOYERS AND FOUNDATIONS FOR SCHOLARSHIP AND PROGRAM SUPPORT