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Building a Pipeline for the Future

Third of a Three-Part Series

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By Barbara Frankel



At age 12, Foday Sackor only knew a life of poverty and violence in Liberia until he came to the United States in 1998 with his mother and two siblings.

The family arrived in New York and three years later moved to Gaithersburg, Md., where his mother was able to find work. Sackor was an excellent student and won a full scholarship to Montgomery College and then to the University of Maryland in College Park. But one thing was getting in the way of his aspirations: money. He couldn't afford room and board at College Park or a car to make the hour's drive. He also wanted to stay close to home to be with his mother since his older brother is serving in Iraq.

"I had the drive to succeed but I needed help," he recalls.

Enter the Universities at Shady Grove (USG), a remarkable program aimed at giving educational opportunity to those who need it most and providing a core source of employees for nearby businesses, such as Sodexo, No. 12 on [The 2008 DiversityInc Top 50 Companies for Diversity@ list](#). With the increasing demand for an educated work force—even in these tough economic times—the university system of Maryland came up with a way to provide access and an inexpensive education to those who otherwise wouldn't pursue college careers.

Created in 2000, USG is a collaboration of nine of the University System of Maryland's degree-granting facilities in one place. Located in the middle of Montgomery County, Md., USG offers its students access to the full university-system resources and most of the popular and in-demand degrees, such as nursing, business, technology, social work and education. Eighty-eight percent of its approximately 2,500 students are working in the area. Almost all transfer from two-year schools into four-year degree programs.

"We don't offer degrees; we facilitate," says Dr. Stewart Edelstein, associate vice chancellor of academic affairs at the University System of Maryland and executive director of USG. "Our mission is to expand access to education. We are here to support the work force and economic needs of the region."

The student body is very diverse; most have financial and family constraints and need help. Edelstein says the vast majority of the approximately 1,000 full-time daytime students come from Montgomery College, and increasingly, they are Latino and Asian. The others are part-time weekend undergraduate students.

Their success is reflected in the numbers: USG has a 92 percent retention rate over five years, and one-third continue on for graduate degrees. Edelstein projects that within the next few years, the student population will increase to 6,000.

Area companies are taking advantage. One of these companies is Sodexo, which has been involved with USG. Rohini Anand, senior vice president and global chief diversity officer at Sodexo, is on the USG board and feels her company benefits enormously from the program.

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ask the white guy



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a bias toward diversity*

"We believe that USG develops the caliber of students that we seek to hire. Not only are the graduates from USG from the disciplines that we are in need of (hospitality and culinary arts, MBAs, and their new engineering program) but these are students who are passionate and committed corporate citizens," she says.

Anand, who says Sodexo offers the students internships and scholarships, notes that 60 percent of the USG students are Black, Latino, Asian or American Indian and "they are in our backyard in Montgomery County, Md."

As for Sackor, he graduated in 2007 and went to work as a financial analyst for Accenture, No. 38 on the DiversityInc Top 50 list. He also started his own mentoring and tutoring company, Role Model Tutors. He helps USG nursing students prepare for state certification exams and intends to help those in other fields prepare for graduate-school exams.

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