

## Optional Writing Prompt C

### When Your College Has Your Back

By David L. Kirp on March 2, 2018, in *The New York Times*

The University of Texas had a problem — students were struggling to finish their degrees. Barely half of each class was graduating in four years. Wayne State University, in Detroit, suffered from a far bigger headache than Texas did — too few of its students were graduating, period. In 2014, only a third of the undergraduates who had arrived six years earlier earned a bachelor's degree.

Most universities are in the same boat. Today just 40 percent of college students earn a degree in four years. This phenomenon is so common that educators now use six years, by which time 59 percent of undergraduates receive their diplomas, as the new normal.

That's bad news. The extra time slows many students' progress toward an advanced degree or a good job. When students stay for an additional year, it costs them or their parents as much as \$40,000, and at public institutions, taxpayers foot part of the tab. And with undergraduates lingering, there is also less room for other students to enroll. Most important, the longer it takes students to graduate, the more likely they are to drop out.

But there has been a turnaround at both University of Texas and Wayne State. Last year U.T. raised the on-time graduation rate to 66 percent from 61 percent, and in 2017, 47 percent of the students at Wayne State graduated within six years, making the university one of the nation's fastest improvers.

The gains at Wayne State and the University of Texas don't depend on rocket-science-difficult strategies. Both schools simply started paying more attention to helping those who need it most.

Instead of waiting for struggling students to acknowledge they're in trouble, these schools provide them with concierge service from the moment they arrive on campus. Advisers and counselors reach out, upperclassmen are hired as tutors, and "learning communities" of like-minded students offer a haven in the sometimes overwhelming big-campus environment. Bureaucracies that turned seemingly mundane activities like registering for classes into Kafkaesque experiences are being streamlined.

At U.T., students with the weakest academic backgrounds are placed in paid internships linked to their academic interests. Traditional sage-on-the-stage lecture classes (which studies have found that students are one and a half times likelier to fail than classes that actively engage them) are being replaced by innovations like "flipped" courses, in which students work on projects during class time. Wayne State gives its most vulnerable freshmen an early taste of college with a summer program combining remedial math and reading with college-survival skills like time management.

Initiatives like these build a "we have your back" community. They enable vulnerable undergraduates to realize that they're not impostors, an all-too-common belief, and that they can handle the obstacles they'll predictably encounter. These are wise moves, as psychologists have demonstrated that students' chances of graduating increase substantially when they believe that they belong at the university and that, with effort, they can do the work. Why doesn't every university make the same type of effort to help students succeed?

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**Prompt:** After reading "When Your College Has Your Back," write a 750-word essay in which you argue whether or not Cal Poly has built a "we have your back" community that enables its students to handle "the obstacles they'll predictably encounter" during their time in college. If you believe Cal Poly makes the same type of effort as the University of Texas and Wayne State to help students succeed, support your position with compelling arguments that expand upon or go beyond those points already offered in the article. If, instead, you believe Cal Poly has not built a "we have your back" community and needs to develop initiatives to help students succeed, defend your position with compelling arguments that expand upon or go beyond those points already offered in the article. Your essay should show an understanding of the article without simply repeating it, and you should incorporate specific details from your own experience and knowledge into your response.