

**STUDENT AFFAIRS LEADERSHIP COUNCIL**



**Supporting and Retaining  
Traditionally Underrepresented  
Students**

*Custom Research Brief • July 14, 2011*

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**THE ADVISORY BOARD COMPANY  
WASHINGTON, D.C.**

# I. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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## Project Challenge

A member college approached the Council with the following questions about strategies for increasing retention among traditionally underrepresented student populations:

- **Strategies and Programs:** *What overall strategy do institutions adopt to increase retention rates for traditionally underrepresented students? What programs (such as peer mentoring, minority-specific orientation, multicultural affairs office, etc.) contribute to this goal?*
- **Engaging Campus Stakeholders:** *How do students, faculty, staff, and administrative personnel contribute to decisions regarding programs and support for traditionally underrepresented students? What committees and staff coordinate these programs? In what ways are students involved in coordinating or delivering these programs? How are non-minority students involved in these programs? What role does the office of multicultural affairs play in coordinating and delivering programs?*
- **Administration:** *Do these programs fall under the purview of student affairs, academic affairs, or both? From where do institutions draw funding for these programs? What level of funding is provided?*
- **Evaluation:** *What programs have proven particularly successful? What data supports this? What needs have contact institutions not yet satisfied?*

## Project Sources

- Advisory Board's internal and online research libraries ([www.educationadvisoryboard.com](http://www.educationadvisoryboard.com))
- The Chronicle of Higher Education (<http://chronicle.com>)
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (<http://nces.ed.gov/>)

## Research Parameters

The Council reached out primarily to private institutions that enroll large numbers of Pell grant recipients and racial and ethnic minorities.

# I. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Brief				
Institution	Location	Approximate Enrollment (Total/Undergraduate)	Carnegie Classification	Type
<b>College A</b>	Midwest	12,100/11,600	Master's Colleges and Universities (medium programs)	Private
<b>University B</b>	Mid-Atlantic	4,300/2,700	Master's Colleges and Universities (larger programs)	Private
<b>University C</b>	Pacific West	9,000/5,800	Master's Colleges and Universities (larger programs)	Private
<b>College D</b>	Mid-Atlantic	3,100/2,400	Master's Colleges and Universities (larger programs)	Private
<b>University E</b>	Mid-Atlantic	12,900/9,900	Research Universities (high research activity)	Public

**Source:** National Center for Education Statistics, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

## II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### Key Observations:

- ❖ **Contact institutions provide at-risk and traditionally underrepresented students with academic support programs that prepare them for college-level work.** These programs often take place during the summer before students' first semesters or during their first academic years and focus on key competencies such as reading, writing, and math.
- ❖ **Academic monitoring procedures allow contacts to identify students who may be at risk for withdrawing or failing and to arrange interventions accordingly.** Some contact institutions establish dedicated referral systems for at-risk students, while others rely on periodic grade reports.
- ❖ **Contacts report that financial considerations often play a large role in students' decision to withdraw. Contact institutions attempt to mitigate this strain through scholarships.** Contacts stress the importance of educating traditionally underrepresented students about how to obtain necessary financial resources and navigate the institution's administrative channels.
- ❖ **Peer mentor programs and organized peer groups offer an important form of personal support at most contact institutions.** Contact institutions often include peer mentoring in structured support programs and pair younger students with older participants. The resulting social networks lead to an investment in campus life that can diminish the possibility of withdrawal.
- ❖ **Pairing students with faculty or staff role models can result in the formation of personal attachments to the campus community.** Contact institutions structure interactions between students and faculty or staff members formally, such as through mentorships, as well informally, such as at social events during which the two groups mingle and discuss pertinent issues.
- ❖ **Contact institutions stress the importance of creating a multicultural campus environment that fosters the success of traditionally underrepresented students. A number of formal programs reinforce a multicultural campus environment, including orientation modules and speaker events that address diversity.** These offerings engage the entire campus community and elicit participation and engagement from the broader student body.
- ❖ **Contacts report that training faculty in diversity issues is a largely unmet need at their institutions. Nevertheless, some programs exist to educate faculty about the needs of a multicultural student body.** Administrators deliver this training through faculty workshops, at faculty meeting presentations, and at events hosted by the campus multicultural center.
- ❖ **Responsibility for traditionally underrepresented student retention initiatives and multicultural programming is dispersed between academic affairs and student affairs; contact institutions thus employ a number of strategies to work across institutional divisions.** Some contacts involve administrators from both divisions in formal groups or plan events in conjunction with one another. Others rely on the informal sharing of information to coordinate their retention and diversity efforts.
- ❖ **Contacts report that institutional funding is the main source of support for retention initiatives for traditionally underrepresented students.** However, alumni and corporate donations and federal and state appropriations contribute to some programs.

### III. PROVIDING ACADEMIC, FINANCIAL, AND PERSONAL SUPPORT

#### Academic Support

Contacts explain that many traditionally underrepresented students arrive at college unprepared for the academic challenges they will face. By identifying at-risk students and providing them with strong academic support, contact institutions facilitate the integration of these students into collegiate academic responsibilities.

#### Summer Bridge Programs

Some contact institutions offer select students the opportunity to participate in bridge programs consisting of courses and co-curricular activities the summer before matriculation. These programs strengthen core academic skills, such as writing and math, thereby easing the transition to college-level coursework.

Summer Bridge Programs at <i>University C</i> , <i>College D</i> , and <i>University E</i>				
Institution	Program Offerings	Duration	Academic Credit	First-Year Retention Rate
<b>University C</b>	English and Africana studies courses; community- and confidence-building activities, such as visiting African-American museums, attending African-American plays, and eating food from across the African diaspora	Approx. four weeks	None	98 percent, compared to 87 percent for the University as a whole
<b>College D</b>	Two programs. In both, academic courses and workshops that develop math, reading, and writing skills; tutoring sessions; group projects; field trips; community-based activities	Three to four weeks	Three credits	82.1 percent between 2004 and 2009, compare to 72.1 percent for the College as a whole <sup>1</sup>
<b>University E</b>	Daily academic courses; on- and off-campus activities; introductions to campus resources, such as an academic resource center and the Office of Student Life	Six weeks	Four to seven credits	Data not available

<sup>1</sup> Calculations based on data provided by contacts.

### III. PROVIDING ACADEMIC, FINANCIAL, AND PERSONAL SUPPORT

#### Sustaining Summer Bridge Program Skills with First-Year Curricula

In order to bolster the skills that students learn during summer bridge programs, contact institutions require participants to enroll in first-year student development courses. Academic workshops and tutoring sessions often supplement these courses.

 **Autonomous Courses for Participating Students**

Summer bridge program participants at **College D** enroll in some classes as a cohort during their first year. Participants may also attend educational workshops, academic counseling sessions, and tutoring sessions. Likewise, summer bridge program participants at **University C** take one course together during the fall and spring semesters of their first year; these courses revisit study skills and stress management techniques and explore leadership abilities.

 **Discussion Seminars that Supplement Existing Courses**

**University E** requires summer bridge program participants to enroll in a specialized first-year seminar once the school year begins. These seminars correspond with particular courses and meet once a week to review material assigned for those courses. In addition, seminar professors focus on study skills, exam preparation, and time management.

#### Interventions for At-Risk Students

Administrators at many contact institutions monitor the academic performance of at-risk students in order to stage constructive interventions when necessary. These interventions discourage students from withdrawing from the institution and help them create an effective plan for academic success.



Campus-Wide Referrals	Frequent Grade Monitoring	Infrequent Grade Monitoring
<p>Faculty, staff, and parents may report at-risk first-year students to <b>University C</b>'s referral system for first-year students. An administrator conducts a review of each student's situation and develops an intervention plan that draws on resources and personnel from across the University.</p> <p>A staff member at <b>University B</b> meets with students that faculty have identified as at-risk and discusses the personal and academic situations that are threatening their success.</p>	<p>Summer bridge and academic support program administrators at <b>College D</b> frequently monitor the academic performance of participants. They conduct periodic check-ins and provide counseling to resolve issues that may arise throughout students' academic careers.</p> <p>Program administrators closely monitor the academic performance of participants in <b>University C</b>'s summer bridge and academic support program. They meet frequently with participants to discuss both academic successes and difficulties.</p>	<p>Faculty at <b>University B</b> submit grades to the institution's registrar midway through every semester; students who are receiving a C- or below in any class are issued a warning. The administrator of a scholarship program for urban students meets with program participants who receive mid-semester warnings and refers them to the academic counseling center. Staff members at the center work with these students to develop plans for academic success.</p>

### III. PROVIDING ACADEMIC, FINANCIAL, AND PERSONAL SUPPORT

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#### Financial Support

Contacts report that the financial burden of college contributes significantly to withdrawals even among academically successful students. To mitigate this factor, contact institutions establish scholarships for traditionally underrepresented students and help guide qualified students to available scholarships.

##### Funded Support Programs

Some contact institutions include financial gifts in academic and personal support programs. At **University B**, a scholarship program for urban students awards participants with a yearly \$2,000 stipend. In exchange, participating students must attend academic success workshops and mentoring sessions, become active in student organizations, maintain a high grade point average, and perform 15 hours of community service during both their sophomore and junior years.

##### Alumni Awards

Occasionally, racial or ethnic minority alumni networks help traditionally underrepresented students pay tuition fees. At **University C**, the Mexican-American Alumni Association provides incoming freshmen of Mexican descent who demonstrate financial need and academic achievement with a partial-tuition scholarship. The University's African-American Alumni Association likewise provides scholarships for incoming first-year students.

##### Scholarship Education

Many traditionally underrepresented and low-income students are unaware of the multitude of institutional scholarships for which they may qualify. **College A's** office of multicultural affairs educates peer mentor program participants about scholarship opportunities in informal settings and during a weekly discussion meeting. Similarly, summer bridge program participants at **University E** visit the Office of Financial Aid to discuss scholarship opportunities with administrators.

#### Financial Aid-Based Retention Initiative at *University B*

In 2008, administrators at **University B** pioneered a financial aid program designed to increase retention among academically successful low-income students.

At the completion of every spring semester, the registrar and the director of financial aid compile a list of students whom they expect to return to campus in the fall but who have not yet registered for classes. They remove students with a grade point average below 3.0 from the list, as well as students who have committed behavioral infractions; from the resulting list, they select students who have left campus with a balance remaining on their account. They then contact students whose balance falls below a certain threshold and **offer to forgive the past semester's debt if the student enrolls for the fall semester.**

In 2008, 12 of the 13 students whom the registrar and the director of financial aid contacted returned to school in the fall. Due to the program's success, the University has continued to offer the program every year since its original implementation.

### III. PROVIDING ACADEMIC, FINANCIAL, AND PERSONAL SUPPORT

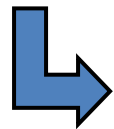
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#### Personal Support

Contacts seek to facilitate the creation of social networks among traditionally underrepresented students, their peers, and faculty and staff members. These relationships reportedly stimulate student involvement in campus life and reinforce students' commitment to graduating.

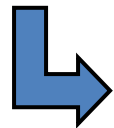
#### Peer Mentor Programs

Forging individual connections between young students and their older peers can prove crucial to students' academic success. Students who are further along in their college careers and have learned to navigate college life can often guide new students. Peer mentoring is the primary method by which contact institutions involve traditionally underrepresented students in retention efforts:



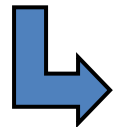
***Draw mentors from among support-program participants.***

At **College D**, older summer bridge and academic support program participants mentor younger participants throughout their academic careers. Similarly, recipients of the scholarship for urban students at **University B** are required to serve as mentors to first-year recipients during their sophomore years.



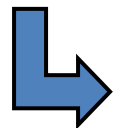
***Provide training and financial incentives for mentors.***

Given that mentors often must serve as counselors to their mentees, all contact institutions that have peer mentor programs provide training in how to interact with mentees and address crisis situations. In addition to training mentors, **College A** pays mentors for their work.



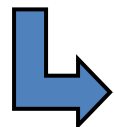
***Strengthen bonds among mentees by creating group units.***

At **College A**, each of the eight to ten mentors oversees eight to ten mentees. These family units engage in social activities together and attend weekly discussion sessions, at which speakers explore topics ranging from resume preparation to dining etiquette.



***Expand mentor duties to include more than advising, such as planning programs.***

Mentors on the work-study team of one of **College D's** summer bridge and academic support programs plan and administer events for program participants. Mentors at **College A** periodically sponsor entertaining outings to venues such as bowling alleys for their family units.



***Require frequent contact between mentors and mentees.***

Administrators at **College A's** office of multicultural affairs require mentees to contact their mentors at least once every two weeks. Mentees may do so in person, by phone, through Facebook, or by some other mode of communication.



### III. PROVIDING ACADEMIC, FINANCIAL, AND PERSONAL SUPPORT

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#### *University C's Critique of Formal Peer Mentor Programs*

In contrast to other contact institutions, **University C** does not offer a formal peer mentor program. Contacts allege that such programs often pair students with mentors towards whom they feel no natural affinity. More organic relationships emerge, they explain, when administrators facilitate the mixing of students from all undergraduate classes at intercultural events.

#### **Improving Undergraduate Retention and Performance through Urban High School Mentorships at *College D***

**College D** seeks to positively impact its retention rate by preparing local high school students for college. Since 77 percent of its undergraduate classes come from two nearby counties, the College directs a portion of a large Title V grant it recently received toward a mentorship program that pairs undergraduates with urban high school students from these areas.

Undergraduates work with students and their families starting in the ninth grade. Administrators attempt to match mentors to demographically similar mentees in order to augment the identification that the high school students feel toward their mentors.

In addition to providing academic and personal guidance to at-risk high school students, this program reportedly improves the academic performance of mentors; contacts attribute this impact to the structure and discipline the program provides and the relearning of academic basics.

#### **Increasing Engagement through Organized Peer Groups**

Contact institutions utilize a number of strategies to bring traditionally represented students of the same age in contact with one another. Contacts report that strengthening ties between students and forging a sense of group solidarity decreases the probability that a student will withdraw.

- **Summer bridge programs** enroll a small number of students who live and take classes together for an extended period of time. This arrangement lends itself to the creation of strong bonds between students.
- **Cohort courses** for summer bridge and academic support program participants at **University C** and **College D** allow students to adapt to college-level work alongside peers with whom they have spent a summer developing friendships.
- **Group extracurricular activities** such as speaker and networking events for summer bridge and academic support program participants at **University C** and recipients of the scholarship for urban students at **University B** offer a non-academic venue in which traditionally underrepresented students may form supportive friendships.

### III. PROVIDING ACADEMIC, FINANCIAL, AND PERSONAL SUPPORT

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#### Connecting Students to Faculty and Staff Role Models

Faculty and staff members can play an important stabilizing role in students' lives. Contact institutions indicate that these adult role models interact with undergraduates in both formal and informal settings:

##### Formal Mentorships

Adults as well as students can serve as useful mentors to young undergraduates. A mentorship program at **University B** pairs traditionally underrepresented students with faculty and staff mentors who provide them with career and academic advice.

##### Informal Socialization

African-American faculty and staff members attend **College A**'s monthly men's free haircut night. They subtly guide conversation toward topics that are essential to academic and career success, such as study and job skills, résumé-writing, and proper business attire.

## IV. CREATING A MULTICULTURAL CAMPUS ENVIRONMENT

### Strategies for Integrating Traditionally Underrepresented Students into Campus Life

Contacts report two primary strategies for creating a campus environment in which traditionally underrepresented students may easily thrive. Contact institutions first offer positive support for students' cultural heritage, then facilitate cultural exchange and discussion between students from all backgrounds.

#### *Build Cultural Capital*

Contacts report that building the confidence, or cultural capital, of traditionally underrepresented students plays an important role in academic success. Contacts achieve this goal by celebrating students' racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. For example, summer bridge and academic support program participants at **University C** visit African-American cultural destinations during the summer before their first semester.



#### *Encourage Cross-Cultural Communication*

Once traditionally underrepresented students feel confident about their own cultural history, contact institutions encourage them to share their perspectives with members of other racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups. Contacts offer various opportunities for engaging in this communication, such as discussion groups, speaker events, and international food tastings.

### Program Offerings

Contacts utilize a number of program offerings, including discussion groups, orientation modules, speaker events, and required social-justice coursework, to pursue these strategies further.

#### Orientation Programming

Most contact institutions include a diversity module in required orientation programming. At **University B**, first-year students attend a session during orientation in which they discuss diversity and expectations regarding cross-cultural communication on campus.

#### Diversity Speaker Events

Every year, **College D** honors Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. by awarding him an honorary degree. In conjunction with this event, administrators host a number of speakers who discuss social justice topics ranging from the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act to the legacy of Dr. King.

#### Small Discussion Groups

The multicultural center at **University E** holds a small group discussion session every week that anyone associated with the University may attend. A student and a staff or faculty member facilitate discussion and guide conversation towards issues such as xenophobia or the relationship of privilege to race and class.

#### Social Justice Coursework

A social justice course that all **University B** students must complete elicits active interrogation of multiculturalism and diversity from every student, regardless of their racial or ethnic heritage. Rather than remaining passive observers of diversity on campus, these students engage intellectually with the heterogeneous populations they find around them.

## IV. CREATING A MULTICULTURAL CAMPUS ENVIRONMENT

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### Faculty Diversity and Providing Diversity Training

Most contact institutions report a scarcity of racially and ethnically diverse faculty and staff members. At **College A**, however, racially and ethnically diverse individuals comprise approximately 30 percent of all full-time faculty, mirroring representation in the student body.

Contacts at most institutions report that providing structured diversity training for faculty is a largely unmet need. Nevertheless, most institutions educate faculty in some manner about strategies for supporting the academic success of an ethnically and racially diverse student body:

#### *Faculty Development Workshops*

Administrators at **College D** conduct an annual workshop consisting of two presentations on diversity and small group discussion sections. They also offer a week-long workshop on expanding their curriculum inside and outside the classroom to maximize the academic success of Hispanic students.

#### *Presentations at Faculty Meetings*

The a dedicated retention officer reporting to the Provost at **University B** discusses the institution's growing population of urban, first-generation, and racial and ethnic minority students at faculty senate meetings. She reviews strategies for supporting the academic success of these students and provides follow-up information to interested faculty members.

#### *Student Input and Extra-curricular Programming*

Contacts at **College A** report that faculty members learn about diversity primarily through interaction with students who participate actively in programming offered by the office of multicultural affairs. In addition, some faculty members become acclimated to diversity on campus by attending events sponsored by the office.

## IV. CREATING A MULTICULTURAL CAMPUS ENVIRONMENT

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### Strategies for Encouraging Non-Minority Participation

Involving non-minority students in multicultural initiatives can encourage cross-cultural communication and facilitate the engagement of traditionally underrepresented students with campus life. Contact institutions report a variety of strategies for attracting non-minority students to multicultural programming.

**Request that professors offer extra credit to students who attend multicultural programming.**

Contacts at **College D** report that students who attend events associated with the annual awarding of an honorary degree to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. must write a response paper in which they reflect on their experience to receive extra credit. This writing requirement compels students to engage intellectually with new perspectives on diversity.

**Integrate international student cultures into multicultural programming.**

Contacts at **College A** report that this strategy attracts both international and non-minority students who often do not attend other multicultural events. **University E** implements this strategy by hosting frequent international food tastings that educate students on the national culture behind each cuisine.

**Support campus centers and student organizations that sponsor service-learning opportunities.**

At **University B**, non-minority students often engage with diversity through service-learning work in nearby communities. In addition, student organizations that focus on social justice issues such as homelessness often expose non-minority students to a greater degree of racial and ethnic diversity than can be found on campus.

## V. PROGRAM FUNDING AND SUSTAINABILITY

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### Coordinating Diversity and Retention Initiatives

Responsibility for multicultural programming and retention initiatives for traditionally underrepresented students varies across contact institutions. Most institutions entrust the office of student affairs and the office of academic affairs each with responsibility for different programs.

Contacts report a variety of methods for bridging this administrative divide between student affairs and academic affairs. Most institutions call upon both academic affairs and student affairs personnel when staging events and administering retention programs. Some contact institutions also involve administrators from both divisions in formal groups that focus on retention and diversity. In addition, some contact institutions employ informal channels for coordinating efforts between the two divisions.

#### Joint Coordination of Events and Programs

Contact institutions often draw upon both student affairs and academic affairs personnel to administer events and programs:

- At **College A**, staff at the office of multicultural affairs invite racial and ethnic minority faculty members to an annual meet-and-greet with students.
- At **University E**, the Department of Undergraduate Education administers the specialized first-year seminar program. However, the Director of Student Life actively participates in the working group for this program.
- **College D** delegates responsibility for retention efforts aimed at traditionally underrepresented students to academic affairs administrators. Nevertheless, contacts report that student affairs personnel help stage faculty workshops on diversity and plan orientation and residence hall programming that addresses multiculturalism.

#### Participation in Formal Groups

Some contact institutions address diversity in formal groups composed of high-level administrators from across campus. At **University E**, a council composed of deans and vice presidents, including the Vice President for Student Affairs, is currently investigating retention efforts for a number of underrepresented and at-risk student groups. This cross-divisional composition brings a number of perspectives to bear on diversity and retention at the University.

#### Informal Information Sharing

Personal relationships and the informal sharing of information play a large role in coordinating retention efforts and diversity programming at contact institutions. Contacts at **University C** note that staff at the first-year student office and staff at the academic resource center (which report to Student Affairs and Academic Affairs, respectively) work closely together and often discuss ongoing retention efforts and at-risk students. Likewise, faculty members who notice at-risk students reach out to the student affairs personnel who oversee the referral system for first-year students to arrange an intervention.

## V. PROGRAM FUNDING AND SUSTAINABILITY

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### Funding Sources and Uses across Contact Institutions

Most contact institutions draw primarily upon institutional budgets to fund diversity initiatives and retention efforts. These funds support retention among traditionally underrepresented and at-risk students by financing the employment of retention officers, multicultural centers, and summer bridge and academic support programs. Contact institutions also draw from donor gifts, state funding, and federal grants to support select programs.

Institutional Funding	
Retention Officers	<b>University B</b> recently allocated funds toward a new position that reports to the Provost and focuses exclusively on the retention of at-risk students.
Multicultural Centers	Senior administrators at <b>College A</b> provide funding to the office of multicultural affairs. The office uses these funds for everything from computers to speaker events.
Summer Bridge and Academic Support Programs	One of the summer bridge and academic support programs at <b>College D</b> receives institutional funding. Likewise, the first-year student office at <b>University C</b> draws approximately 90 percent of its budget from institutional sources.
Donations	
Support Programs	Alumni and corporate donations comprise approximately 10 percent of the budget of the first-year student office at <b>University C</b> .
Scholarships	The Mexican American Alumni Association at <b>University C</b> relies heavily on gifts from donors to finance their scholarship program for low-income students of Mexican descent.
Government Funding	
Summer Bridge and Academic Support Programs	<b>College D</b> finances one of its summer bridge and academic support programs with appropriations from the state government. A large Title V grant that the College recently received from the federal government also supports this program.
Mentorships for High School Students	The Title V grant that <b>College D</b> recently received also funds the mentorships that pair undergraduates with high school students from the counties surrounding the College.

### **PROFESSIONAL SERVICES NOTE**

The Advisory Board has worked to ensure the accuracy of the information it provides to its members. This project relies on data obtained from many sources, however, and The Advisory Board cannot guarantee the accuracy of the information or its analysis in all cases. Further, The Advisory Board is not engaged in rendering clinical, legal, accounting, or other professional services. Its projects should not be construed as professional advice on any particular set of facts or circumstances. Members are advised to consult with their staff and senior management, or other appropriate professionals, prior to implementing any changes based on this project. Neither The Advisory Board Company nor its programs are responsible for any claims or losses that may arise from any errors or omissions in their projects, whether caused by The Advisory Board Company or its sources.

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