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Undergraduate Research Experience Increases Retention, Engagement at WVU

An apprenticeship initiative at West Virginia University has shown success at retaining learners of all backgrounds.

By Ashley Mowreader

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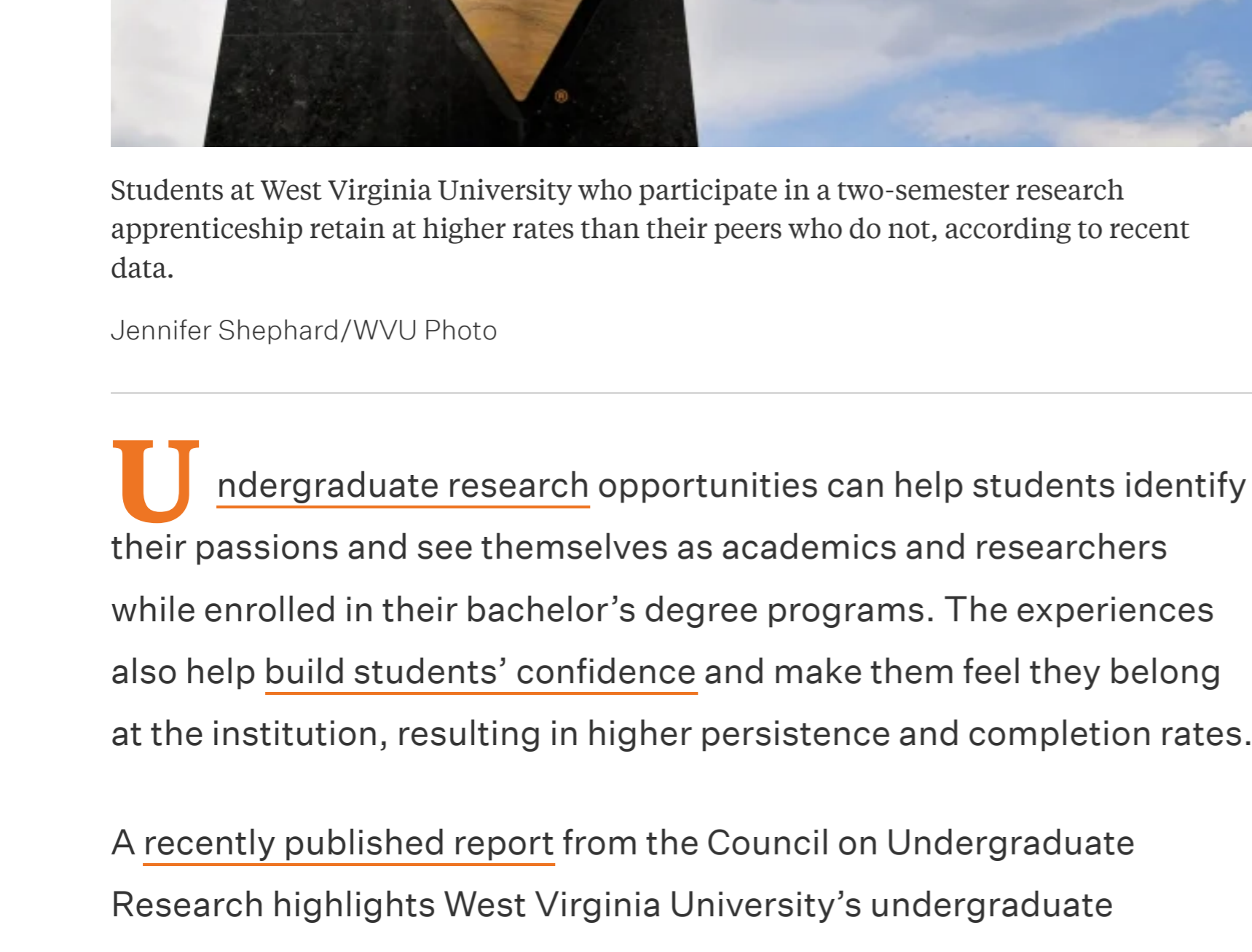
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Students at West Virginia University who participate in a two-semester research apprenticeship retain at higher rates than their peers who do not, according to recent data.

Jennifer Shephard/WVU Photo

Undergraduate research opportunities can help students identify their passions and see themselves as academics and researchers while enrolled in their bachelor's degree programs. The experiences also help build students' confidence and make them feel they belong at the institution, resulting in higher persistence and completion rates.

A recently published report from the Council on Undergraduate Research highlights West Virginia University's undergraduate research program and its impact on student retention, particularly for students from underrepresented minority backgrounds. The model removes barriers to participation through personalized outreach, compensation for students' work and staff support.

The background: Colleges in West Virginia, in general, report below-national rates of student success, falling behind in persistence and degree completion for undergraduate students. The National Center for Education Statistics reported, in fall 2022, the full-time retention rate at postsecondary institutions was 76.5 percent, compared to West Virginia's 74.2 percent.

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WVU trends highest among its counterparts, with, as of fall 2022, an 81.4 percent retention rate for students who start at the university, according to state data.

Students who participate in undergraduate research often retain at a higher level, complete their degrees faster and are more likely to pursue graduate education.

How it works: The Office of Undergraduate Research launched the Research Apprenticeship Program (RAP) in 2017 to provide first- and second-year students the opportunity to explore faculty-mentored research and creative activities.

The two-semester program is open to any WVU student, regardless of major.

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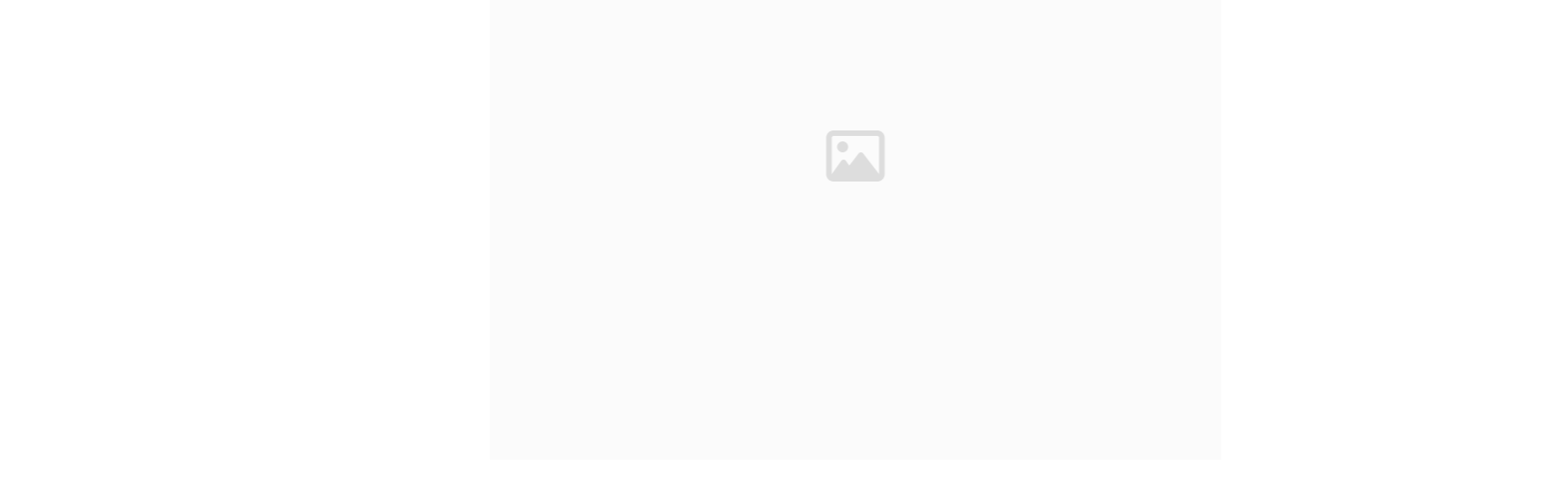
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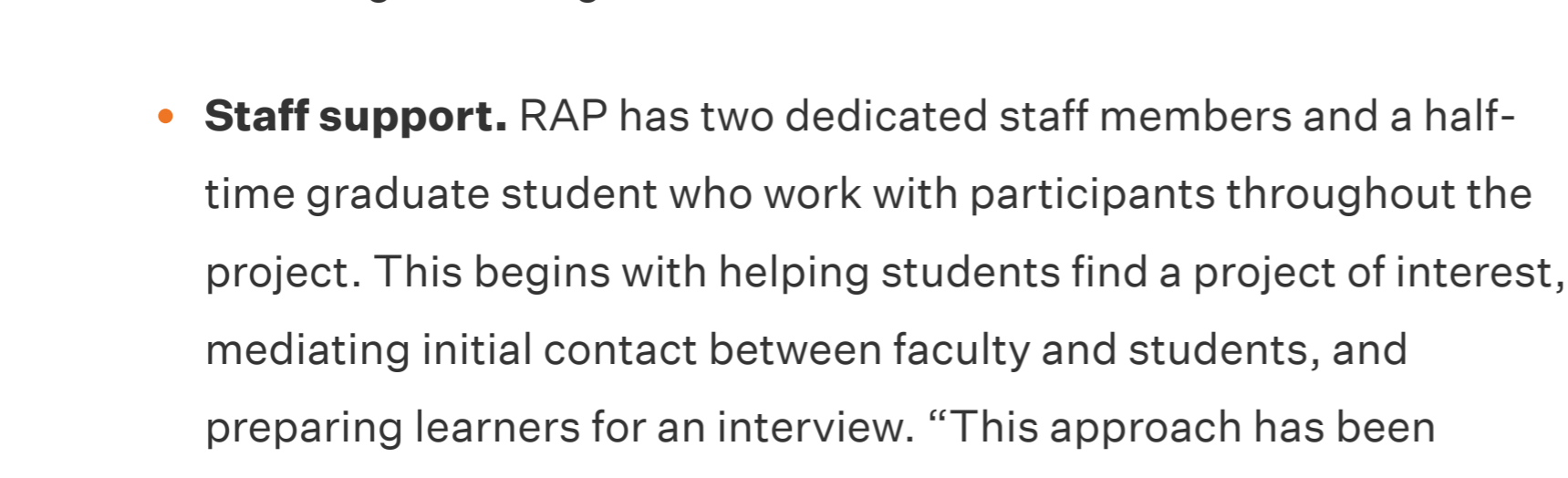
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Faculty members who conduct research are recruited each summer via email, and those interested in hosting a student complete a survey in which they detail their availability to host an apprentice and the projects available to learners. Staff input this data to a RAP mentors database, which provides a common location for all project information dating back to the launch of the program.

The research projects vary by faculty member and discipline, but all apprentices learn to carry out an investigation or artistic inquiry, learn research methods and make scholarly or creative contributions to knowledge, according to the program's website.

During the two terms, students work as apprentices in an accompanying course, Introduction to Research.



First-semester content focuses on introducing students to research, setting expectations, providing tools to have a good relationship with a mentor and helping develop their identity as a researcher. Second semester, students learn about how to apply for future opportunities and present their research to a larger audience.

The experience culminates with a universitywide undergraduate research symposium in which all RAP participants contribute their research or creative work. Students also receive a badge for completing all coursework and research criteria.

The secret sauce: RAP works to eliminate barriers to participation in several ways, including:

- Intentional outreach.** Potential participants receive emails, text messages and social media messages, with those belonging to certain groups (such as those eligible for federal work-study) receiving more targeted outreach.

- Staff support.** RAP has two dedicated staff members and a half-time graduate student who work with participants throughout the project. This begins with helping students find a project of interest, mediating initial contact between faculty and students, and preparing learners for an interview. "This approach has been particularly important for historically marginalized students who may not have experience with research or feel comfortable approaching faculty," the study says.

- Financial aid.** All participants are paid or receive class credits for working a minimum of four hours a week with their faculty mentor. Around half of participants receive federal work-study money, earning \$15 per hour, and others are funded with National Science Foundation dollars (namely the INCLUDES First2 Network and the Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation). Those who are not eligible for these funds receive class credit.

- No selection criteria.** There is no minimum requirement to participate, and any student who secures a mentor is eligible. Around 100 new students join the program each semester.

Among first-generation students, 90 percent of RAP participants retained from fall to fall compared to 72 percent of their peers. Students from historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups—including Black, Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian and Hawaiian/Pacific Islander—who participated in RAP also retained at 94 percent, and their peers who did not retained at 75 percent.

"Although higher than institutional averages, retention among Black participants was not statistically significant," the report noted. "This represents a demographic group that requires additional attention from RAP moving forward."

Low-income students and rural students also saw high retention numbers (91 percent and 95 percent, respectively), though the university did not provide comparative data for their nonparticipant classmates.

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