Building Capability, Empowering Students, and Achieving Success:
The Financial Empowerment for Student Success Initiative

By Dan Broun with Colin Austin and Jenna Bryant

December 2014

Achieving the Dream™
Community Colleges Count

MDC

Acknowledgements

Achieving the Dream, Inc. and MDC gratefully acknowledge the generous support of the Bank of America Charitable Foundation for funding the development and expansion of financial literacy support services at three community colleges. We also want to recognize faculty and staff from the Houston Community College System, Los Angeles Harbor College, and the Community College of Baltimore County for their energy and experience around the work.

About the Authors

Dan Broun is a program director with MDC and directed the Financial Empowerment for Student Success initiative at the organization.

Jenna Bryant is a program manager with MDC and currently serves a coach/mentor with Achieving the Dream's Working Families Success Network (WFSN) in Community Colleges, and currently directs MDC's WFSN Community College Learning Network.

Colin Austin is a former senior program director at MDC and directed the network of community colleges participating in the Center for Working Families initiative.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

In 2011, Achieving the Dream, Inc., the leading national organization focused on student success and equity in community colleges, and MDC, a nonprofit with nearly 50 years of experience in developing economic and workforce development strategies for communities, institutions, and individuals, joined together, with funding from the Bank of America Charitable Foundation, to support community colleges in scaling programs aimed at increasing the financial capability of their students.

The Financial Empowerment for Student Success (FESS) initiative was a two-year initiative focused on increasing student success through the provision of financial services. Three community colleges – Los Angeles Harbor College, the Community College of Baltimore County, and the Houston Community College System – received funding and substantial technical assistance for their financial capability programs.

The colleges designed their programs to capitalize on the expertise of Bank of America (BOA) staff serving as volunteers. In addition, these three colleges joined with several other Achieving the Dream colleges in a learning network aimed at increasing knowledge about how to implement these programs.

Los Angeles Harbor College (LAHC), Wilmington, California: LAHC developed a program to provide financial literacy training and financial coaching to its students. The college focused on two particular student cohorts in its initial efforts: veterans and students who had previously been part of the foster care system.

Houston Community College System, Houston, Texas: The Houston Community College System, which has six colleges under its purview, added a financial literacy module to its student success class and created a series of financial literacy fairs to reach a wide range of students.

The Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC), Dundalk, Maryland: Of the three grantee colleges, CCBC had the longest-standing financial capability program, which included financial literacy as part of student success classes. Through the FESS initiative, CCBC added financial coaching to its program.

Each of the three participating institutions received $65,000 to support their work over two years, and all used internal resources to supplement the BOA investment in the form of funding and in-kind supports, such as space for on-site financial literacy centers. MDC provided direct support in the form of technical assistance and coaching, which included: regular consultation with MDC staff, including site visits; peer-learning opportunities; participation in a larger learning network of 10 additional Achieving the Dream colleges engaged in financial empowerment activities; and access to intensive financial coaching training offered by Central New Mexico Community College. MDC also served as an advisor on the design and 2014 launch of the Working Families Success Network Community College expansion, which is funded by several national foundations.

Important Lessons Learned

Any institution looking to scale its financial empowerment programs can benefit from the three grantee colleges' experience and lessons learned. These lessons have resonance whether a college is starting a program from scratch or building upon an existing structure to offer additional programmatic offerings to its students.

Financial capability training is effective

The most important lesson from the FESS initiative is that these types of programs can have a lasting impact on both the college and the students served. And other institutions are catching on quickly. The three grantee colleges are now part of a national initiative working to make financial capability an integral component of community colleges' activities. The experience of the three community colleges involved in the FESS initiative has brought important knowledge to a national effort to increase educational and employment success for individuals and families who struggle to earn family-sustaining wages.

Solutions must be specific to the college

Financial capability programs can be adapted to meet the particular needs and culture of a college. Ultimately, there is no-one-size-fits-all model that should be applied to every institution. A particular college's financial capability offerings are dependent on the circumstances of its environment, availability of funds, and, most importantly, the needs of its student body.

Staged development may make sense for implementing financial capability programs

The three grantee colleges began the initiative at different stages of development. The Community College of Baltimore County had embraced the notion of financial literacy for a few years prior to FESS, while the Houston Community College System and Los Angeles Harbor College were newer to the subject matter. Rather than using the initiative to try to implement a high-intensity program that reached all students from the beginning, the less experienced colleges embraced an approach whereby they added services in stages and, in some cases, tested products on campus.

Institutional buy-in is critical

The success of the three grantee colleges was due, in large part, to vocal support from college administrators, including college presidents. However, even more important than words was commitment to sustainability. The FESS grant was a modest investment in the college. Recognizing the impact of these services, all three institutions have continued their programs beyond the grant period by seeking additional funding or by allocating resources to the programs. These efforts may play a role in improving student persistence, which can lead to more students benefitting from the services.

Higher intensity services require more resources

As colleges develop financial capability programs, they should be realistic about the intended reach depending on the strategies pursued. Higher intensity services are more hands-on, and colleges need to be aware of both their costs (time, resources, and staffing) and ultimate benefits to students.

Collecting data is difficult but critical

Evaluation is pivotal to measuring the effectiveness of financial empowerment strategies. It is often difficult to identify which data best represent the impact of such initiatives. The grantee colleges assessed their program's impact by collecting data on how many students they reached with each initiative and whether students reported an increase in financial ability and confidence, which helped inform the colleges' decisions about modifications to interventions.

Additionally, the way these data are collected can impact their quality and value. As the FESS initiative evolved, the colleges identified ways to improve data collection and analysis to determine the effectiveness of financial capability strategies. The ways in which these more qualitative measures are collected and integrated with existing data systems will be paramount as the programs grow in future years.

Community partnerships increase program impact

Colleges can extend the breadth and depth of available student support services by leveraging external partnerships. These partnerships range from very informal connections to formal arrangements with memoranda of agreement, depending upon the size and scope of colleges' financial capability activities and student needs. Most essential is for partners and colleges to develop an understanding of each other's capacity during the project's planning phases, which should build off existing strengths of each organization. At the beginning of the project, partners should develop a list of what services and technical assistance each organization can provide to each other and the students.

Final Report

Introduction

When Michael Rodriguez[1] showed up on the campus of Los Angeles Harbor College (LAHC), the odds were stacked against him. Shuttled between foster families and group homes throughout his high school years, Michael found little support at home to help him understand and prepare for the academic and economic challenges of the postsecondary environment. Michael, like many of his peers, possessed little knowledge of how to manage his finances—not only to pay for his education, but also to address any financial challenges that might force him to drop out of school.

Enter Armando Villalpando, a financial coach at the college who also runs the financial literacy drop-in center. Villalpando spent hours of one-on-one time with Michael, helping him develop a financial plan to make it through his time at LAHC, and directing him to community organizations and resources that could supplement the support the college provided. With that support, Michael finished his first semester at LAHC and re-enrolled for the spring semester—one step closer to the degree he needed to reach his goal of becoming a computer technician.

The financial coaching provided by Villalpando was just one part of a new program offered through LAHC as part of a national initiative aimed at understanding how community college financial empowerment strategies can help increase student success. In 2011, the Bank of America (BOA) Charitable Foundation funded Achieving the Dream, Inc., the leading national organization focused on community college student success and equity, to support colleges in enhancing programs aimed at increasing the financial capability of their students through the Financial Empowerment for Student Success (FESS) initiative.

Achieving the Dream, Inc. chose MDC, a nonprofit with nearly 50 years of experience in developing economic and workforce development strategies for communities, institutions, and individuals, as the primary organization to provide technical assistance to the participating colleges. Three community colleges – Los Angeles Harbor College, the Community College of Baltimore County, and the Houston Community College System – received funding and substantial technical assistance for their financial capability programs through this dynamic partnership.

In addition, these three colleges joined with 10 other Achieving the Dream colleges in a learning network aimed at increasing knowledge about program implementation. MDC provided colleges in the learning network access to learning activities, such as webinars and conference calls, and distributed a monthly newsletter that profiled best practices of community colleges participating in the network. This final report outlines the Achieving the Dream FESS initiative, the work of the grantee colleges and learning network, and the important lessons community colleges may consider when starting or scaling similar programs at their institutions.

Rationale for Program

Community colleges have long been considered the most democratic of all postsecondary institutions. They serve a population that represents a broader section of the nation than is often found at traditional four-year colleges or universities. Community colleges typically serve higher percentages of students of color, low-income students, older students, and students who hold full- or part-time jobs.

Community colleges also serve students who face more severe financial challenges; challenges that significantly impact their ability to reach their educational goals. More than 25 percent of first-time students who enroll in the fall semester do not return the following spring semester.[2] While academic issues hinder many students, financial issues are often the reason why students interrupt their postsecondary education. Research shows that financial challenges, such as lack of child care and lack of reliable transportation, are at the core of other frequently noted obstacles.

- Public Agenda, with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation,[3] conducted a 2011 study of 600 young people who dropped out of college. They found that 54 percent identified "having to work and make money" as the primary reason for leaving before attaining a credential. Further, 60 percent of respondents described the cost of non-tuition fees as a major barrier to completion.
- A student survey conducted by the Pearson Foundation, in collaboration with Harris International, revealed similar findings, with 39 percent of students citing financial reasons for their decision to drop out of college, compared to 9 percent citing academic reasons.

The financial pressures students face are often compounded by the fact that many of these individuals lack the knowledge necessary to manage their finances. A rudimentary knowledge of personal finance is sorely lacking for most Americans, and particularly for those in high school and postsecondary institutions. In 2008, Jump$tart Coalition found the level of financial literacy was only 48 percent among high school students and 62 percent among college students. The rates among African-American and Latino students were particularly concerning, with 89 percent of African-American students and 83 percent of Latino students failing a financial literacy test.[4]

The experience of institutions that offer financial capability strategies suggests that interventions for these issues can make a real difference in student persistence. Central New Mexico Community College (CNM), located in Albuquerque, was an early adopter, and began bundling financial supports for students in 2005. This approach brings together a range of essential economic supports, which makes it easier for students to access a variety of services from a centralized source. The goal of the college's effort was to help students stabilize their finances so they could stay on track to complete a credential. CNM started with financial literacy workshops and then, over a period of several years, introduced additional services, such as financial coaching, tax preparation, and benefits assistance. The payoff has been substantial—students who received bundled services were three to four times more likely to achieve an economic goal, such as completing an academic or training program, than students not receiving bundled services.[5]

Other colleges are also achieving promising results. MDC documented the activities of several community colleges that participated in a network of community colleges offering financial capability training.[6] Key findings for students included increased term-to-term retention rates, greater access to financial assistance, and new financial or economic resources through partnerships with community agencies.

Achieving the Dream Financial Empowerment for Student Success (FESS) Initiative

Achieving the Dream's two-year FESS initiative sought to increase student success by enhancing financial services at three community colleges. Grantee colleges designed their work to incorporate BOA staff serving as volunteers. While there was variance in how colleges utilized BOA representatives, all BOA volunteers offered their financial expertise to students on campus.

In the fall of 2011, Achieving the Dream distributed a request for proposals to its network of colleges. Representatives from Achieving the Dream, MDC, and BOA evaluated 15 applications from across the country, and chose three colleges that presented strong cases for implementing and scaling a diverse set of strategies directed at increasing student financial capability.

Los Angeles Harbor College, Wilmington, California: LAHC developed a program to provide financial literacy training and financial coaching to veterans and students who had previously been part of the foster care system.

Houston Community College System, Houston, Texas: With six colleges in total, the Houston Community College System proposed the addition of a financial literacy module to its student success class and the creation of a series of financial literacy fairs to reach a wide range of students.

Community College of Baltimore County, Dundalk, Maryland: Of the three grantee colleges, CCBC had the longest standing financial capability program, which included financial literacy as part of student success classes. Through the FESS initiative, CCBC added a financial coaching component to its program.

Each college received $65,000 to support its work over the two-year period. All three colleges also used internal funding and other in-kind resources to supplement the FESS initiative (for example, space for on-site financial literacy centers). MDC provided technical assistance that built on its existing efforts, made possible with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, to integrate financial services and income supports with educational offerings.

- **Regular consultation with MDC staff, including site visits.** MDC staff spoke and visited with college project team leaders on a regular basis, providing advice and access to resources to help enhance programs.
- **Peer-learning opportunities.** The three grantee colleges participated in several virtual and in-person meetings to learn from one another. These interactions included an intensive project kick-off meeting in January 2012, at MDC offices in Durham, North Carolina. Colleges also heard presentations on each other's progress and worked through implementation challenges at DREAM 2013, Achieving the Dream's annual institute on student success.
- **Participation in a larger learning network.** In addition to the three grantee colleges, 10 other institutions were invited to participate in a network of Achieving the Dream colleges engaged in financial empowerment activities. Participants in the network received monthly newsletters containing new developments in the field, and participated in webinars about relevant subject matter, such as integrating financial literacy into student success classes, ways to scale programs effectively, and innovative strategies for distributing financial aid.
- **Access to financial coaching training.** Through the support of Bank of America, each college received intensive financial coaching training offered by Central New Mexico Community College. These multi-day training sessions provided college staff with the needed skills and resources to offer these types of services.
- **Membership in the Working Families Success Network.** As part of their participation in the FESS initiative, the three grantee colleges accepted an invitation to join the Working Families Success Network, formerly the Center for Working Families, supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and several other national foundations. Participation in the network included access to learning activities, including attending annual network meetings in 2012 and 2013.

Case Studies of Achieving the Dream FESS Colleges

MDC's experience with the 13 colleges demonstrated that there is no one-size-fits-all model when it comes to introducing financial management strategies to community colleges. This applies to the types of services colleges offer (for example, financial coaching, or more general financial literacy workshops) or the delivery mechanism (for example, a standalone center that delivers services or embedding components into existing classes). However, MDC found that there are several key elements that should be considered when designing and implementing financial empowerment programs at community colleges.

The matrix in Table 1, developed for the national Working Families Success Network (which includes community-based programs and colleges that use the strategy of bundling services), outlines some of these critical elements, and shows how each college approached these elements during the FESS initiative. The Working Families Success Network is a network of community-based organizations and colleges helping families and individuals get jobs, complete their education or training, improve their credit, and have enough income to pay their bills and to save for the future.

Table 1: Core Design Elements of Financial Empowerment Programs

Core Design Element	The Community College of Baltimore County	Los Angeles Harbor College	Houston Community College System
Target Population to be Served	Cohort of most distressed students (defined as students receiving emergency scholarships)	Cohort of most distressed students (defined as veterans and foster care students)	Entire student body population
Level of Service	High touch	Medium touch	Low touch
Strategies for Integrated Service Delivery	Specific people and a retention and completion strategy	A physical place and specific people	A retention and completion strategy
Location within the College	Academic affairs	Student services	Academic affairs
Data Collection	Manual collection creating bridge to existing system	Manual collection creating bridge to existing system	Manual collection creating bridge to existing system
Services Offered	Financial coaching Financial literacy component in student success class	Financial coaching Workshops on financial literacy	Financial literacy component in student success class Workshops on financial literacy

The three grantee colleges pursued different but effective strategies tailored to the needs of their students and their institutional cultures. This section of the final report details the colleges' efforts and lessons learned.

Los Angeles Harbor College

Los Angeles Harbor College (LAHC) serves a primarily low-income section of Los Angeles. The student body population, like the city itself, is incredibly diverse—83 percent of its students are students of color. Like most community colleges, the majority of students receive some form of financial aid. Fifty-nine percent of students receive Pell Grants, and many others are eligible for a variety of assistance from state and federal sources.

The college sought to reach the most vulnerable of its population, specifically those formerly in the foster care system and veterans of the Armed Forces.

While these populations have different experiences prior to enrolling at LAHC, they can face similar challenges. These challenges include managing the financial pressures of attending an institution while working part or full time, and accessing available public benefits, including housing and transportation assistance.

To meet these needs, LAHC focused its FESS initiative efforts on providing individualized coaching to these cohorts. The college hired two individuals on a part-time basis to serve as financial coaches. The coaches received intensive financial coaching training through a program offered by Central New Mexico Community College, one of the most experienced community colleges in the field of financial empowerment. After completing the training, LAHC's coaches met with students on a one-on-one basis and provided services to help improve their financial decision-making ability, including how to:

- Set personal financial and educational goals.
- Understand household budgets.
- Access financial aid.
- Access public supports, including housing, which is a particularly vexing issue for former foster care youth.
- Understand financial issues, such as the importance of credit, dangers associated with predatory lending practices, and sound financial planning.

In addition to these one-on-one meetings, coaches offered periodic workshops on financial literacy to the general student population. These workshops focused on topics such as budgeting and understanding basic financial concepts. In some cases, workshops featured outside speakers from financial institutions, including Bank of America.

The college succeeded at serving large numbers of students and at encouraging these students to share their newly acquired knowledge with students at local high schools. This low-cost knowledge exchange helped to prepare the high school students for the financial challenges of college, and reinforced LAHC student knowledge and confidence. That sense of connection was a powerful part of the experience for students participating in the program.
"I learned to manage money. [But not only that], I've learned that there's always help out there—you just

Table 2: Los Angeles Harbor College Results from the FESS Initiative, Unduplicated

Data Element	Fall 2012	Spring 2013	Fall 2013	Total
Students enrolled in the college (total)	9,647	9,490	9,735	n/a
Students participating in financial capability activities*	235	149	51	435
Students receiving one-on-one financial literacy training or financial coaching	45	62	92	199
Students participating in financial capability workshops**	110	82	51	243
Students taking student success courses, including portions of courses focusing on financial literacy	123	n/a	n/a	n/a
Volunteers assisting in financial capability program activities	30	119	23	172
Bank of America volunteers assisting in financial capability program activities	7	2	0	9
Students (percentage) who participated in financial capability programs in fall 2012 who returned in spring 2013 (retention rate)	31	31	28	n/a

** Financial capability programs are defined as services aimed at increasing students' financial knowledge. They include enrollment in student success courses with financial literacy components and one-on-one financial counseling.*

***Workshops are defined as one-time events where students hear from a speaker or speakers on financial capability issues.*

have to learn to seek help. One connection can lead you to another connection."

One of the most important lessons of the LAHC experience was the difference that could be made through careful matching of staff who could identify with the students. Program administrators made a conscious effort to find individuals to serve as coaches who had training as counselors and could relate to the experience of students in each cohort. The two coaches hired for the effort were both young, and one coach, Armando Villalpando, was a former LAHC student. One of the coaches was a former foster youth. The ability to relate to students' experience was critical to building trust and ultimately having a greater impact. In a focus group, several participating students indicated the personal connection with the coaches, such as Armando, was important.

"Yes, that's the whole key. It's a pathetic thing for someone to say 'I know what you've been through' when they haven't. You don't understand how we feel, you don't know what goes through our head. But with Armando, you know, he's been there."

Reaching veterans offered its own set of challenges. While LAHC was extremely successful in reaching former foster youth, the college was somewhat disappointed in its outreach to student veterans, though not for lack of effort. Coaches offered office hours in the college's dedicated veterans' center and conducted outreach encouraging students to attend sessions. However, these students relayed that they generally were less comfortable working with individuals who were not veterans.

The college hopes to continue its financial capability programs with the two cohort populations and expand its reach to the general campus population. The coaches are now located on campus in a local YouthSource center, a city-sponsored youth employment center located on campus that serves LAHC students and the wider community. This location offers even greater opportunities to reach more students and provide them with needed financial capability training.

Houston Community College System

Located in the nation's fourth largest city, the Houston Community College System (HCC) is comprised of six colleges stretching across 16 campuses, each serving a different geographic region of the city. All told, the system has more than 70,000 students.

HCC designed the financial empowerment program through the FESS initiative to reach as many students as possible. There were two main components of HCC's efforts: 1) a financial literacy module offered in a student success course, and 2) week-long financial literacy fairs at each of the campuses.

Student Success Course

Every degree-pursuing student at HCC is required to take a student success course. These student success courses differ depending on enrollment in academic or technical tracks. For the FESS initiative, HCC focused its efforts on the largest cohort—those enrolled in the academic track.

The college created a curriculum on basic financial literacy that was offered during the student success class. The class generally focused on issues such as study skills and time management, which made the financial literacy component a perfect fit. The curriculum offered information on a wide variety of financial literacy subjects, with lessons focusing on:

- Cost-of-living factors.
- Financial aid and paying for college.
- Credit and predatory lending.
- Budgeting and saving (liabilities and assets).

Each of the classes included use of online materials and worksheets that allowed students to use their own personal experience. The class was a practical, not theoretical, exercise.

One challenge for the HCC system was providing training to the faculty, most of whom had never offered this type of instruction. The college offered training as part of an annual refresher course on classroom instruction. However, getting faculty to devote the same level of attention to the financial literacy module as the other modules in the student success class emerged as a challenge.

One of the most important aspects of the training – and one that demonstrates the value of the experience – were the findings from the intensive surveys student completed after each semester, which gauged improvement in financial capability.

Of the HCC students who participated in the 2012 fall semester financial literacy and capability student success course:

- 96 percent felt more equipped to make sound financial decisions.
- 93 percent understood the financial aid process better.
- 93 percent understood credit and credit scores better.
- 94 percent returned the following semester, compared to 91 percent of all HCC students.

The HCC survey, which more than 1,300 students completed, also gauged the program's impact in students' homes. More than 10 percent of the students reported speaking with their families about financial matters. Students interviewed expanded upon these numeric results.

"I didn't think that I could save my money. This class pointed out that I spend more on what I want than what I need. If I had $200 and I wanted a purse and I also had to pay $200 for books… I would buy the purse. This class pointed it out to me."

"I learned more about my money personality through a personality assessment we did. I came out to be the giver. I give a lot of everything; energy, time, and money. It's made me aware of when I really want to do something; I'm always setting stuff aside, maybe to take care of someone. It's taught me to say no just a little bit more. This really helped me understand how I do everything for everyone, and that's exhausting and expensive."

Financial Literacy Fairs

HCC recognized that the student success class was not the sole way to reach students. To expand its reach, the college offered financial literacy fairs at each campus. During the dedicated "Financial Literacy Week," students participated in a range of workshops and presentations focusing on all elements of the financial system.

The fairs featured presentations from community partners, including Bank of America, which sent employees to present on topics such as basic budgeting and establishing credit. When possible, workshops were repeated to allow students with differing class schedules to attend as many sessions as possible.

One individual coordinated the financial literacy effort at the college, with assistance from others, to facilitate simultaneous coordination. To increase exposure and to seek continuous improvement of the effort, HCC staggered the fairs, offering them at three campuses each semester over the course of the project. Future efforts may include offering evening workshops and allowing night students full participation in the events. The number of students who have been reached is impressive, with nearly 15,000 served to-date. Tracking full participation is difficult, so it is likely the figure underrepresents the true level of participation.

Community College of Baltimore County

The Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) serves suburban Baltimore, with three campuses in Dundalk, Essex, and Catonsville.

CCBC has been a leader in financial education among community colleges for several years. The college offers a financial literacy module as part of its required student success course, which eases new students into the academic challenges of a postsecondary environment and helps them form financial goals

Table 3: Houston Community College System Results from the FESS Initiative, Unduplicated

Data Element	Fall 2012	Spring 2013	Fall 2013	Total
Students enrolled in the college (total)	70,847	71,324	69,995	212,166
Students participating in financial capability activities*	5,274	3,879	5,594	14,747
Students participating in financial capability workshops**	1,159	592	1,124	2,875
Students taking student success courses, including portions of courses focusing on financial literacy	5,274	3,879	5,594	14,747
Volunteers assisting in financial capability program activities	17	15	16	48
Students (percentage) who participated in financial capability programs in the semester who returned the next semester (retention rate)	Fall 2011 to Spring 2012 n/a of students reenrolled	Spring 2013 retention of EDUC 1300 students 90.8%	Fall 2013 retention of EDUC 1300 students 94.4%	n/a

and develop related strategies. For example, at the beginning of each semester, students in the class are given a small plastic piggy bank and are encouraged to put aside spare change toward micro-savings. Students reported that this simple exercise of setting aside money represented a big change in thinking. It also had real results: collectively students saved close to $80,000 from spring 2011 to fall 2013.

CCBC also developed a video that explained student financial challenges to faculty, administrators, and community members. The short documentary, *Behind Classroom Walls*, featured real stories of CCBC students and how they coped, or struggled to cope, with the burdens of supporting families and attending college. Thus, financial literacy for CCBC is more than educating students about financial challenges. It is also about ensuring faculty understand that difficulties in academic performance are not always due to issues like lack of preparation or educational ability.

The designers of CCBC's efforts wanted to use the FESS initiative to move to another stage of intervention—primarily individualized coaching. While they were pleased by the results of the broader literacy training, they also believed that intensive one-on-one coaching could yield a higher level of success with their target population.

Originally, the plan for the effort was to focus on a specific cohort of students—those who received emergency financial assistance support from CCBC. CCBC, like many colleges, offers small, short-term grants to students who are facing immediate financial challenges that might prevent them from attending school. This could be money need to fix a car, cover utility disconnection notices, or similar challenges. Through the FESS initiative, students who received this support were required to meet with a financial coach who partnered with the student to develop strategies to avoid facing similar financial crises in the future.

The college hired new staff to serve as financial coaches. Financial coaching is defined as "a specific and tailored approach in which trained individuals provide one-on-one financial counseling to help students reach their financial goals."[7] In this approach, students sat with counselors who provided guidance in a collaborative manner to allow students to better manage their finances.

Successful coaching also requires appropriate coach training. Originally, CCBC had hoped to take full advantage of a Train the Trainer program offered through Central New Mexico Community College that trains financial coaches. However, because of logistical challenges, staff at CCBC had to begin training the financial coaches before completing the Train the Trainer program in its entirety.

Between fall 2012 and spring 2014, CCBC CARES served 367 students who needed varying levels of financial coaching services. In addition, the service was available to all students who wanted to take advantage of the support.

There are some challenges inherent in offering this type of intensive service. For CCBC, the main challenge was primarily related to staffing levels. With a student body population averaging 70,000 across three campuses, two staff members were not enough to serve such a large number of students. However, as the program develops, the college will continue to seek ways to expand the services, perhaps by hiring more staff or leveraging technology to increase the college's reach. For example, the college is working closely with a funder to develop a virtual reality program called "Save Me," which is an interactive activity that provides students with an 'aged' avatar to explore how seeing a future version of themselves might assist students with making more empowered financial decisions (for example, to save and plan for the future that, in turn, may lead to improved economic stability). The pilot program for this initiative took place in spring 2014, with a more expanded effort expected in fall 2014.

Important Lessons Learned

Colleges seeking to build or expand financial empowerment programs stand to learn from the experience of the three grantee colleges.

Financial capability training is effective

The most important lesson from the FESS initiative is that these types of programs can have a lasting impact on both the college and the students served. And other institutions are catching on quickly. Sixteen colleges in four states were recently selected to participate in the national community college expansion of the Working Families Success Network. And greater opportunities may arise in the future as colleges connect with

Table 4: Community College of Baltimore County Results from the FESS Initiative, Duplicated

Data Element	Fall 2012	Spring 2013	Fall 2013	Spring 2014	Total
Students enrolled in the college (total)	25,188	22,320	24,275	n/a	70,023
Students participating in financial capability activities*	3,889	1,884	3,953	1,783	11,509
Students receiving one-on-one financial literacy training or financial coaching	32	80	84	171	367
Students participating in financial capability workshops**	25	34	44	46	149
Students taking student success courses, including portions of courses focusing on financial literacy	3,832	1,770	3,825	1,566	10,993
Volunteers assisting in financial capability program activities	0	7	11	8	26
Bank of America volunteers assisting in financial capability program activities	0	2	0	0	2
Students (percentage) who participated in financial capability programs who are returned the next semester retention rate)	N/A	93%	85%	n/a	93%

additional local partners and regional and national systems.

Solutions must be specific to each college

While community colleges often share similar missions, their sizes, resources, and processes of reaching their objectives vary—translating to a need for individualized approaches to financial literacy programs. The experience of this initiative shows that financial capability programs can be adapted to meet the particular needs and culture of any college. A particular college's financial capability offerings are dependent on the circumstances of its environment, availability of funds, and, most importantly, the needs of its student body.

For instance, program staff for the Houston Community College System designed a program that could reach many students across a wide geographic area in multiple campuses. Thus, it designed a program that could be administered effectively from a central office—embedding curriculum in a system-wide mandated course. On the other hand, LAHC targeted and designed programs for a particular portion of its student body—foster youth and veterans.

In implementing financial empowerment programs, colleges should conduct environmental scans and design programs that work best for individual needs. Table 1 offers examples of these design components and how each grantee college made choices that best fit its student population and institutional culture.

Staged development may make sense for implementing financial capability programs

The three grantee colleges began the initiative at different stages of development, with HCC and LAHC new to financial empowerment programs and CCBC relatively experienced. Each college took a staged approached to testing products, incorporating services, and offering programs.

LAHC approached staged delivery by working with a particular high-need cohort of students. Working with two specific groups offered two main benefits to the college. First, staff could design a program to meet the particular needs of these students in a high-intensity model. In particular, the college learned that these particular populations of students responded most effectively when approached by individuals who were veterans or former foster youth. Second, working with the cohorts allowed the college to test high-intensity services, such as financial coaching, before determining whether or not it wanted to expand them to the student population as a whole. The college wanted to ensure it understood the details of program delivery in terms of staffing and funding, among other criteria, before expanding it college-wide.

HCC took a similar staged approach in its efforts. The system decided that the best way to reach the largest number of students was to integrate a financial literacy component into its student success course. By demonstrating the importance of financial literacy to a large number of students – in this case all students enrolled in academic degree programs – moving to a more direct coaching model would be an easier sell should the institution go that direction. The second component of HCC's approach – the financial literacy fairs – also showed the value of a staged approach. Rather than offer the financial literacy week at all of its 16 campuses at once, the system staggered the roll out of the fairs, offering them at three campuses per semester the first year of the initiative, and increasing to five per semester the second year. This allowed the system to make any adjustments so they could offer the program to all colleges and campuses in the system in future years.

CCBC, which was further along in its financial capability programs, used the FESS initiative as a way to move to the next stage of its efforts. After successfully embedding financial literacy in its student success classes, the college offered intensive financial coaching. Many of the lessons that the program administrators used in the classroom setting were applicable to the more individualized approach.

As the grantee college examples demonstrated, staged development meant different things to each institution. LAHC found it made sense to start with one-on-one interactions with the expectation to later expand the offerings to a larger audience, while CCBC and HCC started with reaching broader audiences before going to a more individualized approach. The lesson from these institutions' success is that being intentional is more important than trying to do it all from the beginning.

Institutional buy-in is critical

The success of FESS at the three grantee colleges was, in large part, due to the fact that these programs received support from college administration, including college presidents. Experience in the field of financial literacy and integrated service delivery has shown that getting buy-in from college leadership is paramount to program success.

MDC has concluded that colleges considering implementing a new or enhanced financial empowerment strategy should consider four key criteria.

1. **Is a part of the mission of the college.** How does expanding services through an integrated service delivery system meet the college's goals?
2. **Can be paid at the outset.** How will changes to the college's programs be paid for?
3. **Is sustainable.** If this program is to be part of the institutional mission of the program, how will it be sustained? Will it be sustained indefinitely? For a particular period of time?
4. **Can be measured.** If there is a sustainability plan, how will success be measured?[8]

Each college grantee met all four criteria, and demonstrated buy-in in several ways. First, presidents and high-level administrators participated in the national initiative, including travel to conferences to speak on the importance of the initiative. At a conference of Centers for Working Families in the fall of 2012, former LAHC President Melvin Martinez expressed his belief about how the program was critical to the college's mission. "For us, participation in this initiative was a no-brainer," he said. "Our board said it was about time we served students in this manner."

More important that vocal support for the initiative was a commitment to sustaining the financial empowerment programs beyond the grant period. By most measures, the FESS grant was a modest investment in the college. However, all three institutions continued the program beyond the grant period by seeking additional funding or by determining the real cost-benefit in offering financial capability training to students. Progressive presidents and leadership teams saw the long-term benefits of these programs encourage the staff to keep the programs going and move toward bringing programs to scale.

Higher intensity services require more resources

In pure numbers, HCC reached the largest number of students. Through both its financial literacy component in the student success class and financial literacy fairs, the system reached nearly 15,000 students. While the service of providing financial management skills was demonstrably important, by design it was not individualized; students were not given information on their particular financial circumstances unless they chose to seek it out from representatives from other organizations presenting at the financial literacy fairs. By leveraging the expertise of external partners to provide low-touch services to students, HCC was able to focus its limited resources on reaching a large student population.

This strategy is contrasted to some degree by the efforts of CCBC and LAHC, both which stressed one-on-one financial coaching in their models. In these cases, individual financial coaches talked students through their financial challenges and developed approaches to meet their needs. However, both colleges found the demand for coaches' time outweighed the amount the college could offer, so scaling this approach will prove very difficult, particularly for institutions with multiple campuses.

Other institutions have tried to address this issue of scale by training staff and faculty to serve as part-time coaches to expand the reach. Colleges like CCBC and LAHC have taken more cohort-based approaches, surmising that meeting the needs of a particular high-need target population is more feasible and sustainable than trying to meet the real financial needs of an entire student body.

This lesson is not to suggest that the financial coaching model is flawed, but that colleges developing programs should be realistic about the intended reach depending on the strategies pursued. Higher intensity services are more hands-on, and colleges need to be aware of both their costs and ultimate benefits to students.

Collecting data is difficult but critical

Evaluation is critical to understanding if financial empowerment strategies are effective. However, it is often difficult to identify which data best represents the impact of such initiatives. Several organizations across the country, including community colleges, have begun to develop a core set of metrics to measure economic stability and financial capability as a way to improve policies and services for their participants. The FESS initiative incorporated strands of this common set of outcomes and measures as a way to connect the dots among students who are served by multiple institutions and community organizations.

- Number of students participating in activities that increase their financial knowledge
- Number of students receiving one-on-one financial literacy training or coaching
- Number of students attending financial literacy workshops
- Number of students taking student success courses with financial literacy components
- Number of students receiving income and work supports
- Term-to-term retention rates for students who participated in financial capability programs
- Comparison data on enrollment and retention

The colleges in the FESS initiative faced multiple challenges in gathering data to assess the impact and effectiveness of their financial capability programs. Because the colleges were also part of a larger network of institutions delivering services to improve the economic outcomes of students, they were asked to provide additional data on changes in student credit scores, income, and use of financial products, when available. The collection of these optional data elements is typically a challenge for college staff as it requires a well-coordinated process and data tracking system that captures detailed information on a student's finances.

Building the habit and setting a priority for collecting and using data are also challenging for community colleges. Tracking data on services received, workshops attended, and increased financial knowledge is time-intensive, and requires collaboration among multiple staff members. Colleges may not have the allocated staff time and or technological resources to effectively collect and analyze data related to financial capability services.

As the FESS initiative evolved, the colleges identified ways to improve data collection and analysis to determine the effectiveness of their strategies in improving students' financial capabilities. For example, in an effort to improve data collection procedures and identify problems or questions, HCC designed a survey to collect data from students served by the financial literacy offerings. Students were asked if they felt like they were more equipped to make better financial decisions, if they had an increased knowledge of financial matters (for example, credit scores, financial aid, or cost of living), and if they took specific actions as a result of the financial capability program (for example, opened a savings account or developed a budget).

To determine what impact the financial education program was having on students' lives, LAHC relied on "verbal tracking" by asking students questions about their finances. These conversations led LAHC to surmise that the financial stability program was useful, but staff wanted to be able to share more than anecdotal data to demonstrate success. The college is in the process of instituting a more formalized intake process with digital forms for students to complete in order to collect baseline data. The college will then institute a pre- and post-financial literacy test in order to see if the anticipated outcomes are being met.

Community partnerships increase program impact

Colleges can extend the breadth and depth of available student support services by leveraging external partnerships, which may range from informal to very formal connections, depending upon the size and scope of the colleges' financial capability activities and student needs. Financial education is one area where colleges generally seek strategic alliances with community-based partners.

During the FESS initiative, grantee colleges were asked to innovate by partnering with local banks to extend the number of students reached and the intensity of financial education services. Specifically, the colleges were encouraged to engage volunteers from Bank of America's local branches in providing financial empowerment services to their students. The design of the project allowed for some flexibility in collaboration between colleges and local bank staff, with the hope that lessons could be learned about how community colleges and financial institutions could build the capacity of college staff to increase the financial capability of students.

A secondary goal of the use of bank volunteers was to help low-income students and their families begin to build relationships with local financial institutions and gain a better understanding of how financial systems affect their lives. Ideally, in an effective partnership students would learn about local economies, low-cost financial products, strategies for building emergency savings, and how their credit scores affect their ability to access credit and basic services (for example, affordable housing and utilities).

The timetable for the FESS initiative, in addition to the colleges' limited resources, made the goal of engaging with local banks challenging, but not impossible. Initially, the three colleges found it difficult to design and implement strategies that used bank volunteers to provide intensive financial coaching to students. To incorporate banks into a financial education program, an existing relationship between the college and a local bank would have been very helpful—which was not the case for the three grantee colleges. College staff spent a significant amount of time and resources developing relationships and getting buy-in from bank staff.

Colleges looked for new ways for bank volunteers to provide insights to students regarding financial education. Workshops or financial literacy fairs seemed to be the most feasible way to meet the program design and still benefit students. HCC implemented a manageable plan that incorporated bank volunteers in a way that was appropriate to the needs of its students and the culture of the institution. Staff from multiple banks participated in HCC's financial literacy fairs, which introduced the students to information about savings, affordable financial products, and financial literacy concepts. This activity helped the college build the foundations of a partnership with local financial organizations that could later assist the college in offering higher touch programs.

LAHC also focused on ways to build a long-term relationship with a local bank so more intensive services could be incorporated into the financial capability program in the future. After a few conversations with the local bank, college staff realized both institutions had an interest in serving the veteran population in their service areas, and the college hopes to establish a more permanent working relationship with local banks about this issue, with volunteers possibly providing more direct financial counseling service to LAHC veteran students.

Conversations with the grantee colleges provided insights into how colleges can engage with external partners within their local communities in deeper, more sustainable ways in the future. Most important is for partners to develop an understanding of each other's capacity during the project's planning phases. An effective partnership should build off existing strengths of each organization. At the beginning of the project, partners should develop a list of what services and technical assistance each organization can provide to each other and the students. In the case of the FESS initiative, it might have been beneficial to have local banks and colleges submit a joint proposal that outlined how the two organizations would work together to improve the financial capability of students.

Similarly, in forming partnerships, it can be helpful to formalize the relationships by documenting the relationship with a memorandum of understanding (MOU) or letters of commitment. Each organization should identify the level of effort in terms of time and staff resources they can reasonably commit to this project. In doing so, the community college and its partners could outline the roles and responsibilities that will help to sustain the relationship through staff changes. The process of working through these strategies will help to build trust and solidify relationships between partners.

Endnotes

[1] *The names of students in this paper have been changed to respect requests for anonymity.*

[2] *Jaggers , S. S., & Xu, D. (2011). Online and hybrid course enrollment and performance in Washington State Community and Technical Colleges. Community College Research Center. Retrieved from http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/online-hybrid-courses-washington.html.*

[3] *Johnson, J., Rochchild, J., Ott, A., & DuPont, S. (2009). With their whole lives ahead of them: Myths & realities about why so many students fail to finish college. Public Agenda. Retrieved from http://www.publicagenda.org/media/with-their-whole-life-ahead-of-them.*

[4] *Mandell, L. (2008). The financial literacy of young American adults: Results of the 2008 national Jump$tart Coalition survey of high school seniors and college students. The Jump$tart Coalition for Personal Financial Literacy. Retrieved from http://www.jumpstart.org/assets/files/2008SurveyBook.pdf.*

[5] *The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2010). An integrated approach to fostering family economic success: How three model sites are implementing the Center for Working Families approach. Retrieved from http://www.aecf.org/KnowledgeCenter/Publications.aspx?pubguid=%7BF0C4C227-E25E-4B20-A005-0DE98C2FA82C%7D.*

[6] *Liston, C. and Donnan, R. (2012). Center for Working Families at community colleges: Clearing the financial barriers to student success. MDC, Inc. Retrieved from http://www.mdcinc.org/resources/publications/center-working-families-community-colleges-clearing-financial-barriers.*

[7] *MDC, Inc. (2013). Working Families Success Strategy: College implementation guide. Retrieved from http://wfsncollegeguide.org/wp-content/themes/workingfamiliessuccessstrategy/pdfs/MDC_WFS_all.pdf.*

[8] *Ibid.*

Achieving the Dream™

Achieving the Dream, Inc., is a national nonprofit that is dedicated to helping more community college students, particularly low-income students and students of color, stay in school and earn a college certificate or degree. Evidence-based, student-centered, and built on the values of equity and excellence, Achieving the Dream is closing achievement gaps and accelerating student success nationwide by: 1) guiding evidence-based institutional improvement, 2) leading policy change, 3) generating knowledge, and 4) engaging the public. Conceived as an initiative in 2004 by Lumina Foundation and seven founding partner organizations, today, Achieving the Dream is leading the most comprehensive non-governmental reform network for student success in higher education history. With over 200 institutions, more than 100 coaches and advisors, and 15 state policy teams – working throughout 34 states and the District of Columbia – the Achieving the Dream National Reform Network helps nearly 4 million community college students have a better chance of realizing greater economic opportunity and achieving their dreams.

MDC

MDC is a nonprofit with an extensive history working to improve the effectiveness of community colleges around the nation. For nearly 50 years, MDC has managed programs that connect education, employment, and economic security to help people "learn, earn, and save" their way to a place in the middle class. MDC's strategies, aimed at removing the barriers that separate people from opportunity, include: using data to define gaps and mobilize leaders to create a will for change; demonstrating sustainable solutions and developing them into effective models; and then incubating them so they can be replicated at scale for maximum impact. For more information on MDC programs focused on the implementation of financial education and support services at community colleges, please visit www.mdcinc.org.