

HOW COMPREHENSIVE STUDENT SUCCESS PROGRAMS LEARNED AND ADAPTED THROUGH COVID-19

JULY 2022

I. INTRODUCTION:

Across the country, students from underserved communities have faced disproportionate challenges to enrolling in and remaining in college during the pandemic. College enrollment fell by five percent during the pandemic – nearly one million students – the largest decline in the last 50 years. Low-income adults and people of color were most heavily impacted, as they were more likely to face financial hardship. A precipitous drop like this will have longstanding ramifications for students, their families, and regional and national economies if left unaddressed. It's imperative that these students receive the support they need to get back on track.

TICAS, in partnership with MDRC and LEO, has worked for more than a year and a half with a community of seven evidence-based college completion programs. These programs, which span the country geographically, all employ a similar model that uses counselors, coaches, or case managers to connect students with a range of support – personal, financial, and academic – to help them complete college. All have also undergone rigorous evaluations that have shown statistically significant impacts on college persistence, completion, and student earnings after graduation.

We met with them in February and again in May to discuss their experience over the last two years and to learn how they have adapted to keep as many students on track to graduate as possible. This paper summarizes those lessons learned and offers some insights for the field on innovative approaches to recruiting and retaining students during a time of enormous pressure and upheaval.

II. CHALLENGES:

All of the programs in our community of practice encountered significant challenges throughout the last two academic years as the students they exist to serve suddenly faced substantial hardship. The very students that the programs in our community of practice work with – those who are underserved – suddenly saw their college careers at risk. Millions of students and their family members lost jobs overnight and could no longer afford to go to college. Others were suddenly needed as caregivers, as schools shut down and their relatives faced devastating health problems. Others did not have the space, equipment, or Internet service to go to school online. And still others got sick themselves or faced mental health challenges that made it hard for them to continue their education.

As a result, some programs saw declines in applicants, some saw students drop out in large numbers, and others saw changes in their student populations as many students struggled to balance new caregiving responsibilities, faced physical or mental health challenges, and/or dealt with job loss. These challenges sometimes exacerbated enrollment disparities that had existed prior to the pandemic. One program, for example, has long had many more male applicants than female ones, and this trend got slightly



worse during the pandemic. Another program saw the same number of applicants but found that they were pulling from a more affluent student population than in previous years. Here are the main challenges that were common across programs:

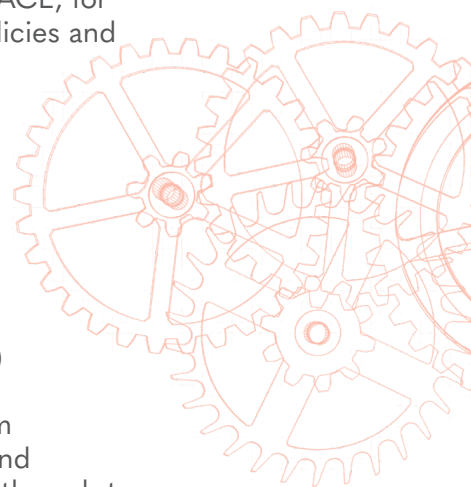
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- » **Potential students became harder to reach:** Programs that had traditionally recruited students face-to-face were forced to move their efforts online. Bottom Line, for example, which operates in three states, saw a decrease in the number of students signing up for recruiting events and enrolling in the programs. Virtual recruiting was especially challenging for programs attempting to reach adult students. It was the least challenging for programs that begin in high school, such as One Million Degrees, and for InsideTrack, which has supported fully online students - in addition to hybrid and in-person - since the early 2000's.
 - » **Institutional and program policies discouraged some students from enrolling, staying enrolled, or staying enrolled full-time:** The students served by the programs in our community of practice, largely from low-income backgrounds, first generation, and BIPOC students, were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic's economic toll. As a result, many programs said full-time enrollment dipped significantly as students faced increased responsibilities such as caregiving and other personal responsibilities. One Million Degrees saw a decline in engagement. In other cases, institutional policies, such as a vaccine requirement, deterred some students from enrolling or returning.
 - » **Virtual delivery models reduced student engagement:** Most of the programs in our community of practice said that the transition to virtual learning reduced student engagement. Timothy Renick from the National Institute for Student Success (NISS) described the problem as "fighting for the attention of their students." Others said data from their institution made clear that students perform better academically with face-to-face instruction but prefer virtual classes for the flexibility. Some programs have required in person sessions but have received pushback from students about attending. Program leaders reported that virtual learning options have given students a lot more flexibility, but in doing so they have lost the vital sense of connectedness, and some program leaders reported that it was harder to motivate students and to hold them accountable for progressing towards the goals they had set in a virtual environment. "It is harder to ignore an advisor in person. The accountability aspect of the program and the back-and-forth dialogue suffers in a virtual setting," said Steve Colon, CEO of Bottom Line.
 - » **Staff faced more urgent and pressing personal and professional challenges than they had previously:** There was universal agreement among program leaders that program staff faced heightened challenges because of the pandemic. All the programs in the community of practice employ counselors, coaches, or case managers who work closely and directly with students to help them navigate the challenges of college. As students confronted financial, physical, mental health, academic, and other crises, counselors were asked to deal with more dire problems than they had in the past. Counselors were asked to serve as mental health counselors, to help students find housing and jobs, and support their families through COVID and other health challenges. All program leaders said their staff dealt with a range of urgent and pressing problems that went beyond the scope of their roles previously. Staff reported feeling a great deal of strain and exhaustion as they worked overtime to deal with the trauma they were facing while also helping their students in sometimes unimaginable circumstances. Some program leaders felt that counselors needed smaller caseloads to effectively connect with students once they transitioned to virtual environments. Most programs said that virtual interactions require more time to connect with students, and staff reported being asked more frequently to meet after hours to accommodate students' schedules.
 - » **Staff needed more support and programs needed more capacity:** At a time when the students they were serving were facing graver challenges than they typically had in the past, staff members lost the ability to use the "personal touch of being around someone

and being able to reach out through in person interactions,” which had made them successful at their jobs prior to the pandemic. Program leaders at Stay the Course reported that staff faced challenges adapting to the virtual environment, but were able to do so through additional support and coaching. Just as students and counselors lost their connection point, staff felt and continue to feel disconnected from not just participants, but their team, said Lelani Mercado of ProjectQUEST. At times, program leaders struggled to make sure their staff felt heard and were aware of organization shifts in direction. Overall, programs felt like they did not have enough capacity to keep up with the difficulty of virtually connecting with students. Because all the programs in our community of practice are non-profits, they also found themselves strained economically, wanting to offer competitive salaries and working conditions for coaches and other staff, but needing greater philanthropic and public investment to match the demand.

III. HOW PROGRAMS ADAPTED:

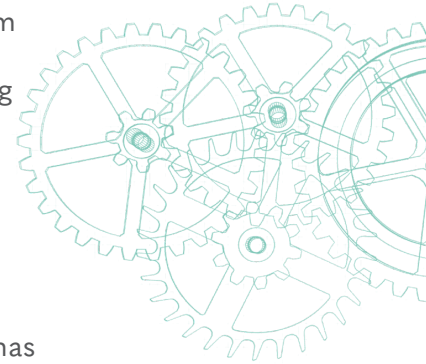
Programs approached the challenges they encountered with a wide variety of strategies aimed at retaining and recruiting as many students as possible.

- » **Adapting program requirements:** While some programs temporarily changed or minimized their program requirements to make it easier for students to enroll, re-enroll, or remain enrolled, the experience of the pandemic has led the program leaders to reflect on the need to be very intentional about which aspects of a program should be relaxed and which aspects should not. All leaders felt that the question about how and when to modify aspects of a program model should be driven by data and approached almost surgically, providing as much flexibility as possible to students while also ensuring that the program elements that have been linked most strongly to student success remain intact. CUNY ASAP | ACE, for example, looked across several program eligibility and engagement policies and temporarily relaxed them in areas – credit threshold, part-time status, and contact modalities – where they felt they could positively impact enrollment and retention.
 - » **Allowing part-time enrollment:** CUNY ASAP | ACE, which had previously required students to be enrolled full-time to participate in the program, and which previously had found full-time enrollment to be a driver of program success, received feedback from program teams that many students were having difficulty registering for (and maintaining) a full-time schedule of classes due to several institutional/ pandemic-related challenges. To keep continuing students from stopping out completely, they allowed current students to attend part-time for a semester, as long as advisement staff worked with each to map out an alternative plan for timely degree completion including full use of intersessions.
 - » **Extending the maximum credit eligibility threshold:** To reach a broader section of continuing and transfer students, as well as underpin a comprehensive reengagement campaign for those students who may have stopped out since the onset of the pandemic, CUNY ASAP | ACE increased its maximum credit eligibility threshold from 15 to 30 credits, modifying the program service timeline accordingly to ensure timely completion. This change allowed them to reach significantly more continuing and transfer students.
- » **Providing virtual coaching while narrowing down what can be done virtually and what must be done in person:** All programs shifted to providing virtual coaching in some capacity during the pandemic. InsideTrack, which shifted to hybrid or virtual coaching 15 years ago, provides a model for virtual engagement, refined over time. They have found that using phone, email, and text can allow for effective and efficient coaching that isn't bound by location. Other program leaders



expressed concern about the impact of virtual classes on students' academic trajectories and worked hard to understand why students preferred virtual learning. They tried to meet them in the middle for peak engagement. Students at Georgia State University, for example, overwhelmingly wanted to continue with online classes and expressed a strong preference for online learning over in-person instruction. While NISS typically works hard to accommodate student preferences, in this area, data shows that many students, especially those early in their college careers, are at greater risk of falling behind academically in virtual courses. The program is working on changing some of the mindsets about online learning, and gearing students back toward in-person interactions at least some of the time. They also prioritized in-person meetings between students and counselors and group discussions where students could foster relationships with one another.

- » **Working to normalize job loss, financial issues, and other challenges:** Program leaders also spoke about normalizing students experiencing job loss and financial issues so that students didn't feel guilt or stigma, and then connecting them to support in their community. InsideTrack worked to destigmatize students asking for help by using an opt-in model to alleviate the pressure of students being "forced to seek help," if they weren't ready. The model that these programs employ relies heavily on coaching, which makes it easier for students to regularly discuss obstacles that they are facing, which helps to ease the stigma of asking for help.
- » **Providing enhanced crisis support for students:** One program, InsideTrack, has long provided specialized coaches to help when crises occur, such as experiences of housing insecurity, mental health, and abuse. Early in the pandemic, with the support of philanthropic funding, they created the Emergency Coaching Networking using an on-demand coaching model to offer an additional layer of support to over a thousand students at more than 20 post-secondary institutions. Some institutions chose to inform all students of this specialized support, while other institutions chose to focus on specific demographics; students were able to opt in to receive help if they would like.
- » **Raising staff salaries:** Several programs spoke of requesting larger budgets in new philanthropic funding proposals to be able to provide larger salaries and retain staff. One program said that local retail businesses were offering more competitive wages than they had prior to the pandemic, which was putting pressure on them to meet or exceed the competition.
- » **Adopting a more proactive approach to recruiting and retaining students:** One program changed its approach to recruiting to work in one-month segments, regularly evaluating what was working and what wasn't and learning through the process. Programs that relied on recruitment outside of K-12 schools became a lot more intentional about how they measured recruitment on an ongoing basis to maximize the effort they spent on effective strategies. One Million Degrees worked to remind students that they have a community to come back to. CUNY ASAP | ACE program teams conducted regular analyses with the support of the research and evaluation team to determine the number of stopped-out students who could potentially re-enroll and graduate with their cohort. Academic advisors, administrative support staff, full-time retention and engagement staff then conducted phone, text message, email, and direct mail campaigns (with the support of the central office) to encourage students to return to school and to address any registration holds (e.g., financial aid), and to help them register for classes for the upcoming semester. These initiatives were part of more extensive "retention action plans" that the colleges engaged in and included the use of various digital platforms to re-engage students.



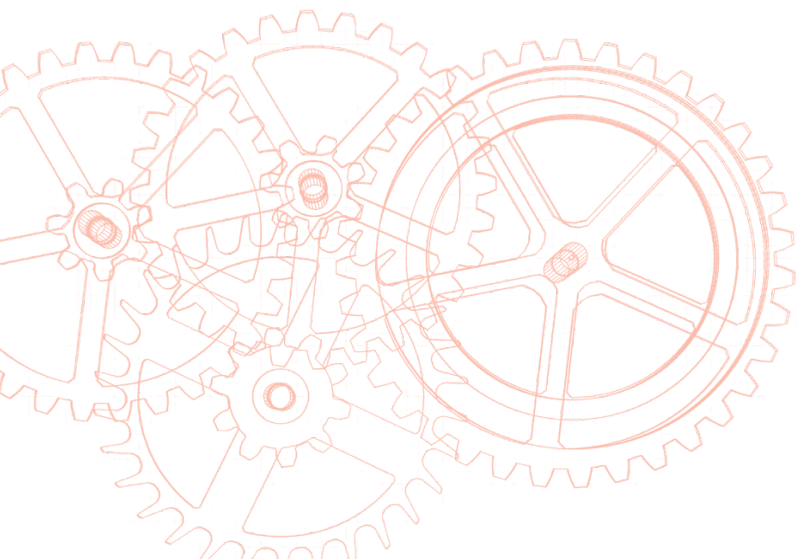
IV. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE BROADER FIELD:

Program leaders responded aggressively and ambitiously to the challenges brought on by the pandemic, and they felt that those responses had mitigated some of the impact. They also learned some lessons that may have broader applicability to the field of student support professionals, researchers, and policymakers. One clear takeaway from their experience is that if hybrid service delivery models are here to stay, programs and colleges will have to become more intentional about how they respond. Which program elements must remain in person and which ones can be modified and delivered virtually to provide students greater flexibility? How can program leaders and administrators measure recruitment and academic progress on an ongoing basis to ensure that they are serving as many students as effectively as they were able to prior to the pandemic in a hybrid environment?

Program leaders are also facing decisions about which elements of their program are vital to their mission and which they can be flexible in. For example, could programs continue to allow part-time students to participate and expect to achieve the same results? If so, do they need to use a different or modified set of supports?

At the same time, program leaders expressed concern about the fact that they had already modified their programs to deal with the impact of the pandemic, that they were operating beyond the parameters of the programs as they had been evaluated for the purposes of an evaluation, such as a randomized controlled trial. This led to a lot of reflection on the part of program leaders, and they confronted questions such as: what is the essence of my program?

It was also clear through our conversations with program leaders that they were spending more time than before the pandemic attending to their staff members' needs, looking for new ways to support them, and to raise their salaries. While it's hard to predict future economic conditions, it's not hard to predict that colleges and student support programs will need more financial support to retain staff in this both draining and critical work. Prior to the pandemic, program leads consistently reported needing more public funding to scale with fidelity. The pandemic has exacerbated this need.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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This report was co-authored by Catherine Brown and Chandler Whitted, with support from [Bottom Line](#), [CUNY ASAP | ACE](#), [InsideTrack](#), [NISS](#), [One Million Degrees](#), [Project QUEST](#), and [Stay the Course](#). TICAS received generous support for this project from Arnold Ventures, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Joyce Foundation, and Robin Hood Foundation. The views expressed in this paper are solely those of TICAS and do not necessarily reflect the views of our funders. This report can be reproduced, with attribution, within the terms of this Creative Commons license: creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/.



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