

# College Completion Network: Research Project Findings

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The College Completion Network is funded by the Institute of Education Sciences and led by the American Institutes for Research.<sup>®</sup> The network brings together research teams focused on postsecondary success for students—coordinated by a Network Lead—to share ideas, build new knowledge, conduct strong research, and share findings. Specifically, the network is working to refine and evaluate interventions for increasing the number of students who earn degrees in open- and broad-access institutions with the goal of providing college leaders and policymakers with reliable evidence on promising strategies.

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## College Completion Network Overview

Open- and broad-access institutions—such as community colleges and 4-year colleges and universities that accept 75% or more of their applicants—are central to the goal of increasing degree completion among U.S. college students. These institutions create opportunities for a large population of students, including most first-time degree-seeking students. Each year, hundreds of thousands of students across the United States enroll in open- and broad-access institutions with high hopes and aspirations, but many of these students will drop out before ever earning a degree.

The College Completion Network was established to expand the field's understanding of promising strategies that could support more students in attaining degrees at open- and broad-access institutions. Funded by a 6-year grant (2017–2022) from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), the College Completion Network brought together research teams focused on postsecondary student success to share ideas, build new knowledge, conduct strong research, and disseminate findings among those in the field. The research teams in the network conducted studies to refine and evaluate interventions for increasing the number of students who earn degrees at open- and broad-access institutions with the goal of providing college leaders and policymakers with reliable evidence on promising strategies.

A Network Lead team, facilitated by the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) in partnership with Eric Bettinger, PhD, of Stanford University, coordinated and supported network activities. The Network Lead also conducted a research study consisting of a systematic review of the research on advising strategies that support college completion, as well as an analysis of the policies, practices, and programs that support students on the path to college completion.

The College Completion Network sought to achieve the following four primary goals:

- Evaluate promising interventions related to college completion.
- Build new knowledge about college completion and postsecondary success.
- Provide policymakers and college leaders with reliable evidence.
- Strengthen the work of the network research teams through collaboration.

This document presents high-level summaries of the approaches and findings of each network project as well as links to additional resources related to the projects. These projects examined interventions for which there was strong interest at open- and broad-access institutions. College leaders, practitioners, and policymakers can use the findings to guide decision making related to the use and refinement of these interventions.



### About the College Completion Network

The College Completion Network is a research network funded by IES. Network members include five research teams studying promising interventions for improving college completion. The Network Lead team, which includes researchers at AIR and Stanford University, supports collaboration among network teams through convenings, work groups, and outreach.

## RESEARCH PROJECTS

The network included five research teams that worked with community colleges or public universities on a research project focused on college completion. The network was facilitated by a Network Lead team (AIR), which conducted a policy and practice scan of the research literature on strategies related to information and advising.



**Advising for College Success: Policies, Practices, and Programs That Support Students on the Path to College Completion (AIR):** This AIR project included a systematic review and a policy and practice scan focused on advising interventions. The project engaged focus groups at 47 colleges across 24 states.



**Affording Degree Completion: A Study of Completion Grants at Accessible Public Universities (Temple University):** This project, a collaboration between Temple University's Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU), engaged 11 open- and broad-access institutions across 10 states to examine the short- and medium-term impacts of completion grant programs on semester-to-semester persistence, social-psychological well-being, and on-time graduation.



**An Experimental Evaluation of Accelerated Pathways Through Developmental Education (RAND/AIR):** RAND and AIR partnered with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to examine the impact and costs of corequisite remediation—models for placing students who need remedial support into credit-bearing courses—at five open- and broad-access institutions across Texas.



**Men of Color College Achievement Project (MDRC):** MDRC partnered with the Community College of Baltimore County to evaluate whether a culturally relevant and multicomponent mentorship and student success program improves the persistence, academic achievement, and degree completion of men of color.



**Nudges to the Finish Line: Experimental Interventions to Prevent Late College Departure (University of Virginia):** This University of Virginia study examined whether text-message nudges that provide personalized information to students about finishing their degrees can improve college completion rates. The intervention was designed in collaboration with 20 colleges and universities and implemented in partnership with public higher education institutions in New York City, Ohio, Virginia, Texas, and Washington State.



**A Scalable Growth Mindset Intervention to Raise Achievement and Persistence in Community College (Stanford University):** This project represented a collaboration between PERTS at Stanford University and the College Transition Collaborative. The project partnered with six open- and broad-access community colleges, representing 19 campuses in five states, to evaluate whether an online module describing a growth mindset improves the persistence and success of students in developmental mathematics courses.

### Supplemental projects

The College Completion Network also supported a set of supplemental projects that were developed in collaboration across network teams:

- Approaches to Addressing Mental Health Needs of Community College Students
- A Policy and Practice Scan of Strategies to Engage and Support Returning Students
- Improving Utilization of Non-Tuition Supports to Promote Community College Retention and Completion – *Results forthcoming*



## Advising for College Success: Policies, Practices, and Programs That Support Students on the Path to College Completion

### **i** About the Project

From fall 2021 to summer 2022, the College Completion Network Lead team conducted virtual focus groups with administrators at forty-seven 2-year and broad-access 4-year colleges with the goal of better understanding the advising policies, practices, and programs (hereafter referred to as “strategies”) the institutions use to support student success. Simultaneously, the team conducted a systematic review of the research literature on advising strategies, summarizing the evidence for a wide range of strategies that have been the focus of research over the past 2 decades. The team produced two briefs to highlight the findings from each study and conducted a gaps analysis to distill areas of convergence and divergence, providing insights for policy, practice, and research.

### **</>** Study Background

There are numerous barriers to college completion, but a key challenge is that colleges have historically been structured as “cafeterias,” where students have considerable flexibility to make decisions about their programs of study but few formalized touch points with advisors.<sup>1</sup> As a result, many students proceed through college with little direction, wasting time and money.

In recent years, colleges have recognized that advising has the potential to foster student success by addressing a range of academic and nonacademic challenges. In addition, two trends have emerged. First, there is a growing consensus that student advising should be *comprehensive*, meaning it should extend well beyond the first year of college and be characterized by meaningful relationships with advisors, faculty, or support staff who work together to identify and address students’ needs.<sup>2</sup> Second, advising should be a *holistic process* that meets students where they are, connects them with appropriate resources and supports to address academic and life challenges during their time in college, and helps them consider and plan for challenges and opportunities beyond college.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, the fact that college advisors are typically stretched thin with large caseloads and other responsibilities has hampered the ability of colleges to implement comprehensive and holistic advising models.<sup>4</sup> To better understand how colleges are using advising strategies to support student success, the College

<sup>1</sup> Bailey, T. R., Jaggars, S. S., & Jenkins, D. (2015). *Redesigning America’s community colleges: A clearer path to student success*. Harvard University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Karp, M., Ackerson, S., Cheng, I., Cocatre-Zilgien, E., Costelloe, S., Freeman, B., Lemire, S., Linderman, D., McFarlane, B., Moulton, S., O’Shea, J., Porowski, A., & Richburg-Hayes, L. (2021). *Effective advising for postsecondary students: A practice guide for educators* (WWC 2022003). National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/WWC-practice-guide-advising-full-text-revised2.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Karp et al. (2021).

<sup>4</sup> Shaw, C., Atanasio, R., Bryant, G., Michel, L., & Nguyen, A. (2021). *Driving toward a degree* (Research brief 1). Tyton Partners. [https://drivetodegree.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/TYT105\\_D2D21\\_01\\_Caseload\\_Rd9.pdf](https://drivetodegree.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/TYT105_D2D21_01_Caseload_Rd9.pdf)

### Project Team

The interdisciplinary study team from AIR includes researchers as well as former college advisors and administrators.

- Amy Feygin, Principal Researcher, AIR
- Eric Bettinger, Professor of Economics, Stanford University
- Trey Miller, Principal Researcher, AIR, and Associate Professor of Economics, University of Texas at Dallas
- Jennifer Poole, Researcher, AIR
- Mark Hatcher, Research Associate, AIR
- Linda Choi, Researcher, AIR
- Madison Dell, Research Assistant, Stanford University

This project is supported by IES, U.S. Department of Education, through [Grant R305N170003](#) to AIR.

Completion Network conducted virtual focus groups with administrators at 47 colleges. Simultaneously, the network conducted a systematic review of the research literature, summarizing the evidence for a wide range of strategies that have been the focus of research conducted during the past 2 decades. The study team then compared the findings from each study to distill areas of convergence and divergence, providing insights for policy, practice, and research.



## Methodology

### Advising Policy and Practice Scan

The study team conducted 60- to 90-minute virtual focus groups with administrators at 47 colleges. The study included two samples: a nationally representative sample and a purposive sample of colleges selected for their track record with advising.

- **Nationally representative sample:** The study team identified a sample of 2-year and broad-access 4-year colleges using data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Administrators at 36 colleges agreed to participate in the focus groups.
- **Purposive sample:** The study team identified administrators at 15 community colleges as candidates for recruitment. Each college was either a recent Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence finalist or winner, or a winner of the Leah Austin Mayer Achieving the Dream award. Administrators at 11 of the colleges agreed to participate.

The study team coded focus group transcripts on a rolling basis for main themes using deductive and inductive approaches. The team began by breaking each overall advising strategy into its core components and then characterized each of the core components according to the goals they were intended to achieve.

### Systematic Review of the Evidence

To determine which advising strategies have evidence of improving college outcomes, the study team conducted a systematic review of the research literature on advising strategies offered to current college students. The study team performed the literature search in May 2020 and included studies released in the year 2000 or later. The team then reviewed the studies that met the inclusion criteria in the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) Group Design Standards or Regression Discontinuity Design Standards (hereafter referred to as “WWC standards”).<sup>5</sup> The study team then applied the Every Student Succeeds Act’s Tiers of Evidence criteria to studies that did not meet WWC standards (hereafter referred to as “evidence criteria”).



## Findings

### Advising Policy and Practice Scan

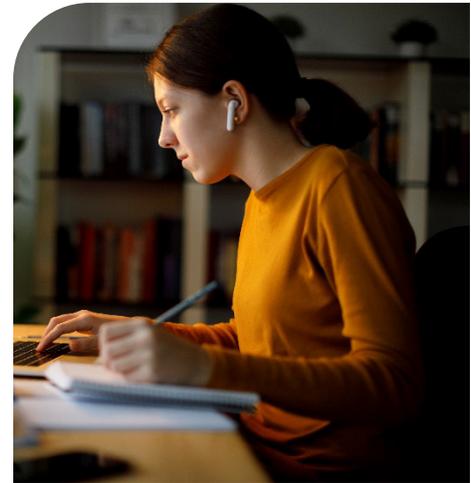
- Advising policies, practices, and programs often focused on the first year of college, with the intent of setting students up for success at entry. College administrators shared six practices targeted to students’ first year of college, and three of these (new student orientation, mandatory first-year advising, and first-

<sup>5</sup> WWC. (2020). *What Works Clearinghouse: Procedures and standards handbook, version 5.0*. National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences.

[https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/referenceresources/Final\\_WWC-HandbookVer5.0-0-508.pdf](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/referenceresources/Final_WWC-HandbookVer5.0-0-508.pdf)

year experience courses) were prevalent (reported by administrators at more than 50% of colleges). Administrators also shared seven practices targeted to students' progress beyond the first year of college, and five of these were prevalent (wraparound supports, mentoring, technology-enabled advising, proactive advising, and culture of care). In contrast, college administrators only reported two practices (career advising and pre-graduation advising) targeted to students as they neared completion, both of which were prevalent.

- College administrators faced time and resource constraints and reported using different types of strategies to support students. These strategies included assigning transition-focused advisors in the first year, handing off students from professional advisors to faculty advisors, using first-year experience opportunities to provide small-group advising, and using technology to support advising.
- College administrators reported using a combination of light-touch strategies (e.g., nudging) and more intensive strategies (e.g., proactive advising) to support students' progress through college. Administrators emphasized the importance of developing meaningful relationships with students by promoting a "culture of care," but resource constraints often meant that lighter touch strategies were necessary.
- Increasingly, and especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, colleges have recognized the importance of meeting students' basic needs. Nearly all college administrators who participated in the study mentioned the importance of offering a comprehensive set of wraparound support services to help students maintain access to basic needs so that students can focus on their classes.



### Systematic Review of the Evidence

- **Holistic and comprehensive interventions that combine multiple components to meet student needs improve student outcomes.** These types of interventions provide students with a comprehensive suite of advising, student services, academic support, and financial aid. Rigorous studies have consistently found long-term, positive effects on student outcomes.
- **Proactive communication with sustained follow-up that spans a student's trajectory through college improves student outcomes.** The review found that students benefit when colleges communicate proactively, pair outreach with consistent follow-up, and provide incentives for students to respond.
- **Student success can be bolstered when colleges provide a robust set of nonacademic supports through comprehensive case management.** Now more than ever, college students require a range of nonacademic supports to ensure their success in college. Colleges can partner with case management organizations to connect students with mental health supports, childcare, transportation assistance, and access to food and other basic needs.

## \* Study Considerations

### Advising Policy and Practice Scan

The advising policy and practice scan has three primary limitations. First, the findings from the focus groups captured only whether a practice was used on campus but not how widespread its use was. It could be that only a small percentage of students on campus benefited from advising strategies.

Second, the findings captured only the knowledge of those participating in interviews. It is possible that participants were not aware of or did not have a full understanding of all practices in use (particularly more informal practices). The focus groups attempted to incorporate the voices of many campus professionals—from high-level administrators to advisors working directly with students—but there may be gaps in the knowledge of those participants.



Finally, the findings do not reflect the experiences of students. Future research that incorporates the voices of students is needed to better understand how students experience various college advising strategies.

### ***Systematic Review of the Evidence***

The systematic review of the evidence has three primary limitations. First, the review may not reflect the full body of evidence on advising. New studies are constantly released; therefore, the review may have excluded important studies produced after the literature search was conducted. In addition, although the literature search was designed to be comprehensive, some studies may have been inadvertently excluded.

Second, the review is not a meta-analysis and therefore does not provide information about the magnitude of effect sizes across multiple interventions of the same type, nor does it examine treatment effect heterogeneity. Future research that uses meta-analytic methods can identify the types of college advising interventions and their features that are most strongly associated with improved student outcomes.

Finally, most studies included in the review examined interventions with at least two components, and some had many more. The review cannot isolate which of these specific components are the “active ingredients” of the interventions and their relative contributions to student success.

## **Resources**

View the [project webpage](#) for more information.

- Report (2022): [Advising for College Success: Policies, Practices, and Programs That Support Students on the Path to College Completion](#)
- Report (2022): [Advising for College Success: A Systematic Review of the Evidence](#)
- Appendix (2022): [Advising for College Success: A Systematic Review of the Evidence, Appendix C: Full List of Reviewed Studies](#)
- Brief (2022): [Advising for College Success: Next Steps for Policymakers, Practitioners, and Researchers](#)



## Affording Degree Completion: A Study of Completion Grants at Accessible Public Universities

### About the Project

This study brought together researchers at Temple University's [Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice](#) and the [Association of Public and Land-grant Universities](#) (APLU). The project capitalized on the Hope Center's strong record in promoting college affordability and APLU's unique relationships with open-access institutions. APLU has developed these relationships through its leadership in the field in working with institutions to promote programs that support students to degree completion. Together, the researchers brought a focus on rigorous and meaningful research informed and embedded within organizational practices and contexts to advance equity and affordability for student success.

### Study Background

Increasing equity in graduation rates and reducing time-to-degree are central concerns for colleges and universities around the country. With the price of college higher than ever, difficulty paying for college is a reality for most students. Financial shortfalls in the final years of college, created by escalating costs and/or declining financial aid, lead many students to leave college without degrees in hand. Completion grants, an increasingly popular approach to improving college completion, provide additional financial support to students struggling with financial hurdles during the final stretch of their degree program. While there is descriptive and anecdotal evidence that these programs may have positive impacts, this study offers the first analysis of the causal impact of completion grants on academic outcomes at 11 open- and broad-access universities.

### Methodology

The research team worked with 11 open- and broad-access institutions, all of which were APLU members, across 10 states to assess the features of the institutions' completion grant programs and evaluate whether students who received the grants completed their degrees at a higher rate than students who did not have access to completion grants. Specifically, the study tested the efficacy of completion grants, with an average grant value of approximately \$1,000 distributed to more than 14,000 students.

The study took place in two phases. The first phase included a pilot efficacy study to understand the complex institutional structures involved in implementing and running completion grants and to measure the short-term impact of completion grant programs on semester-to-semester persistence, social-psychological well-being, and on-time graduation. The second phase involved working with APLU and nine universities to conduct a randomized controlled trial to assess the completion grant programs' medium-term impacts and cost effectiveness.

### Project Team

The team represented a partnership between Temple University's Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice and APLU.

- Sara Goldrick-Rab, Founder, Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice
- Travis York, Director of Inclusive STEM Ecosystems for Equity & Diversity, American Association for the Advancement of Science
- Christine Baker-Smith, Director of Research, National League of Cities
- Douglas Webber, Senior Economist, The Federal Reserve Board
- Kallie Clark, Senior Research Data Analyst, University of California at San Francisco Institute for Health Policy Studies
- Christel Perkins, Deputy Executive Director, Coalition of Urban Serving Universities; Assistant Vice President, APLU

This project is supported by IES, U.S. Department of Education, through [Grant R305N170020](#) to Temple University.

The research team conducted interviews with project directors and any institutional researchers assisting with the data requests. In addition, the team conducted a cost analysis of each completion grant program to understand the start-up and ongoing costs. To capture the student perspective, the team sent a survey to students who were eligible for completion grants at six universities. The team then triangulated the interview and survey data to identify points of convergence and divergence.

## Findings

Findings were obtained by tracking academic outcomes for students in the study over 3 years. Overall, the findings indicate that completion grants had neither a positive nor a negative impact on academic performance or attainment, with one exception—the grants appear to have a positive impact on retention to the next term ( $p < 0.05$ ). However, at the end of the academic year of the first year of study, there is no significant difference in credits completed or time-to-degree. Likewise, after accounting for continued enrollment, the team found no statistically significant impacts on college retention or completion. Despite eligibility criteria specifying that the program was for near completers, only two-thirds of students graduated within the academic year that the grant was awarded.

Furthermore, no evidence of heterogeneous positive impacts on academic outcomes was found for students when parsed by identifiable subgroups. In addition, while there was some variation in program implementation across universities, it did not lead to differences in program impact.

### *Interpretation of Findings*

By using rigorous methods and a large sample to examine an emerging practice in financial aid, this study should inform practitioners and policymakers in their decisions about how best to allocate limited resources. The study found no clear evidence that completion grants promote college completion rates or equity in those rates, and as such, raises questions about the growing popularity of completion grant programs. The descriptive and anecdotal evidence suggesting their apparently positive "results" may stem from the type of college students who are typically allocated completion grants—students who often have persisted far into college despite financial challenges—rather than the independent effects of the awards. Financial aid programs like the ones used in this study may represent an inefficient use of funds and should therefore receive careful consideration prior to implementation.



## Study Considerations

While it is possible that the COVID-19 pandemic altered students' needs and the potential impact of completion grant programs, it is unlikely that was the case for students in this study. Grants were awarded in fall 2018, and students had nearly 2 years to complete college before the pandemic began—there was not a pattern of positive impacts during that time. That said, the study's results were obtained under specific conditions and apply to large public universities like those studied.

Targeting financial aid to near completers was difficult for the universities in the study because they lacked precise information on where students were in their educational trajectories. Credit thresholds for completion vary by program and major, and the sequence of coursework also matters—yet administrators lacked those details to assist with decision making. Since this is a real-world problem that affects program efficacy regardless of whether an evaluation is taking place, it is a key consideration but not necessarily a study limitation. Both students and administrators would benefit from greater transparency into degree progress and timelines for completion.



## Resources

View the [project webpage](#) for more information.

- Journal Article (2021): [Completion Grants: A Multi-Method Examination of Institutional Practice](#)
- Video (2021): [Spotlight on the Affording Degree Completion Project](#)
- Report (2018): [Supporting Community College Completion With a Culture of Caring: A Case Study of Amarillo College](#)
- Report (2018): [Still Hungry and Homeless in College](#)
- Report (2018): [Addressing Basic Needs Security in Higher Education](#)
- Journal Article (2016): [Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream](#)
- Report (2016): [Foiling the Drop-Out Trap: Completion Grant Practices for Retaining and Graduating Students](#)



## An Experimental Evaluation of Accelerated Pathways Through Developmental Education

### **i** About the Project

AIR, the RAND Corporation, and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) have conducted several studies over time to examine reforms to developmental (remedial) education. These studies have investigated various approaches for accelerating students through developmental education, multiple measures for the placement of students, and supports for students scoring at the lowest levels of college readiness on standardized readiness exams. The aim is to promote effective implementation and scaling of developmental education reforms through evidence.

Building on this research, the team conducted a set of studies focused on *corequisite remediation*, one approach for accelerating students through developmental education. An experimental study examined corequisite models implemented in English courses in five Texas community colleges between fall 2016 and fall 2018. The study compared students assigned to each college's corequisite model to students assigned to a traditional prerequisite developmental education course. The team also examined the fidelity of corequisite implementation, the impacts of corequisites on students' academic success over 3 years, and the contrasts in experiences between students placed into corequisites and those in traditional developmental education courses. In addition, a statewide implementation study examined the various approaches that Texas community colleges used to implement English corequisites. Findings from this research can help build a better understanding of how corequisites support students and of promising approaches for implementing corequisites.

### Project Team

This research team represents a partnership among AIR, the RAND Corporation, and THECB.

- Trey Miller, Principal Researcher, AIR, and Associate Professor of Economics, University of Texas at Dallas
- Lindsay Daugherty, Senior Policy Researcher, RAND Corporation
- Paco Martorell, Associate Professor of Education, University of California at Davis and Adjunct Researcher, RAND Corporation
- Megan Austin, Principal Researcher, AIR
- Russell Gerber, Principal Data Scientist, BetterYou
- Alexandra Mendoza-Graf, Associate Policy Researcher, RAND Corporation
- Diana Gehlhaus, Research Fellow, Center for Security and Emerging Technology
- Vanessa Coca, Senior Researcher, AIR

This project is supported by IES, U.S. Department of Education, through [Grant R305H170085](#) to AIR.

### **</>** Study Background

Research has found that students who were required to take developmental (remedial) courses in college struggled to persist in and complete credit-bearing coursework. These findings have led colleges and states to seek new approaches to ensure student readiness for college-level coursework and to implement a range of reforms related to developmental education. Many of these reforms focus on accelerating students more quickly into credit-bearing courses. One of the most commonly adopted reforms is corequisite remediation (or "corequisites"), which requires that students deemed "not college-ready" be placed directly into a credit-bearing course and provided with just-in-time developmental education support within the same semester.

In 2011, the Texas legislature called on the state's public postsecondary institutions to develop accelerated developmental education approaches, and 2017 legislation specified that corequisites should serve as the primary approach for addressing college readiness. State policy set out some basic requirements for corequisite

design but also provided institutions with considerable flexibility to design corequisites in different ways. Institutions were instructed to gradually scale corequisites to at least 75% of all student enrollments in developmental education courses by 2020. Corequisites are a national reform; a 2016 national survey found that 35% of 2-year colleges offered English corequisites.<sup>6</sup>

As the state began efforts to scale corequisites and implement other developmental education reforms, policymakers wanted to develop more evidence on how best to implement these reforms, their impact, and their cost. THECB partnered with AIR and RAND to carry out this research. This study is the first experimental evaluation of corequisite English courses, building on prior quasi-experimental evidence and a randomized controlled trial of math corequisites that demonstrated impacts on postsecondary outcomes.<sup>7</sup>



## Methodology

This study examined corequisites that integrated reading and writing developmental education support with a college-level English course. Between fall 2016 and fall 2018, first-time enrolling students ( $N = 1,441$ ) across five open- and broad-access institutions in Texas were randomized to either corequisite remediation or the highest level of standalone developmental education. Using administrative data on student education records, the study followed students for 3 years after course assignment, tracking student success in terms of course completion, persistence, and degree completion.



In addition to evaluating academic impacts, the research team was interested in understanding more about students' experiences in corequisite remediation and how those experiences compared with experiences in traditional developmental education. A follow-up survey was conducted with a subset of 1,123 students from entry fall cohorts in the semester following their initial course placement (~6 months post-enrollment), and 62% of randomized students completed the survey ( $n = 723$ ). To examine differences in student experiences for students assigned to a corequisite, the research team replicated its impact analysis with survey responses as the outcome of interest.

The implementation study relied on documentation and qualitative research (i.e., focus groups and interviews with students and school staff, observations) to describe how corequisites were implemented across the five study institutions. The team also conducted a cost-effectiveness analysis to describe the cost for achieving student success outcomes of interest.

In addition, the research team conducted a statewide implementation study (see Box 1 of [this 2018 report](#) for more detailed information). This study included an informational form and interviews with community college staff across Texas institutions to describe the various approaches to English corequisites. The team limited data collection to the 60 Texas community colleges that had administrative data suggesting implementation of an English corequisite, and 36 institutions participated in interviews (a 60% participation rate).

<sup>6</sup> Rutschow, E. Z., Cormier, M. S., Dukes, D., & Zamora, D. E. C. (2019). *The changing landscape of developmental education practices: Findings from a national survey and interviews with postsecondary institutions*. Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED600433>

<sup>7</sup> Logue, A. W., Watanabe-Rose, M., & Douglas, D. (2016). Should students assessed as needing remedial mathematics take college-level quantitative courses instead? A randomized controlled trial. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 38, 578–598.

Logue, A. W., Douglas, D., & Watanabe-Rose, M. (2019). Corequisite mathematics remediation: Results over time and in different contexts. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 41, 294–315.

## Findings

The research project produced key findings in four areas, which describe the corequisite models implemented by institutions across Texas, the fidelity of implementation at the five experimental study colleges, the impacts on student outcomes, and the experiences of students.

**Models of Corequisites Implemented:** The research team found that community colleges in Texas were implementing corequisites in many ways. Some common features distinguishing corequisite models were class size, whether the college course mixed students deemed “college-ready” and “not college-ready,” whether the same instructor taught both the college course and the support, the number of credit hours of support offered, and whether the support was offered as one-on-one tutoring or additional course time with a group of students. Based on these findings, the team classified the corequisites described in Texas community colleges into five types.

The five colleges participating in the experimental study implemented three of these models, all of which co-enrolled students in a college-level English Composition course and an integrated reading and writing developmental education course or support:

- **Accelerated Learning Project (ALP) model** (three colleges). Colleges implementing the ALP model co-enrolled developmental education students and college-ready students in the same college-level English Composition course. The developmental education students in the class also were enrolled in a developmental education support or course as a learning community, with the same instructor teaching the college-level and developmental components.
- **Extended Course Time model** (one college). The extended course time model was similar to the ALP model, but only developmental education students were enrolled in the college-level English Composition course. All of these students participated in the developmental education support, which functioned as additional time with the instructor.
- **Required Support Services model** (two colleges). Colleges that implemented the required support services model enrolled students in the college-level English Composition course and required the developmental education students to regularly make use of supports such as tutoring or the writing center.
- **Fidelity of implementation:** Four of the five institutions in the experimental study implemented most of the key components of their corequisite model with fidelity, while one institution struggled to a greater degree with implementing the corequisite as planned. Institutions faced particular challenges with achieving the desired mix of “college-ready” and “not-college ready” students in corequisite models that aimed to establish mixed-readiness courses (ALP and required support services).
- **Impacts on student outcomes:** The research team found that corequisite remediation dramatically improved short-term course progression outcomes but did not lead to meaningful improvements in important long-term outcomes, including persistence and completion. More specifically, when compared to traditional prerequisite developmental education, enrolling in an English corequisite increased the probability that students passed a college-level English course within 2 years of enrolling in college by 18.4 percentage points.<sup>8</sup> Students assigned to corequisites were also more likely (by 6.4 percentage points) to successfully complete English Composition II within 2 years and completed more college credits during their first 2 years of college than their peers who were randomly assigned to prerequisite remediation.



<sup>8</sup> The percentage of treatment students passing English I within 2 years was 68.6%, versus 50.3% in the control group. The percentage of treatment students passing English II was 31%, versus 24.6% in the control group.

The team found positive effects on these short-term course progression outcomes for each of the three corequisite models included in the study; at each of the five colleges; and for traditionally underrepresented students, including Hispanic students, first-generation college students, and students whose first language was not English. However, the team did not find evidence that students assigned to corequisites were more likely than those assigned to prerequisite remediation to persist in or complete college overall or for any of the priority subgroups. The findings did not provide evidence of positive impacts on persistence or completion of a credential. The lack of impacts on persistence and completion was consistent across student subgroups and over time.

- **Student experiences:** The evidence on student experiences suggests that corequisites improve upon traditional developmental education courses in several ways. Students were more likely to report that the coursework was rigorous and less likely to report time spent on individual desk work (e.g., worksheets). Corequisite students also devoted more hours to English instruction within the semester and had reduced class sizes. In several other areas (e.g., individualized attention, group work), findings indicate no differences between students assigned to corequisites and students assigned to traditional developmental education. And in one area, the evidence favored traditional developmental education: Corequisite students were less likely to perceive that their instructor believed in their ability to be successful.

### Interpretation of Findings

Overall, findings from this study are consistent with a growing body of experimental and high-quality quasi-experimental research demonstrating that corequisite remediation dramatically improves short-term course progression outcomes for most students. The current evidence on long-term impacts of corequisites is more nuanced. In an experimental study at City University of New York (CUNY), Logue et al. (2019) found that assignment to a corequisite statistics course significantly improved persistence and completion, but control students mostly enrolled in the traditional algebra pathway that has notoriously low pass rates.<sup>9</sup> In a regression discontinuity study in Tennessee, Ran and Lin (2022) attributed positive impacts of math corequisite remediation largely to efforts to align the college-level math course component with student degree plans, as opposed to enrolling students in college algebra by default.<sup>10</sup> Taken together, these results suggest that states and colleges could consider aligning mathematics corequisite remediation with ongoing efforts to reform mathematics pathways, but there is still much to learn in this area.

In addition, corequisite remediation primarily supports students during their first semester in college, whereas comprehensive advising and student support programs that assist students past their first year in college have been demonstrated to significantly improve long-term outcomes, including persistence and completion. Examples include CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), InsideTrack, and One Million Degrees, all of which reach out to and engage students to help them gain access to resources and overcome both academic and nonacademic challenges. These studies suggest that all students are likely to be more successful when they receive comprehensive support throughout their time in college; adding such continuing support might be a way to translate corequisite remediation's impact on shorter term outcomes into longer term success. This question is an important one for future research.

The findings on student experiences offer some evidence on the factors that may be driving corequisite impacts on students. Corequisite students may benefit from more rigorous coursework, more instructional time, smaller class sizes, and less time spent working individually in the classroom.

<sup>9</sup> Logue, A. W., Douglas, D., & Watanabe-Rose, M. (2019). Corequisite mathematics remediation: Results over time and in different contexts. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 41, 294–315.

<sup>10</sup> Ran, F. X., & Lin, Y. (2022). The effects of corequisite remediation: Evidence from a statewide reform in Tennessee. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 44(3), 458–484. <https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737211070836>

The findings on implementation suggest that there are many ways to design corequisites, and the study found positive short-term impacts across several different models. Various approaches to corequisites may offer promise, and more research is needed to determine effective models and approaches to instruction within corequisites. Additional research may also unpack the factors driving corequisite effectiveness, and some emerging research is beginning to explore these topics.<sup>11</sup>

## Study Considerations

Although results from the study were rated as [Meets Standards Without Reservations by the What Works Clearinghouse](#), there were several limitations. The study examined a limited set of corequisite models, so the results are not generalizable to all English corequisites. In addition, the study assessed the impact of different corequisite English models that were quickly designed and implemented by Texas colleges to comply with state policy mandating their use, as opposed to a set of institutions implementing a common, well-established curriculum with fidelity. Also, decisions about which instructors were assigned to develop and teach in the corequisite courses were left up to the colleges, and researchers were unable to disentangle the effects of corequisites from the impact of the instructors assigned to teach them. On the one hand, this circumstance may allow the study to capture the impact of strategies implemented immediately as a response to state policy. On the other hand, the estimates may not accurately capture the impacts of corequisites implemented at scale. Estimates may understate the potential impact of corequisite models that were designed carefully over time based on evidence of promising practices. Estimates also may overstate the potential impact of corequisite models if colleges were leaders in the field (i.e., unrepresentative of colleges on average) or selected the best instructors to teach corequisite courses (i.e., unrepresentative of instructor quality when scaled to most students).

Second, while the study was sufficiently powered to assess the impact of corequisites for key subgroups or specific corequisite models, it was not sufficiently powered to assess whether observed differences in impacts across subgroups and models were statistically significant. Moreover, given that the corequisite models varied across colleges, it is impossible to disentangle the relative impacts of the different models studied from the implementation conditions and student populations, which varied widely across colleges.

Third, the study sample was primarily drawn from students who fell just under the “college-ready” threshold on an assessment. Thus, the results cannot be generalized to students with test scores far below the “college-ready” threshold.

Finally, like other studies of corequisite remediation, this study compared a corequisite model to a traditional stand-alone developmental education course. As such, it is not clear from the current research base whether the positive short-term effects of corequisites are due to acceleration, the corequisite support, or both components. The research team is currently conducting additional research to address this question.

<sup>11</sup> See Bahr, P. R., McNaughtan, J., & Jackson, G. R. (2022). Reducing the loss of community college students who demonstrate potential in STEM. *Research in Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-022-09713-8>

Ryu, W., Schudde, L., & Pack, K. (2022). Constructing corequisites: How Texas community colleges structure corequisite math coursework and the implications for student success. *AERA Open*, 8(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584221086664>.



## Resources

View the [project webpage](#) for more information.

- Brief (2022): [Using Corequisite Remediation to Help Students Progress to College-Level Courses](#)
- Report (2021): [Student Experiences in English Corequisite Remediation Versus a Standalone Developmental Education Course](#)
- Journal Article (2021): [Assessing the Effect of Corequisite English Instruction Using a Randomized Controlled Trial](#)
- Research Brief (2021): [How Does Corequisite Remediation Change Student Experiences? Results from a Randomized Study in Five Texas Community Colleges](#)
- Blog Post (2021): [Next Year's Freshman: How Corequisites Might Help Address COVID-19 Learning Loss](#)
- Video (2021): [Spotlight on the Accelerated Pathways Project](#)
- Toolkit (2019): [Tools for Improving Corequisite Models: A Guide for College Practitioners](#)
- Report (2018): [Designing and Implementing Corequisite Models of Developmental Education: Findings From Texas Community Colleges](#)



## Men of Color College Achievement Project

### **i** About the Project

Many community colleges and 4-year institutions have developed programming or joined networks to improve the college retention and completion rates of male students of color. The underlying theory of most of these programs is that providing additional social, personal, and academic supports can bolster the academic achievement and college completion of students of color.

In the Men of Color College Achievement Project, [MDRC](#) brought together an interdisciplinary team of impact, implementation, and cost researchers to partner with the [Community College of Baltimore County](#) (CCBC) to generate causal evidence on strategies designed to increase college persistence and graduation among male students of color. The team conducted an impact evaluation of CCBC's Male Student Success Initiative (MSSI) to detect its effects on students' academic outcomes of college persistence, retention, credit completion, and grades of C or better. In addition, the team studied the fidelity of program implementation (the degree to which MSSI was delivered as intended), the experiences of male students of color at CCBC, and the cost of the MSSI program. Ultimately, this multicomponent project seeks to inform both policy and practice related to equity-targeted interventions at institutions in states seeking to transform how their institutions meet the needs of male students of color in support of their academic advancement and degree completion.

### Project Team

The research team represented a partnership among MDRC and CCBC.

- Lashawn Richburg-Hayes, Vice President of Education, Westat Insight
- Rashida Welbeck, Senior Associate, MDRC
- Michelle Manno, Senior Associate, MDRC
- Oscar Cerna, Director of Evaluation, Research, and Impact, Flourish Agenda
- Erika Lewy, Implementation Research Analyst, MDRC
- Colin Hill, Technical Research Analyst, MDRC
- Edith Yang, Senior Associate, MDRC
- Jaylen Alexander, Research Analyst, MDRC
- Amanda Martin-Lawrence, Strategic Initiatives Assistant, MDRC
- Kalito Luna, Research Assistant, MDRC

This project is supported by IES, U.S. Department of Education, through [Grant R305N160025](#) to MDRC.

### **</>** Study Background

Access to college has increased substantially over the last 50 years, but student success—defined as the combination of academic success and degree or certificate completion—has largely remained stagnant. The gap between college access and success is particularly notable for Black and Hispanic students, and males in these groups have lower rates of enrollment and completion than females.<sup>12</sup>

Since the early 2000s, many colleges have tailored campus programs to provide academic and social support specific to the interests and needs of male students of color to address the institutional gaps in equitable student success. MSSI at CCBC is one such program. The two-semester program model includes an ambitious set of services to support students who self-identify as males of color. These services include a required one-credit,

<sup>12</sup> Strayhorn, T. L. (2010). When race and gender collide: Social and cultural capital's influence on the academic achievement of African American and Latino males. *The Review of Higher Education* 33(3), 307–332. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ888275>; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Tables [306.10](#), [326.10](#), and [326.20](#) Marshall, A. Jr., Nichols-Howard, A., & Pilar, W. D. (2021). Raising undergraduate degree attainment among Black women and men takes on new urgency amid the pandemic. *The Education Trust*. <https://edtrust.org/resource/national-and-state-degree-attainment-for-black-women-and-men>

culturally contextualized first-year student success course, Academic Development (ACDV) 101; assigned mentors who are also men of color; connections with student support services on campus; leadership and professional development opportunities; and a focus on community building through activities that reflect racial and ethnic identities.



## Methodology

The Men of Color College Achievement Project consisted of four complementary components: (a) a randomized controlled trial to estimate the effects of MSSSI on student academic progress; (b) an implementation study focused on how the program was put into effect, the fidelity of implementation, the service contrast, and service use by students; (c) a qualitative student voices study to obtain a deeper understanding of the student perspective and context; and (d) cost analyses. The target population for the evaluation was new CCBC students or transfer students with less than 12 credits earned who self-identified as males of color (including Black, Latino, Asian, and other ethnicities). At CCBC, these students are required to take the ACDV 101 course. From spring 2019 through fall 2021, 514 students were randomly assigned to either a program group, which had access to MSSSI, or a control group, which had access to all other existing college services for which they were eligible. The study sample comprised primarily younger students: the average participant was 21 years of age, and nearly 16% of the sample was 25 years of age or older. The majority (83%) of the sample self-identified as Black, and slightly more than 8% self-identified as Hispanic.



The project's mixed-methods approach used five sources of data:

- Student background data at baseline.
- Administrative records of academic outcomes from college transcripts.
- Management information system data on student participation in mentoring meetings and recommended student support service referrals such as tutoring and leadership activities.
- Semi-structured interviews with program staff, ACDV MSSSI instructors, MSSSI Success Mentors, and administrators connected to equity-focused campus supports as well as classroom observations.
- A student survey about the use of campus services (e.g., the frequency of participation in mentoring, tutoring, and advising services) and student support networks.



## Findings

MDRC worked closely with CCBC to carry out the project over six semesters, including those most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the study's findings should be considered in the context of the pandemic, which posed challenges to the MSSSI program and student engagement. In March 2020, during the third semester of the project, CCBC announced a travel ban for staff and students, canceled in-person classes, canceled and postponed all major campus events, and shifted to remote instruction and teleworking. Students experienced various challenges adapting to a virtual learning environment, such as having to share space and technology with multiple family members or preferring in-person learning. As long as classes were largely offered remotely, these challenges persisted. Once instruction began opening to more in-person learning again, students contended with other challenges—namely balancing school, home, and employment schedules because students tended to take on more work hours when they did not need to be on campus.

Key findings include the following:

- **Student experience:** Students enrolled in the MSSSI program had a substantially different experience than those not enrolled. The analysis of qualitative data, including interviews with staff, focus groups with MSSSI and control group students, classroom observations, and observations of other MSSSI activities, shows that the intervention’s features differed from the standard student experience at CCBC.
- **Program implementation:** During the study period, the MSSSI program did not operate as intended, and the pandemic exacerbated operational difficulties. The program features purposefully evolved over time, and not all program components were implemented as originally planned.
- **Student engagement:** Prior to the pandemic, students did not participate in MSSSI services at expected levels, and difficulties in engaging students became particularly noticeable after the pandemic’s start.
- **Orientation course enrollment:** The MSSSI program had positive effects on enrollment in a student orientation course and on passing the course in the first semester—two measures of academic success. The program increased enrollment in ACDV 101—a required one-credit course—by 8.4 percentage points in the first semester of the intervention and increased the likelihood of passing the course by 15.2 percentage points. The program did not affect enrollment or credits earned in the first two semesters.
- **Academic performance:** The MSSSI program had positive effects on students’ performance in the courses they took after the MSSSI program year. Specifically, in students’ fourth semester, program group members were more likely<sup>13</sup> to earn an A, B, or C in all courses relative to control group members by 7.3 percentage points.<sup>14</sup> The program did not affect college persistence or credits earned in any semester.
- **First-generation college students:** Program impacts appear concentrated among first-generation college students. In the first semester, ACDV enrollment rates were higher among first-generation students in the program group (68.6%) compared to those in the control group (44.2%).<sup>15</sup> Among non-first-generation students, enrollment rates were similar for program and control groups.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, first-generation students in the program group were more likely to earn an A, B, or C in all courses (relative to first-generation students in the control group) by 14.8 percentage points.<sup>17</sup>
- **Cost analyses:** The estimated cost of the two-semester MSSSI program was \$885 per student. The estimated program-level cost per MSSSI Success Mentor varied from \$29,101 in spring 2019 to \$5,414 in fall 2021. This variation reflects the change in the number of Success Mentors across terms (dropping from seven in spring 2019 to one to three in fall 2021). In addition, the amount of time Success Mentors spent on MSSSI activities varied by term. In contrast, administrator costs were relatively stable over time. The cost per student ranged from a high of \$1,474 per student in spring 2019 to a low of \$273 per student in fall 2021 due to the variation noted previously as well as the change in the number of program group



<sup>13</sup> 12.5% (program group) compared with 5.2% (control group).

<sup>14</sup> When grades from the ACDV course—part of the intervention—were excluded from grade calculations, program group members were more likely than control group members to earn an A, B, or C in all other courses by 6.3 percentage points. It is unclear why impacts were present in the fourth semester and not the third semester.

<sup>15</sup> 24.4 percentage point difference.

<sup>16</sup> 65.8% (program group) compared to 64.9% (control group). The difference in first-semester ACDV enrollment between first-generation and non-first-generation students was 23.5 percentage points.

<sup>17</sup> When grades from the ACDV course—part of the intervention—were excluded from grade calculations, first-generation program group members were more likely than first-generation control group members to earn an A, B, or C in all other courses by 18.1 percentage points.

students in their first or second terms. The overall average cost was \$885 per student. This average cost per student was \$1,046 in the pre-pandemic period and \$815 during the pandemic period.<sup>18</sup>

These findings apply to the full sample. The pandemic, however, disrupted the experimental evaluation of the MSSl model, creating two subsamples with different experiences. The evaluation period spanned 2019 through spring 2022, which resulted in some students in the sample receiving services during the pre-pandemic period and others receiving services during the pandemic. Specifically, the study sample is divided between those who experienced the program in person (204 students or about 40% of the sample) and those who experienced the program during the pandemic and mostly online but who may have had in-person engagements in the final semester of the evaluation (310 students or about 60% of the sample).

### Interpretation of Findings

The findings suggest that a program combining academic advising/coaching, academic and study skills training, leadership training or career development, mentoring, and special events and workshops can improve some academic success measures, such as earning grades of A, B, or C in courses. The findings also suggest that such programming improves outcomes more for male students of color who are first-generation college students.

Programs for males of color at community colleges have been around for some time, and extensive *qualitative* research is available on the implementation of these programs and their value to students. In contrast, there are few *quantitative* studies of the effect of this type of programming on academic outcomes. This evaluation provides the first causal estimates of the effects of a postsecondary program for males of color on academic outcomes. As a result, the findings are potentially useful to a broad set of practitioners and administrators who are interested in implementing or refining a program of this type. Moreover, the use of a mixed methods design ensures internal validity of estimates, meaning that the outcome findings reflect the impact of the MSSl program and do not reflect other factors. At the same time, the qualitative components of the evaluation design permit the examination of a number of factors that could affect impacts, such as implementation fidelity, dosage, and treatment contrast.

### \* Study Considerations

The study examined just one program that operated on three campuses of a single institution. Thus, generalizing the findings to other populations of interest may not be supported, as impacts could vary if the program were implemented elsewhere.<sup>19</sup> Second, the low fidelity of implementation makes it difficult to determine whether the theory of change underlying the program is flawed or whether better implementation would have resulted in stronger impacts.

Finally, it is important to note that this evaluation occurred during two national social crises, which affected the program and its staff and students. The first—the global COVID-19 pandemic—affected both students and administrators and resulted in a change in learning modality as CCBC moved all classes online in spring 2020 to mitigate COVID-19 transmission rates. The second consisted of a rash of killings of unarmed Black people in 2020, including Ahmaud Arbery in February, Breonna Taylor in March, and George Floyd in May, as well as 17 more fatal police shootings of unarmed Black men across the country that year.<sup>20</sup> These killings coincided with

<sup>18</sup> Cost effectiveness analyses cannot be conducted yet, as it is too early to examine completion outcomes.

<sup>19</sup>Tipton, E., & Olsen, R. B. (2022). *Enhancing the generalizability of impact studies in education* (NCEE 2022-003). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance.

<sup>20</sup> Police shootings of unarmed Black men are author's calculations using the fatal shootings database compiled by *The Washington Post* ("[1,047 People Have Been Shot and Killed by Police in the Past Year](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2022/07/05/1-047-people-have-been-shot-and-killed-by-police-in-the-past-year/)," Accessed July 5, 2022, website: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>). Other research places the figure of unarmed Black men shot by police at 22 per year (Robert VerBruggen, *Fatal Police Shootings and Race: A Review of the Evidence and Suggestions for Future Research* (New York: Manhattan Institute, 2022)).

the pandemic and likely affected both students and MSSI staff differentially, as research suggests that the death of George Floyd resulted in widespread anger and sadness, which was most pronounced among Black Americans.<sup>21</sup>

This challenging context, combined with the documented implementation difficulties, suggest that the program has promise to generate larger impacts with stronger implementation, although the study design does not permit a conclusive answer.



## Resources

View the [project webpage](#) for more information.

- Blog Post (2021): [How the Male Student Success Initiative at the Community College of Baltimore County Adapted During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)
- Video (2021): [Spotlight on the Men of Color College Achievement Project](#)
- Report (2020): [Pushing Toward Progress: Early Implementation Findings From a Study of the Male Student Success Initiative](#)
- Blog Post (2020): [Why Building Community Is Essential to Improving the Male Student Success Initiative](#)
- Blog Post (2020): [MSSI Mentors: Reflections on Serving Men of Color](#)
- Blog Post (2020): [MSSI Mentors: Reflections on Who We Are and Who We Mentor](#)
- Brief (2019): [The Male Student Success Initiative: Investing in the Success of Men of Color](#)

<sup>21</sup> Herman, K. C., Dong, N., Reinke, W. M., & Bradshaw, C. P. (2021). Accounting for traumatic historical events in educational randomized controlled trials. *School Psychology Review*, 1–17.



## Nudges to the Finish Line: Experimental Interventions to Prevent Late College Departure

### **i** About the Project

Nudges to the Finish Line (N2FL) is a text message campaign designed to increase college completion among students who have made significant progress toward their degree and are actively enrolled but who remain at risk of dropping out. The research team designed N2FL in close partnership with 20 colleges and universities. The team then implemented the campaign in partnership with public higher education institutions in New York City, Ohio, Virginia, Texas, and Washington State during the 2016–17 through 2018–19 school years.

The N2FL text message campaign was designed to (a) encourage students to connect with campus-based academic and financial resources, (b) remind students of upcoming and important deadlines, and (c) invite students to engage via text with dedicated college advising staff. During the campaign, students received approximately one message per week over the course of two to three semesters. The study sample included 21,533 students across 20 partner institutions.

### Project Team

The research team represents a partnership among the University of Virginia and Stanford University.

- Benjamin Castleman, Associate Professor of Public Policy and Education, University of Virginia
- Eric Bettinger, Professor of Economics, Stanford University
- Zack Mabel, Research Professor of Education and Economics, Georgetown University

This project is supported by IES, U.S. Department of Education, through [Grant R305N160025](#) to the University of Virginia.

### **</>** Study Background

Most efforts to increase college completion rates have focused on supporting students before or soon after they enter college. For example, several interventions have focused on encouraging students to attend higher quality colleges where they are more likely to graduate, supporting students to apply for federal student aid, and helping students overcome procedural obstacles to matriculation that arise before students arrive on campus. Colleges and universities have also devoted considerable attention to students' first-year experiences in college, with interventions ranging from structured learning and advising supports (e.g., ASAP at CUNY), learning communities, and first-year seminars to improving remediation policies for students who enter college academically underprepared.

Evidence suggests that these strategies can increase the share of students who successfully navigate the transition to college and make progress toward their degree. However, many students who persist beyond the first year of college remain at substantial risk of withdrawing prior to earning their degree. More than 40% of college students who do not graduate leave after their second year of college. Recent evidence also suggests that one in three college dropouts complete at least three-quarters of the credits typically required to graduate before they withdraw. Across the country, this finding translates into approximately 400,000 students per college entry cohort who have earned substantial credits but with no degree to show for their investment.

A combination of limited support for more advanced college students and novel challenges that arise as students approach completion contribute to these high rates of late withdrawal. The road to completion becomes increasingly self-directed as structured student support services taper off after the first year of college. Students may therefore struggle to make and follow through on complicated decisions, such as determining which courses to take to fulfill their degree requirements, especially when academic advising is limited and often difficult to

access. The nonmonetary costs of navigating a challenging environment alone may also be difficult for older students who lead busy lives and have limited networks of academic support outside of school.



## Methodology

The research team partnered with a diverse array of broad-access public 2- and 4-year institutions across the country to implement N2FL. All partner institutions accept 75% or more of the applicants that apply. Of the students attending the partner institutions, 60% were enrolled part time, 32% received federal Pell Grants, and 50% were students of color. The average graduation rate within 150% of the expected time (e.g., 6 years for a 4-year degree) reported by partner institutions was 29%. Of the 20 institutions that participated in N2FL, three are community colleges and three are 4-year colleges in the CUNY system; seven are community colleges in the Virginia Community College System; three are community colleges in Texas; two are 4-year public universities in the University of Texas system; and two are 4-year public institutions in Ohio and Washington State.



Degree-seeking students were eligible to participate in the study if they met the following criteria: (a) were actively enrolled, (b) had an active cell phone number on record with their institution, and (c) had completed at least 50% of the credits typically required for degree completion prior to intervention launch.

Based on these eligibility criteria and the size of enrollments at the partner institutions, the research team recruited 21,533 students to participate in the study. Of this experimental sample, the team randomly assigned 13,826 to the treatment group and 7,727 to the control group. Students assigned to the control condition did not receive any text messages as part of the intervention but maintained access to the support structures typically available on their campus. However, as discussed previously, outreach to students, especially upper-division students, is limited at many public colleges and universities. Therefore, the relevant counterfactual is control group students that did not receive personalized support unless they had the time, motivation, and awareness to seek it out.



## Findings

Across experimental conditions, the N2FL text message intervention did not have significant impacts on college re-enrollment<sup>22</sup> or completion, credit accumulation, degree attainment, or transfer among 2-year enrollees to a 4-year institution. Key findings include the following:

- **Re-enrollment or completion:** Most students (76.2%) re-enrolled or graduated within 4 terms, and the N2FL text messages did not significantly increase re-enrollment or graduation rates. Based on confidence intervals for the impact estimates, researchers can rule out impacts of 1.8 percentage points or larger on the probability of re-enrollment or graduation.
- **Credit accumulation:** The research team found no impact of N2FL on the number of college credits that students accumulated.
- **Degree attainment:** When investigating the impacts of N2FL on degree attainment alone, the research team found no significant effects. Fifty-nine percent of the control group completed their degree within 4 terms, and the team can rule out treatment impacts of 0.9 percentage points or larger.

<sup>22</sup> *Re-enrollment* refers to students who re-enrolled in the term following the intervention term or in a subsequent term.

- **Transfer among 2-year enrollees:** Among students at 2-year institutions, the team found no impact of N2FL on transfer to 4-year institutions and can rule out impacts of 1.0 percentage points or larger.
- **Intervention time frame:** Similarly, there are no effects of N2FL within six terms of the intervention for the subset of institutions for which the research team could observe outcomes over that time frame. None of the estimates is significant, and if researchers were to apply multiple adjustments given the number of estimated impacts, it would only further confirm the lack of significant impacts.
- **Predicted risk of withdrawal:** The team also investigated heterogeneous impacts of N2FL after four terms on the same outcomes by tercile (ranked thirds) of students' predicted risk of withdrawal. As expected, researchers observed the highest rates of re-enrollment or completion, credit accumulation, degree attainment, and transfer (among 2-year enrollees) among students in the bottom tercile of risk. For instance, 70.7% of students in the control group in the bottom tercile earned a degree within four terms, compared with 45.9% of control students in the top tercile. Once again, researchers did not observe significant impacts of N2FL across any of the risk terciles on any of the primary outcomes and, in all cases, can rule out even moderate treatment effects. The null effects of N2FL across the distribution of predicted risk holds whether impacts were measured at four terms or six terms following the start of the intervention.
- **Institution system:** Researchers found no evidence of impacts of N2FL at four terms postintervention across any of the three higher education systems and can rule out the possibility of moderately sized effects. Similarly, researchers did not find significant impacts by education system at 6 terms postintervention. Moreover, the impacts of N2FL did not vary by predicted baseline risk within each higher education system.



### Interpretation of Findings

Three alternative explanations are presented for the study's null findings (i.e., lack of significant findings).

- One possible explanation is that the text messages were not salient enough to students to foster meaningful engagement with advisors on campus. Text-based outreach has become increasingly widespread over the past decade, and colleges must compete more in recent years for the attention of students. Although researchers observed high student and advisor response rates in N2FL overall, they cannot rule out that college students may have reached a point of text message saturation, such that the efficacy of outreach campaigns launched 5 or 10 years ago would be more limited today.
- A second possibility is that the reliance of N2FL on the existing advising infrastructure of colleges and universities to engage with students asked too much of college staff with large caseloads and competing demands. This possibility may be especially true in the context of upper-division students at risk of dropout, who may face acute academic and financial barriers that require more intensive assistance than two-way texting or traditional models of advising can provide. The intensity of support at-risk students need may also explain the success of more resource-intensive interventions in colleges, such as one-on-one coaching programs, which often have low student-coach caseloads and augment, rather than depend on, the traditional advising capacity of colleges.
- A third possibility is that N2FL may have engaged students too late in their college careers. As evident from the promising impacts of comprehensive college supports, there may be important benefits to programs that engage students throughout their college career. If that is the case, then upper-division students at risk of dropout may benefit most from interventions that begin earlier and offer continuous support.



## Resources

View the [project webpage](#) for more information.

- Journal Article (2022): [Finishing the Last Lap: Experimental Evidence on Strategies to Increase Attainment for Students Near College Completion](#)
- Working Paper (2022): [Gauging Engagement: Measuring Student Response to a Large-Scale College Advising Field Experiment](#)
- Video (2021): [Spotlight on the Nudges to the Finish Line Project](#)
- Brief (2020): [Evidence-Based Strategies for Successful Remote Advising](#)
- Brief (2019): [Nudges to the Finish Line – Preliminary Research Brief](#)
- Report (2017): [Leaving Late: Understanding the Extent and Predictors of College Late Departure](#)



## A Scalable Growth Mindset Intervention to Raise Achievement and Persistence in Community College

### **i** About the Project

This project involved a multisite, randomized controlled trial to assess the effect of an online growth mindset intervention among community college students' full-time enrollment as well as their enrollment in and completion of critical math courses. An important emphasis of the study was to leverage the student and institutional diversity of the sample to explore variability in which groups did and did not benefit from the intervention and in which school contexts.

The [Project for Education Research That Scales](#) (PERTS) helps educators apply insights from the behavioral sciences to foster student motivation and success on a large scale. PERTS ran the first large-scale experiments testing growth and other learning mindset programs with adolescents and young adults and now supports the implementation of these programs through a network of nearly 200 postsecondary institutions.

### Project Team

The team represented a partnership between PERTS at Stanford University and the College Transition Collaborative.

- Greg Walton, Professor of Psychology, Stanford University
- Carol Dweck, Professor of Psychology, Stanford University
- Thomas Dee, Professor of Education, Stanford University
- Dave Paunesku, Executive Director, PERTS Lab
- Sarah Gripshover, Director of Research, PERTS Lab
- Parker Goyer, Research Scientist, Stanford University

This project is supported by IES, U.S. Department of Education, through [Grant R305A150253](#) to Stanford University.

### **</>** Study Background

More than half of all college students in the United States attend community college (56%), and this share is growing. Yet only 23% of students who start at community college earn an associate degree or transfer to a 4-year college within 6 years, limiting students' economic earning potential and social mobility as well as economic development in their communities. Moreover, racial-ethnic and social-class inequalities persist in college success. Understanding the barriers students face in community college and effective ways to overcome them is critical for individuals, families, and communities to flourish.

This study focused on a default cultural belief system that implies that intelligence is a fixed quality that people either have or do not have. This view, called a fixed mindset about intelligence, can erode students' willingness to attempt and complete academic challenges. Moreover, research shows that a fixed mindset poses a particular psychological threat, known as an identity threat, to certain groups, such as students of color who have been historically marginalized in education or face negative stereotypes about their intellectual abilities. For these students, a fixed mindset about intelligence can seem to imply that they are less able than others.

Building on past research in secondary school and 4-year college settings, the multiyear study tested whether a 30-minute online module that introduces students to an alternative belief system—a growth mindset about intelligence, which is the belief that intelligence is something a person can develop through deliberate effort, good strategies, and help from others—can improve students' academic progress.

The study focused on students' likelihood of attempting and completing three key indicators of progress:

- **Full-time status:** Did students attempt (complete) enough credits in the first academic year after participating in the study to be classified as a full-time student for the equivalent of one term (12 credits)?
- **College-level math course:** Did students attempt (complete) a college-level math course (e.g., College Algebra) as opposed to only a precollege level (e.g., developmental math skills) or no math course?
- **Gateway math course:** Did students attempt (complete) a math course that functions as a common gateway to degree progress across colleges? This is a more specific and higher-level math course.

Students can be especially vulnerable to fixed mindsets in math (“I’m not a math person!”). In particular, students enrolled in developmental math courses in community colleges may have had negative experiences with math. However, these courses must be completed to access higher-level math, such as gateway math courses, which tend to be required or elective courses for many community college degrees.

Growth mindset interventions are not a magic bullet that will work the same way in all contexts. Instead, they address worries that arise from and interfere with challenge-seeking, learning, and achievement in specific contexts. Thus, in addition to examining main effects, a critical contribution of the present study was to test heterogeneity in identity-based experiences across contexts in treatment effects: Where and with whom is the growth mindset intervention helpful in improving student outcomes? The research team was particularly interested in two contextual factors related to students' group identity: (a) the representation of students' racial-ethnic group on campus and (b) how well that group was performing, absent treatment, on the relevant outcome measure.



## Methodology

The research team partnered with six open- and broad-access community colleges, representing 19 campuses in five states. Students in a class participating in the study (either a math or a success skills course, depending on the college) were randomly assigned to receive either the growth mindset module or an active control module. In the growth mindset module (treatment condition), students read an article describing how brain functioning improves when people confront new challenges, engage multiple learning strategies, and seek out advice. These



students also were offered opportunities to internalize this idea, including writing a letter offering advice to a future student. In the control module, students completed similar activities that focused on the structure and function of the brain. In all, 19,906 students participated in the study. The team examined math outcomes over the full study years—that is, as long as the researchers tracked students (two to 13 terms after the term in which students participated in the intervention).

To study how outcomes varied by students' group identities and context, the research team adopted a recently developed approach that recognizes that students' group identities do not have inherent meaning; rather, meaning arises in and varies by context. Using this approach, the research team first identified 190 “local-identity groups” in the study sample: these were student groups of the same race-ethnicity who began the study at the same campus in the same cohort. Next, the team specified two characteristics of local-identity groups that could impact the effectiveness of the growth mindset intervention:

- **How well-represented the students' identity group is on campus:** Past research shows that students can feel like a spotlight is on them when their group is underrepresented in school settings and that others may see them as representative of their group as a whole. This can cause identity threat to develop.

- **How well students' identity group performs, among students in the control condition only, along the relevant outcome measure:** Past research shows that when members of one's group perform poorly, students can experience identity threat and worry that others will expect them to perform poorly as well. Moreover, evidence indicates that growth mindset interventions often are most effective in raising academic achievement for students who are performing poorly.<sup>23</sup>

Considering these findings, the research team theorized that identity threat would be greatest for students in groups that are poorly represented on campus and who, absent intervention, are performing poorly. And that for these students, a growth mindset module that shows intelligence can be improved may be especially helpful.



## Findings

Analyses for this study are ongoing, and the following findings are preliminary and may change. For this reason, the findings indicate broad patterns but do not include specific numbers.<sup>24</sup>

- **Within study classrooms findings:** There were no overall main effects on success within study classrooms; that is, the math or success skills class in which students were assigned to the study activity and in which they were randomly assigned to condition.
- **Identity-based contextual findings:** Preliminary results indicate consistent effects of the growth mindset treatment based on the degree to which students' local-identity group was represented on campus and the group's academic performance, absent the treatment.
  - Among students in local-identity groups that were **lower performing and, in multilevel frequentist analyses, in groups that were also poorly represented**, the growth mindset module was consistently helpful (significant or marginally significant positive effects).
  - The module was also helpful on certain outcomes among students in local-identity groups that were **low performing and moderately well-represented or moderately performing and poorly represented**.
  - Among students in groups that were **performing well and, in multilevel frequentist analyses, in groups that were also poorly represented**, the growth mindset module had significant or marginally significant *negative* effects on some outcomes.
- **Gateway math course:** The strongest evidence of positive effects from the growth mindset module was for the completion of a gateway math course. In a frequentist test, among students in groups in the bottom third of achievement of this outcome (less than 15.2% of students in these groups achieved this outcome) and in the bottom third of representation on campus, the intervention was associated with an increased rate of attainment of 4.2 percentage points. This outcome was by far the least likely for



<sup>23</sup> Prior performance at the individual level was not fully available in this sample, as many participants were new to the community college partner and did not have prior academic records available.

<sup>24</sup> Among other issues, ongoing analyses will seek to (a) resolve areas of divergence between the two analytic approaches used to examine the data, standard multilevel frequentist analyses and a flexible Bayesian multilevel model called Bayesian Causal Forest (BCF), and (b) understand the role of regression to the mean, if any, as described below. In addition, a constraint of the full-time status variable described below is that the team has not as yet been able to separate academic courses taken (for which effects would be predicted) from any nonacademic courses (e.g., physical education) for which effects would not be predicted.

students in the sample to achieve. These results are consistent with past evidence of positive effects of growth mindset on challenge seeking and math outcomes.

- **Frequentist versus Bayesian Causal Forest (BCF) analyses:** While the two analytic approaches generally yielded similar results, there were some differences.<sup>25</sup>
  - Frequentist analyses tended to yield three-way interactions, with benefits concentrated among students in groups that were less well represented and lower performing and some negative effects among students in groups that were less well represented and performing well.
  - BCF analyses tended to yield two-way interactions, with benefits concentrated among students in lower performing groups and negative effects among students in well performing groups.

### Interpretation of Findings

The preliminary findings suggest the potential for a direct-to-student growth mindset intervention to improve critical academic outcomes in community college. However, the improvement was conditional. The intervention appears to have improved academic outcomes for students whose racial-ethnic identity group was performing poorly absent treatment on campus. Multiple past trials have found benefits of growth mindset interventions concentrated among students with lower personal levels of performance. This study extends those findings to lower performance at the group level, a circumstance linked to identity threat. In addition, some results indicate the growth mindset module's benefit among lower-performing groups was further concentrated among groups that were poorly represented on campus, a situation that can exacerbate identity threat. Insofar as benefits were greatest for students in lower-performing groups, the growth mindset intervention directly remedied intergroup inequality across the sample.

However, the intervention was not effective for all groups in all contexts. First, some results indicate the growth mindset module did not affect outcomes for students in groups that were well-represented on campus, regardless of their achievement level. A critical mass of one's social group reduces identity threat in some contexts, as students are less likely to worry that they could be seen as representing their group as a whole. Students from well-represented groups on campus may therefore have less need of intervention to reduce identity threat.

Second was the unexpected finding that the growth mindset intervention may be associated with unwanted negative effects for students in groups that were performing well or in groups that were both performing well and were poorly represented. This effect was not predicted and has not been found in other studies. The research team is eager to determine whether this finding is a true effect and, if so, what may have led to this outcome.<sup>26</sup> Again, conclusions from the present data should be tempered pending future analyses.



### Study Considerations

Understanding heterogeneity is essential if innovations in the social sciences are to prove reliable and effective. We cannot assume that the same intervention will be needed and effective everywhere for all students. Instead, we should assume that the effects of an intervention will vary across the diversity of school contexts in our society and use scientific inquiry and program evaluation to identify and understand these variations.

<sup>25</sup> We thank David Yeager for assistance in conducting BCF analyses.

<sup>26</sup> One factor that may contribute to this pattern of results is regression to the mean. Because participating colleges were unable to provide historical information about the performance of racial-ethnic groups on campus, the research team had to assess local-identity group performance by examining performance in the control condition. As a result, there is a possibility that some portion of negative treatment effects among students in higher-performing groups, and of positive effects among students in lower-performing groups, could reflect regression to the mean.

This study suggests that group-level factors—poor achievement of one’s racial-ethnic group, perhaps especially when paired with low representation on campus—may create conditions in which a growth mindset intervention is most needed and effective in community college. However, other aspects of contexts are also likely to matter. For instance, past large-scale trials of growth mindset interventions in secondary school contexts show the need for the school context to legitimize a growth mindset (growth mindset *affordances*). If a math instructor rejects a growth mindset, students may not be able to hold on to this way of thinking in math class, even in response to a well-designed growth mindset intervention, nor to use it to guide their behavior to support learning and achievement.

In community college settings, what are the affordances necessary—either in instructors (e.g., beliefs about the malleability of intelligence), in peer cultures (e.g., attitude toward challenge seeking), or in the ways learning is structured (e.g., opportunities to revise work to improve a grade)—for students to hold onto and use a growth mindset effectively? More broadly, how can we build settings that facilitate a growth mindset culture in multiple, redundant ways? Some of our community college partners had been working to introduce growth mindset on campuses for several years before this project was implemented. It is not known how effective these efforts were nor, importantly, how they may have interacted with the present trial in affecting student outcomes. It is possible that the schools’ growth mindset programs diminished the effects of this program. Indeed, one goal is to create strong growth mindset cultures in schools that make direct-to-student growth mindset interventions less needed.



## Resources

View the [project webpage](#) for more information.

- Blog Post (2022): [Is Believing in Yourself Enough? Growth Mindset and Social Belonging Interventions for Postsecondary Students](#)
- Tool (2021): [How You Say It Matters: A Toolkit for Improving Communications About Academic Standing](#)
- Video (2021): [Spotlight on the Growth Mindset Project](#)
- Tool (2018): [Social-Belonging for College Students](#)
- Tool (2015): [Mindset Kit](#)
- Tool (2010): [Growth Mindset for College Students](#)



## Approaches to Addressing Mental Health Needs of Community College Students

### About the Project

This research team represents a partnership among [AIR](#), the [RAND Corporation](#), the [University of Texas at Dallas](#), the [PERTS Lab](#), [Active Minds](#), and the [JED Foundation](#). The goal of this study was to identify multilevel approaches that support the mental health of community college students.

### Study Background

Student mental health is critical to postsecondary academic success. As mental health issues rise among college students in the United States, in part due to the COVID-19 pandemic, colleges increasingly recognize that supporting student mental health is essential for academic success. Students at community colleges are of particular concern given the number of challenges they often navigate (e.g., financial stress, occupational and family responsibilities, less access to support services), which can increase the risk of mental health problems and interfere with college completion. Without proper support, community college students are at risk for a range of immediate issues (e.g., academic impairment, substance use, suicide) and longer-term consequences (e.g., stop-out, dropout, and lower lifetime earning potential).

To address growing concerns about student mental health, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine<sup>27</sup> called on the field to identify and elevate emerging and promising approaches that offer an “all-hands” systemic way to support student mental health in higher education. Yet little is known about how community colleges address student mental health broadly.

To address this gap in knowledge, the study team conducted a descriptive study of multilevel approaches (i.e., a combination of prevention, early intervention, and/or treatment services) that community colleges are implementing to support student mental health, as well as key facilitators and barriers to their success.

### Methodology

The study team asked Active Minds and the JED Foundation to identify 20 colleges involved in efforts to improve student mental health. The identified colleges represented geographic diversity (at least one college from the Northeast, Southeast, Midwest/Plains, West Coast, and Southwest); served large proportions of students of color

<sup>27</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2021). *Mental health, substance use, and wellbeing in higher education: Supporting the whole student*. The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/26015>

### Project Team

This research team represents a partnership among AIR, the RAND Corporation, the University of Texas at Dallas, PERTS Lab, Active Minds, and the JED Foundation.

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or low-income students; and offered a combination of prevention, early intervention, and treatment services. In all, the team recruited 14 colleges, and a total of eight participated in the study.

Between February and July 2022, the research team collected three types of data from each college: publicly available data on the student population (using IPEDS); a survey to gather information about each campus's efforts to support student mental health; and individual and small-group interviews with three to five stakeholders per college. In all, the study included 15 interviews with a total of 28 individuals (19 mental health counselors or implementers of mental health programs and nine administrators). The team analyzed the interview and survey data utilizing a combination of deductive approaches (comparing data against findings from the existing research base and insights from mental health experts) and inductive approaches (identifying themes and patterns that could not be categorized by a priori knowledge).

## Findings

The study findings focus on three areas: (a) approaches colleges were using to support student mental health, (b) ways in which colleges had integrated mental health supports into broader student success efforts, and (c) barriers and facilitators to supporting student mental health on campus.

### *Approaches to Supporting Student Mental Health*

The team described community college approaches for supporting student mental health according to whether the college used a framework to address mental health needs and by type of prevention, early intervention, or treatment service.

**Framework for supporting student mental health.** When asked whether their college used a specific framework to guide their approach to supporting student mental health on campus, none of the interviewees reported it did. However, interviewees shared their personal perspective on the integral role that mental health plays in academic success, noting the importance of supporting students academically and nonacademically. Nevertheless, some reported that faculty and staff outside of the mental health fields (e.g., psychology, social work, nursing) have not widely adopted the idea that supporting mental health is part of their role in educating students.

**Prevention efforts.** All participating colleges implemented a variety of strategies to promote overall student mental health (not only students at risk for or showing symptoms of mental illness). For example, these efforts included educating students about mental health and how to cope with stress/hardship, reducing stigma of mental illness among students and faculty/staff, and changing institutional culture. Efforts ranged from informational sessions about mental health and campus resources during orientation week, mindfulness sessions, providing therapy dogs on campus during finals week, and campaigns to reduce stigma around mental health and change institutional culture. Most campuses reported that counseling staff, student success staff, or “student champions” were responsible for strategizing and implementing the programs at their campuses. Few campuses utilized data collected on campus to drive decisions about which efforts may best suit the needs of their students.

**Targeted early intervention.** When asked about efforts their college is implementing to support students showing early signs of mental illness or at higher risk for developing mental illness, colleges reported a range of efforts. Examples of services offered across the campuses included gatekeeper and mental health training for faculty and staff (e.g., Mental Health First Aid); pen pal programs in which students from traditionally marginalized communities could write to other students for support; and peer-to-peer support groups for at-risk students, including first-generation college students, students who are caregivers, and gender nonconforming students. Although many colleges reported strongly encouraging students and faculty/staff to participate in training and education sessions, none reported mandatory participation.

Most colleges discussed early intervention programs simultaneously with universal efforts, suggesting that few colleges thought about the distinct but complementary role of prevention (i.e., creating a foundation for mental well-being for all students) versus early intervention efforts (i.e., reducing risk for more serious mental illness).

**Treatment services and support for crisis intervention.** All colleges reported offering both in-person and telehealth counseling services, noting that telehealth was a recent addition to accommodate stay-at-home orders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most colleges expressed challenges with meeting the rising demand for mental health services in recent years. Some colleges reported temporary increases in counseling staff capacity due to additional resources from grant funding. Others utilized graduate interns as a cost-effective strategy to provide more support to meet the growing needs of students while being mindful of grant funding (or lack thereof).

Generally, counselors' roles had shifted over time, with counselors juggling many different responsibilities, including providing one-on-one services for students, leading groups for at-risk students (e.g., veterans, LGBTQ+), facilitating specialized programming, participating in community outreach, and providing mental health training to faculty and staff. Finally, several colleges shared that their partnerships or connections with community-based mental health providers was a tool to connect students of color with counselors that better reflect their lived-experiences or to connect students with longer term needs with health care providers.

### ***Integrating Mental Health Supports Into Broader Academic Success Efforts***

The study identified five types of efforts colleges were using to ensure that mental health services were integrated into the broader academic environment: staff education and early alert processes, changing of academic environments, co-location of services, information-sharing sessions with institutions, and the establishment of cross-disciplinary task forces. Many interviewees highlighted staff education efforts as key to integrating mental health considerations into the broader academic environment. For instance, three colleges require faculty/staff to notify academic services when a student is experiencing mental distress. Some colleges shared that counseling services are intentionally co-located with other student services (e.g., campus food pantry) or have relationships with other student support services; this allows them to more seamlessly connect students in need of both basic needs and mental health support with available resources. Additionally, several campuses noted that they have developed a mental health task force, which draws on faculty and staff across a variety of departments to develop strategies to support student mental health. However, most colleges noted that they did not explicitly integrate supporting student mental health within broader academic success efforts.

### ***Barriers and Facilitators to Supporting Student Mental Health***

Barriers and facilitators to supporting student mental health varied among the colleges. The primary barriers discussed across most colleges included: (a) minimal financial support for counseling services and prevention and early-intervention programs, which made sustainability of programs and services challenging; (b) lack of buy-in and support from leadership, which made it more difficult for faculty and staff to see the value of supporting student mental health; and (c) challenges engaging students for prevention and early intervention programming due to a variety of issues, including disruptions to in-person attendance due to the pandemic, challenges promoting events to students, and nonresidential campuses.

Regarding facilitators to supporting student mental health, colleges commonly discussed two major factors. First, although some colleges mentioned concerns about confidentiality when sharing data, colleges that tracked data reported success using data as a communication tool to establish buy-in and support from leadership around prioritizing student mental health. Second, colleges with leadership that prioritized student mental health experienced several benefits, including greater buy-in among faculty/staff and financial support, such as earmarking dollars to institutionalize mental health counselor positions and investing in data-driven decision making.

## Interpretation of Findings

The findings highlight that many community colleges believe strongly in the importance of mental health as a pathway for academic success. The colleges that participated in the study engaged in a wide range of efforts to support student mental health, from student-centric programs (e.g., stress reduction seminars), faculty/staff resources (e.g., gatekeeper training and early alert systems), and institutional efforts (e.g., mental health tasks forces). Support from leadership, financial resources, and faculty/staff buy-in were fundamental in establishing a robust set of mental health supports.

Many of the colleges were attentive to the need to embed opportunities for information and access to mental health services throughout the college environment. This emphasis on integration should remain a core focus and highlights opportunities for community colleges to further integrate mental health supports into student-facing interventions, such as [ASAP at CUNY](#), that aim to provide holistic support to students.

Despite offering a range of mental health supports, the colleges studied often did not have an institutional vision for how mental health supports could be coordinated and delivered. Research suggests that having a framework that addresses mental health on a continuum from prevention through crisis management as well as addressing larger institutional factors that impact student mental health may be important in facilitating impact. Community colleges will continue to face substantial internal capacity constraints (e.g., too few staff, competing demands on time) that challenge the ability to develop these frameworks. Therefore, institutions may need external support (e.g., informational toolkits, technical assistance) to assist with developing a more cohesive and systemic approach to supporting student mental health.

Finally, although this study highlighted several promising approaches to support student mental health, the findings are not based on large-scale rigorous evaluations and highlight the need for continued investment in research to address major gaps in our understanding of student mental health supports in community colleges.

## \* Study Considerations

These findings must be considered within the context of the study's limitations. First, the study drew on a small convenience sample of community colleges identified by our collaborators, Active Minds and the JED Foundation, both national leaders in the space of college mental health, which potentially limited the generalizability to other colleges implementing multilevel approaches. Second, findings from this study were not triangulated with student-level data, limiting our ability to identify approaches that could be "promising" or "best practices" to positively impact student mental health and academic success more broadly. Finally, because the study focused solely on community colleges, the findings may not translate fully to 4-year institutions, which also struggle to adequately address the mental health crisis among their students. Despite these limitations, the study is the first to our knowledge to describe the ways in which community colleges are implementing multilevel and systemic approaches to support student mental health, how community colleges are integrating those efforts into broader student success initiatives, and the barriers and facilitators that community colleges face when addressing students' mental health needs.

## ▶ Resources

View the [project webpage](#) for more information.



## A Policy and Practice Scan of Strategies to Engage and Support Returning Students

### **i** About the Project

Increasingly, colleges have sought to recruit students who left without some credit but no degree—and in particular, students who are just a few credits shy of graduation—to return to campus as part of a larger strategy to increase degree completion rates. However, few studies have documented the types of strategies colleges use to recruit and support returning students, and even fewer test the effectiveness of such strategies. Members of the College Completion Network’s [Lead team](#), [Accelerated Pathways team](#), and [Completion Grants team](#) conducted a study to document the policies, practices, and programs colleges use to recruit and retain returning students. Through focus groups with administrators at fifty-nine 2-year and broad-access 4-year colleges across the United States, the study team learned about the range of policies, practices, and programs in place on college campuses and distilled five lessons for practitioners seeking to recruit and support returning students.

#### Project Team

This research team represents a partnership among AIR and the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice at Temple University.

- Vanessa Coca, Project Researcher, AIR
- Amy Feygin, Principal Researcher, AIR
- Trey Miller, Principal Researcher, AIR, and Associate Professor of Economics, University of Texas at Dallas
- Sara Goldrick-Rab, Founder, Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice

This project is supported by IES, U.S. Department of Education, through [Grant R305H170085](#) to AIR.

### **</>** Study Background

Over the past 20 years, an estimated 30 to 35 million Americans have left college with some academic credit but no postsecondary credential.<sup>28</sup> Such students are more likely to be students of color, have dependents, face unmet financial need, or experience other hardships that cause them to struggle in associate or bachelor’s degree programs.<sup>29</sup> In recent years, colleges have sought to support students to return and attain a degree, particularly those who are only a few credits from graduation. However, little is known about the types of strategies colleges use to support returning students, and few studies have tested the effectiveness of strategies.<sup>30</sup> Further, there is increasing consensus that the types of strategies needed to support returning students must address a broader set of needs, such as those related to food and housing, childcare, and mental health, among others.<sup>31</sup>

This study sought to better understand how colleges support returning students. The study team conducted focus groups with administrators at fifty-nine 2-year and broad-access 4-year colleges across the United States. The focus groups centered on strategies that colleges use to identify, recruit, and support students who left college without a degree (hereafter referred to as “returning students”). Based on information learned in the focus groups, the brief shares five lessons for practitioners interested in supporting returning students.

<sup>28</sup> Higher Ed Insight. (2014). *Adult college completion network: Building a learning network to support adult student success*. Higher Ed Insight.

<sup>29</sup> Johnson, I. Y. (2006). Analysis of stopout behavior at a public research university: The multi-spell discrete-time approach. *Research in Higher Education*, 47(8), 905–934; Schatzel, K., Callahan, T., Scott, C. J., & Davis, T. (2011). Reaching the non-traditional stopout population: A segmentation approach. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 21(1), 47–60.

<sup>30</sup> Fishman, R., Nguyen, S., & Ezeugo, E. (2018). *Varying degrees 2018: New America’s annual survey on higher education*. New America; Higher Ed Insight, 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Mayer, A., & Tromble, K. (2022). *Comprehensive approaches to student success: An evidence-based approach to increasing college completion*. MDRC; The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. (2021). *#RealCollege 2021: Basic needs insecurity during the ongoing pandemic*.



## Methodology

The study team conducted 60- to 90-minute virtual focus groups with administrators at 59 colleges, spanning three samples:

- **Nationally representative sample:** The study team identified a sample of 2-year and broad-access 4-year colleges using data from IPEDS. Administrators at 36 colleges agreed to participate.
- **Purposive sample of colleges implementing practices supportive of returning students:** The study team identified 15 colleges that use practices supportive of returning or adult students, such as offering workforce-oriented programs, credits for previous relevant work experience, flexible course-taking options, and re-enrollment scholarships. Of the 15 colleges identified, 12 agreed to participate.
- **Purposive sample of colleges implementing innovative and evidence-based strategies to support student success:** The study team identified 15 colleges that had a demonstrated track record of success with advising, including recent Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence finalists or winners and winners of the Leah Austin Mayer Achieving the Dream award. Of the 15 colleges identified, 11 agreed to participate.



Before conducting the focus groups, the team consulted prior literature to develop a discussion protocol. This protocol was intentionally broad and used open-ended questions to guide conversation. Two members of the study team conducted each virtual focus group with three to seven administrators from each college, among them college advisors, directors of student services, associate deans, and others who shape college advising. Each focus group was audio recorded and transcribed by Rev.com.

The study team developed a comprehensive codebook to support robust within- and cross-case analyses of the transcribed interview data using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program. Throughout the analytic process, the team engaged in regular communication to ensure consistent application of the coding structure, strategies, and rules for coding the data.



## Findings

The focus groups that the research team conducted with college administrators revealed five key lessons for recruiting and supporting returning students.

- **Lesson 1: Be intentional.** College administrators spoke about the many policies, practices, and programs at their colleges available to support all students and about the potential for these practices to support returning students. However, few administrators were able to connect these practices to an explicit strategy to recruit and retain returning students. College administrators should be intentional about how they support returning students. Administrators may want to consider developing explicit staffing strategies for supporting returning students; leveraging technology, including alert systems and education planning tools, to support returning students; using data to understand patterns in persistence and completion that may inform how they support returning students; and developing focused strategies for identifying students who may consider returning.
- **Lesson 2: Tailor academic experiences to returning students' needs.** College administrators spoke about the need to adapt and customize programs, practices, and policies to meet the needs of returning students, who are often older, working, and parenting. One way to do this is to tailor academic

experiences to the needs of returning students. For example, colleges might consider offering “mini-mesters” (8-week terms) to meet the concerns of students who want to come back but may not be able to commit to a 16-week term. Asynchronous, virtual, evening, and weekend course options also may be attractive to returning students who are unable to take classes during traditional hours due to their work schedules or childcare responsibilities. Colleges also are increasingly recognizing the value of students’ lived experiences and what they bring to the classroom and campus community by offering credits for work-based learning and military experience.

- **Lesson 3: Get to know returning students.** College administrators reported engaging in activities that helped them build authentic relationships with returning students. Through such relationships, administrators can continuously learn about students’ needs and, in that way, develop and refine outreach efforts and tailor resources and supports. For example, by anticipating and proactively addressing challenges, advisors are able to build trust and rapport with returning students.
- **Lesson 4: Provide financial and holistic supports.** College administrators know that returning students need access to an array of nonacademic supports. These supports center on addressing financial barriers not addressed by traditional financial aid packages and meeting students’ basic needs through holistic supports. Colleges might consider offering financial incentives designed specifically for returning students, such as re-enrollment scholarships and tuition and fee waivers. In addition, access to emergency aid can help students persist to earn a degree when unforeseen expenses arise. Colleges should also provide returning students with supports for meeting basic needs, such as food and housing, as well as childcare, transportation, and counseling. Finally, providing opportunities for returning students to connect with one another and other adult learners through peer networks and affinity groups can be a valuable resource for returning students.
- **Lesson 5: Foster opportunities for collaboration.** College administrators should communicate and coordinate with partners within and outside the college to identify and address the myriad of challenges returning students face. For example, administrators could consider collaborating with neighboring colleges or universities, local industry leaders, and local nonprofit organizations to recruit returning students and develop supports or resources for them. Some colleges reported working with local industry leaders to better understand training and credential needs and used the knowledge to develop innovative programs to meet those workforce needs and recruit currently employed students to complete their programs.

## Study Considerations

The five key lessons described in the previous section are drawn from in-depth focus group conversations with administrators at 2-year and broad-access 4-year colleges across the United States. College practitioners can consider these lessons when developing policies, practices, and programs to recruit and support returning students. Re-engaging the millions of Americans who have invested time and resources in advancing their education but who have not attained a degree is critical to the development of a more skilled workforce. Although the focus group conversations provide important information about current practices for recruiting and supporting returning students, more research is needed to understand which practices are most effective. In addition, future research should incorporate student voice to provide important insights into how students experience the policies, practices, and programs that are intended to support their success.

## Resources

View the [project webpage](#) for more information.

- Brief (2022): [Five Lessons to Consider When Supporting Returning Students](#)



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**Our mission:** The College Completion Network seeks to expand the evidence base on promising strategies for improving students' postsecondary success.

