



# Student Success Center Network Coaching Program:

## Facilitating Institutional Transformation

### AT A GLANCE

Coaches are trusted advisors, information conduits, sounding boards, and advocates who facilitate institutional change. This report summarizes findings from the first five years of the Student Success Center Network's Coaching Program, focusing particularly on the most recent phase that engaged directly with Centers in four states (California, Michigan, New York, and Oregon). The report includes case studies that spotlight the work in each state, overviewing the coaching model, unique design elements, theory of change, and impact of coaching on college transformation efforts in that state. The report also identifies overarching lessons learned and highlights opportunities for future work.

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## About Jobs for the Future

Jobs for the Future (JFF) drives transformation of the American workforce and education systems to achieve equitable economic advancement for all. [www.jff.org](http://www.jff.org)

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JFF is committed to using language that promotes equity and human dignity, rooted in the strengths of the people and communities we serve. We develop our content with the awareness that language can perpetuate privilege but also can educate, empower, and drive positive change to create a more equitable society. We will continually reevaluate our efforts as language usage continues to evolve.

## About Community College Research Initiatives

The Community College Research Initiatives (CCRI) group conducts research on equitable college access, progression and transfer, degree completion, and employment in living-wage careers for underserved students and diverse learner populations throughout the United States.

## About Ascendium Education Group

Ascendium Education Group is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization committed to helping people reach the education and career goals that matter to them. Ascendium invests in initiatives designed to increase the number of students from low-income backgrounds who complete postsecondary degrees, certificates and workforce training programs, with an emphasis on first-generation students, incarcerated adults, rural community members, students of color and veterans. Ascendium's work identifies, validates and expands best practices to promote large-scale change at the institutional, system and state levels, with the intention of elevating opportunity for all. For more information, visit <https://www.ascendiumphilanthropy.org>.

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## Introduction

Community colleges are implementing guided pathways and redesigning programs and services to create coherent educational paths to valued careers. These reforms create change throughout the multiple interacting college systems--across policies, practices, and people. To establish and scale these change efforts, there is a need for a sustained support mechanism to promote institutional learning, and provide local, contextual knowledge to remove systemic barriers. This complex undertaking of systemic reform can be challenging, and coaches serve as advocates and ambassadors for community colleges' efforts, contributing outside perspectives and support.

Coaches are trusted advisors who facilitate institutional change by serving as a sounding board, asking probing questions, sharing resources and knowledge, daylighting assumptions, pointing out progress, and providing guidance.<sup>1</sup> Coaches also function as critical information conduits between colleges and Student Success Centers (Centers), which are state-based organizations that deliver expert guidance to colleges on how to implement large-scale student success reforms, and collectively meet their state's completion goals. This allows for better understanding and decision-making at institutional and state system levels. The Jobs for the Future (JFF) [Student Success Center Network](#) Coaching Program (SSCN Coaching Program) began with the foundational belief that institutional coaching can be a driving force for state-level community college reform and strengthen system and institutional capacity to enact change—and improve student success outcomes.

The SSCN Coaching Program gathered data and built evidence of how coaches facilitate institutional change. By supporting guided pathways reforms, coaches increase the Centers' capacity to support student success. The coaches also increase the understanding of what is happening at colleges undertaking these reform efforts, allowing the Center to adapt and adjust to institutional needs. The information exchange between Centers and coaches allows them to use that knowledge to continuously improve their support for colleges.

Many external pressures impacted institutions and state systems, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, natural disasters, and institutional enrollment declines. The extra burdens placed on all practitioners by these events impacted coaches and the college teams doing the work of transformational institutional change. The coaches and coaching networks serve as a resource and a buffer to these external pressures. We heard from several coaches that their in-state network helped them through the worst times and provided ideas and support. We also heard from college team leads that coaches helped them re-start and advance their institutional change work that had been stalled because of these external factors. Coaching not only supports institutional change but also serves to moderate unplanned changes and support individuals through tumultuous times.

# JFF's SSCN Coaching Program

## Background

The SSCN Coaching Program was designed to support Student Success Centers in their use of institutional coaching to advance reform efforts in their states. A 2017 pilot program, funded by The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), provided small grants, technical support, assessment, and research to ten Centers, in a partnership between JFF and Community College Research Initiatives (CCRI). From these exploratory projects, the SSCN saw the potential for state-based institutional coaches to enhance Centers' efforts to impact institutional change and student success outcomes.

Building off the pilot, JFF launched Phase I of the SSCN Coaching Program, focusing on two tracks of investment in the development of coaching programs: capacity building for Centers and professional development for institutional coaches. JFF provided grants and technical support, in partnership with CCRI, to five Centers in [Texas](#), [Ohio](#), [North Carolina](#), [Michigan](#), and [New York](#) that were ready to build new or enhance their existing coaching programs. CCRI collaborated with Center leadership to identify needs specific to each coaching program and to document program features across the cohort. To support the Centers' desire to focus on improving equity in student outcomes, CCRI developed equity-minded coaching tools and materials.

A concurrent investment into the second professional development track launched the SSCN Guided Pathways Coaching Training Program. With [Achieving the Dream](#) (ATD) and the Pathways Collaborative, JFF provided coaching training via a year-long guided pathways certification program for approximately 50 coaches throughout the SSCN. With a commitment to sustainability and disseminating knowledge about institutional coaching throughout the SSCN, JFF and their partners created a [set of resources](#) for coaches and supported coaching work with a community of practice that allowed for sharing information, learnings, and concerns and a strategic advisor who provided input on coaching strategies, plans, and processes.

Phase II of the SSCN Coaching Program, launched in 2020 with the support of the Ascendium Education Group, provides resources to a new cohort of four coaching-ready Centers—[California](#), [Michigan](#), [New York](#), and [Oregon](#)—and continues to offer professional development opportunities for the full SSCN coach community. This phase's key focus is gathering data and building an evidence base for documenting how coaching supports sustained, long-term institutional transformation. Below we describe the goals and objectives for this phase of the

work and take an in-depth look into the design of Phase II and strategies to meet the intended outcomes.

Phase II grantees were selected based on the following four criteria:

- State-based coaches – Center has built infrastructure to support the identification, training, and deployment of current institutional or state agency-aligned staff to serve as coaches on behalf of the Center.
- Equity-minded coach focus – Center has coaches trained in equity-minded practices and provided with resources to raise awareness, discuss, and have conversations about structural inequity.
- Intentional coach training – Center has developed mechanisms to support ongoing engagement with national Pathways Collaborative coach training and supported state-based efforts to provide contextual learnings.
- Community of practice – Center has created in-state communities or mechanisms that allow coaches to continually learn from each other virtually or in person.

### *Design Elements*

The overarching goal of Phase II is to build capacity of the Center grantees to deploy trained institutional coaches to support transformational reform efforts on college campuses through seed grants, strategic technical assistance, and ongoing professional development for coaches provided by JFF and their partners CCRI and ATD. The four objectives to reach that goal include:

- Increase state capacity to support institutional transformation and bolster student success.
- Equip more individuals in-state with skills, knowledge, and opportunity to drive student success efforts on the ground.
- Cultivate cross-state and cross-region peer learning and idea exchange.
- Cultivate a culture of learning and continuous improvement in institutions.

State-based coaching serves as a mechanism for Centers to deepen engagement with colleges and accelerate institutional reform work, aimed at removing systemic barriers and improving equitable student outcomes. Two core design elements, documented in Phase I, provide targeted resources for Centers to broaden the reach of their coaching, and continuously offer professional development opportunities to facilitate institutional change.

## Overview of Grantee Centers' Coaching Models

### *Essential Elements of Student Success Center Coaching Programs*

Essential elements are central components of coaching program design that support actualizing coaching program goals. In this section, we share important state context information and the following design elements for each center: models and approaches; coaching structure and college engagement; and coach professional development.



### California

**State context:** Community college system, 116 colleges

**Models and approaches:** Project-based tailored coaching, mandatory.<sup>2</sup>

**Coaching structure & college engagement:** 18 full-time regional coordinators and three regional coordinator leads; the coach works on various projects with their assigned colleges.

**Coach professional development:** Coach community of practice, SSCN provided training, and other external coach trainers.



### Michigan

**State context:** Community college association, 28 colleges

**Models and approaches:** Short-term project-based, voluntary, access mentoring by contacting the Center or filling out an online request form.

**Coaching structure & college engagement:** 13 subject-matter expert mentors; peer-to-peer mentoring during Scale of Adoption Assessment (SOAA) calls and during convenings.

**Coach professional development:** Coach community of practice, SSCN provided training, and other external coach trainers.

## New York



**State context:** Comprehensive college system, 64 institutions including 30 community colleges

**Models and approaches:** Project-based and cohort-based guided pathways institutes, mandatory, coaches are assigned to colleges through a needs assessment or a particular expertise request.

**Coaching structure & college engagement:** 48 coaches trained or in training. Peer mentor coaches work on short-term projects and guided pathways institute coaches work with colleges throughout their institutes.

**Coach professional development:** Coach community of practice, SSCN provided training, and other external coach trainers.

## Oregon



**State context:** Community college association, 17 colleges

**Models and approaches:** Cohort-based guided pathways Institutes, colleges that volunteered to be part of the Oregon Pathways Project are required to have a coach, coaches and colleges are matched.

**Coaching structure & college engagement:** 3 coaches. The coaches are either current or former Oregon community college leaders with in-depth state context knowledge.

**Coach professional development:** Coach community of practice and SSCN provided training.

## Grantee Activities

Multiple activities expand the capacity of grantee Centers' coaching programs, including bi-monthly community of practice meetings for grantee Center leadership and lead coaches, convened by JFF and CCRI team members and often co-facilitated with Center leadership. Topics are timely and important to Centers, such as coordinating Center-led professional development with the broader SSCN offerings. Strategic advisors check in monthly and support the creation of the Center's theory of change and ideas for data collection and analysis on coaching impact.

Student Success Centers are small and nimble, positioned to adapt and respond to in-state conditions and context, policy environments, and regional economies. To honor this nimbleness, while attending to the ever-growing need to support complex and difficult work at institutions, Centers must have access to tools, resources, services, and—increasingly—to people who can facilitate change. In Phase II of the SSCN Coaching Program, JFF and grantee Centers



worked to strengthen the in-state and cross-state network of coaches who facilitate and support continuous improvement at colleges.

Coaching is a mechanism for transformational change and an active practice. Colleges can leverage the capacity and knowledge of coaches to make progress on institutional reform agendas to increase student success. Coaches are facilitators, data journeyers, capacity builders, advocates, connectors, & critical friends/partners. Ongoing professional development calibrates the competencies needed to do this and provides contextualized opportunities for learning and practical application of content.

Informed by a needs assessment survey, professional development topics include synchronous practice sessions as well as asynchronous learning opportunities in Canvas, in the following content areas:

- Five-week guided pathways online training
- Coaching for racial equity
- Keep, start, stop strategic planning
- Incorporating student voice
- Partnership health
- Labor market information alignment with guided pathways redesign
- Pathways to economic and social mobility using labor market information
- Trauma-informed campus and classrooms
- Stakeholder engagement
- Maintaining momentum through transitions in institutional leadership

The ongoing, coach-led investment in quality professional development is an important component of quality engagements between coaches and institutional partners around student success.

## What We Learned – Case Studies

### Success Center for California Community Colleges

The [Success Center for California Community Colleges](#) was founded in 2014 to provide the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office with professional learning, policy development, and strategic project support in large-scale, systemwide student success reforms. The statewide vision for change is the [Vision for Success](#), aimed to improve student completion, transfer, efficiency, and employment outcomes, as well as close equity gaps and regional

attainment gaps. Four commitments are intended to achieve this statewide success vision, and the Center’s coaching program aligns with the second commitment: “Design and decide with the student in mind.”

To meet this commitment, the Success Center for California Community Colleges employs 18 Guided Pathways Regional Coordinators (GPRCs) assigned to serve a specific number of colleges within a defined [geographic region](#). The system trains GPRCs to provide tailored coaching while centering equity, racial justice, and equitable student engagement. All 116 community colleges throughout the state have an assigned GPRC, and each GPRC is a year-round, full-time, benefitted employee of the Foundation for California Community Colleges. In the past five years, GPRCs have fostered regional collaboration, liaised between colleges, districts, and the Chancellor’s Office, and have developed and shared resources, tools, and promising practices.

While it varies from college to college, the GPRCs:

- Build relationships to be seen as a trusted advisor to college leadership
- Facilitate internal conversations with college guided pathways work groups, college leadership, or another specified college working group or initiative
- Learn about, receive, and deploy training on proven practices on campuses
- Learn about existing systems-level supports and how to leverage untapped capacity
- Inform and help align on-campus work with systems-level supports to eliminate duplication of efforts and to increase efficiency
- Set up virtual meetings, create rapid webinars, and facilitate communities of practice
- Coach Student Engagement Innovation Grant college partners in program design and implementation

### ***Unique Design Elements***

In this phase of the SSCN Coaching Program, the Success Center for California Community Colleges is focused on examining the role of GPRCs in supporting the design and implementation of the system’s [Student Engagement Innovation Grants](#). These grants are designed to help colleges experiment with and pilot innovations that amplify students’ voices equitably, particularly in the design and implementation of guided pathways efforts. Two grantees, Lassen College and Mendocino College, were highlighted in a [statewide webinar](#) for their work in equitable student engagement that evolved into a partnership between the two colleges. Both colleges credited the work of their GPRC for not only assisting them with their individual projects, but also in forging and maintaining their partnership. As a result, other

colleges not part of the Student Engagement Innovation Grants reached out to their GPRCs to learn about centering student voice and participation in decision-making processes.

GPRCs also work with Foundation colleagues from the Equity Unit, spending significant time co-designing the Student Equity Innovation Grant program, as well as a college communications process, a process for convening, and a process for ensuring that the program outcomes align with the statewide commitment to student-centered, equitable design. The relationship GPRCs have with college personnel, their understanding of current college demands, and their knowledge of college practices and policies have helped to inform the Equity Unit on the best ways to develop this program to ensure design and programmatic success.

Despite the continued stress of trying to work safely in a pandemic, wildfire evacuations, and a revolving door of college leadership transitions, GPRCs are the anchor for many colleges.

### Theory of Change

In this phase of coaching work, the goals are for GPRCs to:

- Support cross-functional college teams that engage students equitably, at scale, and sustainably.
- Ensure students are active input providers into guided pathways redesign on their campuses.
- Ensure guided pathways teams use ongoing input to guide the design, deployment, and continuous improvement of guided pathways decisions.

### California Student Success Center Regional Coordinator Program Theory of Change



Short-term, programmatic outcomes include at scale and equitable engagement of students that informs and drives decision-making and action and fosters continuous improvement in guided pathways efforts. Longer-term, state-level outcomes include implementing guided pathways at scale with a core focus on equity, and GPRCs, the Foundation, and the Chancellor's Office units work in tandem, championing one another's strengths and relying on one another's expertise to assist colleges with equitable student engagement using human-centered design.

### ***Understanding Coaching Impact***

In a September 2021 focus group with GPRCs, they shared that while a news article may highlight increased enrollment trends, it misses the fact that a year of partnership between the GPRCs and colleges is behind that work. They shared that “the stories are what demonstrate the value of work,” making it hard to quantify the conscious shift in institutional process and practice. In terms of culture shift, GPRCs mentioned a change from “knocking on the door to being invited in,” where they shifted to serve as trusted partners and valued advisors for agenda-setting and institutional decision-making regarding leading indicators of success and ways to improve the student experience. They also elevated a need to continue building capacity around data at the college level to align internal and external priorities better. While institutions do ask probing questions when reviewing their SOAA data and institutional, state, and regional data dashboards, GPRCs mentioned that some small colleges do not have their own research departments, and state dashboards do not always accurately reflect the realities rural schools face. It can be difficult to see the unique equity gaps relative to student and regional populations when small population sizes result in lagging masked data. Per their theory of change, GPRCs use a strategy matrix to guide and direct their work and measure the impact of the work of the GPRCs. For example, the matrix includes categories on implementing equity-center, student-focused design; building relationships and capacity; and communicating and providing resources. Each of these elements is examined at three levels: direct support to the institution and its stakeholders, the community college system, and external local, regional, or national partnerships.

## Michigan Center for Student Success

The [Michigan Center for Student Success \(MCSS\)](#), housed within the Michigan Community College Association, provides support to Michigan's 28 community colleges by serving as a hub connecting leadership, administrators, faculty, and staff in their emerging and ongoing efforts to improve student outcomes, emphasizing linkages between practice, research, and policy. Since its inception in 2011, the MCSS has led over 20 initiatives with colleges across Michigan. The Center uses several strategies to achieve its vision— collaboration, research, coherence, equity, and policy. To broaden support for improving student outcomes, MCSS designed a voluntary coaching model to operate in Michigan's decentralized higher education environment.

Guided pathways, the overarching framework used for Michigan's comprehensive transformational change efforts in higher education, began in 2014. Colleges worked to implement these holistic reforms in cohorts over the next six years through two consecutive series of guided pathways institutes. During the latter part of these institutes, an opportunity to develop a coaching program emerged to offer another way to support and reinvigorate momentum towards achieving these long-term college reform efforts. The MCSS's Mentoring Program was piloted in 2018 during Phase I of the SSCN Coaching Program with the goals of supporting guided pathways implementation, scaling, sustaining, and supporting the professional development of mentors (MCSS's term for coaches) through testing a low-cost, virtual, voluntary, and replicable approach of providing coaching support to colleges in an autonomous higher education environment. In this phase, MCSS invested in foundational infrastructure for the virtual program design by creating a website for college resources and tools, and a Canvas site to serve as a communication and training hub for the mentors. The MCSS Mentoring Program pilot leveraged their continued work in guided pathways to create a peer-to-peer learning network that supports colleges' ongoing implementation.<sup>3</sup>

MCSS re-launched the mentoring program in 2020 with a new name, the [MCSS Mentoring Network](#), representing their effort to build a network of committed, equity-minded practitioners. Key learnings from the pilot were applied to this phase of their program. MCSS began [guided pathways institutes](#) earlier than many SSCs and found during their coaching pilot that adding a mentoring component after the institutes were nearly complete made it challenging to get traction. Despite efforts in case-making for colleges to use coaches, they also found there was not as much college engagement, and this led to strategizing ways in Phase II to create greater uptake in this area to reach the program's goals. Currently, the program's goal is to improve targeted guided pathways practice areas in student financial stability, holistic support, and developmental education reform. MCSS is also focused on developing digital leadership as a tool for increasing cross-college engagement across MCSS initiatives.

The Center strives to meet colleges where they are and to embed supports within existing practices. The SOAA for guided pathways implementation is one of these practices. It was adapted for use with multiple guided pathways practice areas and administered every 18 months as a data collection method and a way for colleges to measure their progress. Mentors, along with MCSS staff, participate in the validation and follow-up calls with participating colleges. Another strategy to raise awareness about mentoring and create more interactions between mentors and the colleges was to embed mentoring into new initiatives from their inception. Jenny Schanker, Director of Research and Institutional Practice at MCSS, highlights, “the most powerful aspect of our approach is our ability to pivot mentor support to emerging needs at our colleges. As we recruit additional mentors to our network, the range and depth of services we can offer continue to expand. Because our mentors are volunteers, it is also easy to expand or contract the number of mentors as needed. This will be important as we look to sustain this work as a permanent component of the Michigan Center for Student Success.”

Mentors are selected with specific subject matter expertise, and in concert with JFF and the SSCN, MCSS provides training and resources to support their development as an integral part of transformational change in Michigan’s community colleges. The Center recruited 13 peer mentor coaches based on their expertise in the initiatives tied to priority guided pathways practice areas. These are student financial stability and holistic support ([MI-BEST](#)) and developmental education reform ([MIStart2Finish](#)/MCSS Reconnect Academy). Mentors participate in ongoing professional development opportunities on topics including coaching practices, change management, being equity champions, and digital leadership provided by the SSCN Coaching Program and other partner organizations, such as Community College Research Initiatives (CCRI), Community College Research Center (CCRC), the National Center for Inquiry and Improvement (NCII), SOVA, and Josie Ahlquist, a social media strategist who teaches digital leadership for higher education.

In their role, mentors

- Serve as change agents with their own institutions
- Provide insight and expertise in engaging external colleges in short-term mentoring focused on project-specific programming
- Partner with Center leadership on the SOAA validation calls to offer their unique practitioner perspective that colleges highly value
- Offer follow-up touch points on identified goals after the SOAA validation calls, schedule, conduct, and document those engagements
- Serve as facilitators and resources for colleges during the Reconnect Academy
- Raise the visibility of the MCSS Mentoring Network as facilitators, panelists, discussion leaders, and resources for participants at various convenings, and through MCSS’s

digital leadership engagement platforms, such as Tweet chats, and facilitating LinkedIn discussions

- Bring outside experience and knowledge of best practices from other colleges and help contextualize those practices to a specific college

### *Unique Design Elements*

With a continued focus on increasing college engagement with mentors to support program goals, the Center strategized new ways to catalyze change. The objective is to build relationships between mentors and colleges by raising the visibility of their mentors through multiple modes of interactions in Center activities across all initiatives. The intention is that through cultivating these mentoring interactions, college engagement with mentors will increase over time.

One of the primary ways mentors interact with colleges is through social media engagement. While the Center's model is predominantly virtual, the onset of the pandemic shifted all institutes into the virtual realm as well and, in this way, merged delivery methods for institute engagement with their emerging digital media leadership presence to foster cross-college engagement. With mentors centrally involved, they developed and launched an ongoing social media campaign called [#LevelUp with #MCSSEquity on Twitter](#) and began a [guest blog campaign on LinkedIn](#).

Another way mentors expand the Center's capacity to support colleges is through partnering with Center leadership to conduct SOAA validation and follow-up calls; this also serves as a way for colleges to get to know mentors. The MCSS adopted a framework created by the National Center for Inquiry and Improvement (NCII) to focus on practices related to financial stability in the SOAA for MI-BEST, and they adapted the original SOAA with input from the Community College Research Center (CCRC) for use with another initiative focused in a guided pathways practice area, MISTart2Finish. The Center utilizes the SOAAs across initiatives as a self-assessment instrument for colleges to use in goal setting, measuring progress, and for the Center to gauge the impact of mentoring.

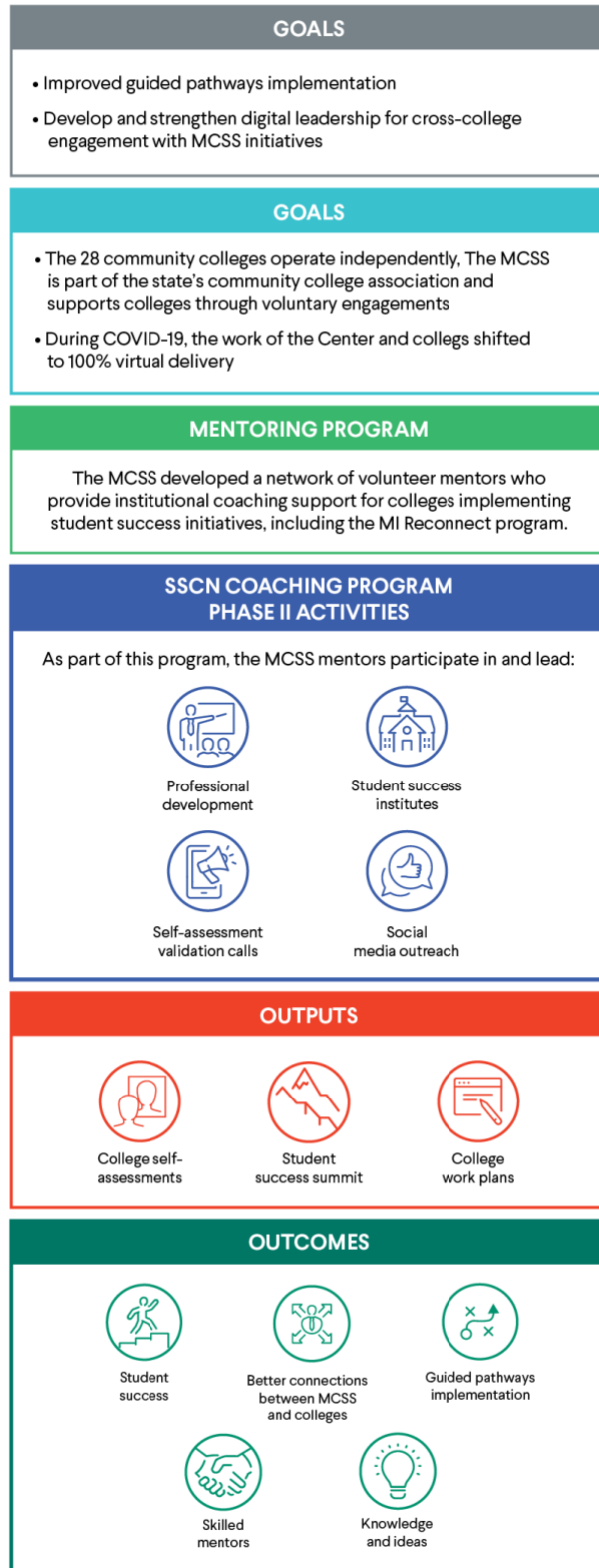
### Theory of Change

The goals for MCSS’s coaching program are to improve the targeted practice areas of guided pathways of student financial stability and holistic support ([MI-BEST](#)) and developmental education reform ([MIStart2Finish](#)/ MCSS Reconnect Academy), and to develop/strengthen digital leadership as a tool for increasing cross-college engagement across MCSS initiatives. Each of these program goals contains a social media engagement aspect.

Notable changes have occurred from the original theory of change. For example, work moved from transfer pathways mentoring to building digital leadership engagement with MCSS mentors across initiatives. This shifted in response to lowering enrollment, capacity constraints at colleges—and among mentors—and moving all engagement to virtual platforms for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. Another change arose with developmental education reform when state legislation was passed for statewide free tuition via the Michigan Reconnect Scholarship. It stipulated that colleges provide accelerated remediation by January 2022 and potentially adopt statewide placement recommendations released in June 2021. From this, the MCSS Reconnect Academy was formed to support colleges in this transition and a role for mentors again was woven into its design to serve as facilitators and resources.

Shorter-term to mid-term programmatic outcomes include mentor skill development

### Michigan Student Success Center Mentoring Program Theory of Change





as equity-minded change agents, engaging in digital media activities across initiatives to increase their visibility with colleges that will lead to more requests for mentoring from colleges, and serving as capacity builders for the Center. Longer-term, state-level outcomes include: identifying student economic stability needs; developing and strengthening partnerships to provide student support; scaling implementation of developmental education reforms, and engaging faculty and staff in aligning transfer pathways, including curriculum design and improved business processes.

### **Understanding Coaching Impact**

The Center tracks college engagement through a data tracking spreadsheet and collects data primarily in two ways: 1) statistics from tracking the impact of their digital engagement; and 2) administering the SOAA in 18-month cycles with the three initiatives in this grant. Additionally, the SSCN Coaching Program gathered qualitative data from mentor focus groups, Center leadership and college leadership interviews.

**Digital engagement.** The Center's organizational shift to virtual strategies drew digital engagement to the foreground and activities, outputs, and outcomes were added to the theory of change to support this growing part of their plan to connect mentors with colleges through the virtual environment with the intent that college engagement with mentoring will increase. From Twitter chats in 2020, to the rollout of their LinkedIn presence, mentors have actively engaged in contributing content as a means to extend and grow engagement with the MCSS Mentoring Network. Their #LevelUp with #MCSSEquity campaign began in late 2021 and continues to progress towards increased visibility for mentors through digital media leadership opportunities. MCSS hired a communications firm to track their campaign and from January to end of March 2022, all aspects of their social media footprint showed significant growth. Their digital media strategy of using mentors as a way to increase the Center's connection to colleges is proving to be an effective way to engage with colleges and over time these interactions may lead to increased mentoring requests from colleges.

**SOAA validation calls.** As part of visibility raising for mentors, they were invited in fall 2020 to participate in the SOAA validation and follow-up calls with participating colleges. Mentors co-facilitated these calls with MCSS leadership and offered valuable insights as practitioners as well as asked thoughtful probing questions that helped colleges think about priority areas and next steps. Mentors asked the college team if they could follow up to check in on how things were going and then did so. They took notes on these calls and entered them into the Center's data tracker spreadsheet. The observation was made that mentors with their practitioner perspectives strengthened the calls significantly and they will continue to partner in this way to add value to a college's progress assessing experience. The SOAA process involves mentors providing examples of what other colleges are doing, which helps institutional leads understand

what works and what they might want to try next. It also allows people from across the institution to come together and express their points of view. The SOAA data will continue to be used to prompt change conversations and measure progress.

The Michigan college leadership interview data also shows how mentoring helps colleges have conversations on campus, provides a different, more student-focused perspective, and that going over the SOAA—whether with the MI-BEST, MIStart2Finish, or Michigan Guided Pathways version—helps move the institutions out of their silos, since the assessment crosses departments. One college lead felt interactions with the mentor spurred thinking, created good dialogue among the college team, and catalyzed change. Engaging with mentors helps bring more people on board with the initiative and connects the dots between the different strands of work being done. It “takes a village of people in and outside of your institution to get over some of that resistance to change. [Through the] mentoring process and guidance from MCSS we saw thinking and minds change.”

## **New York State Student Success Center**

The [New York State Student Success Center](#) is focused on increasing the completion and success of postsecondary students. The Center was created in 2016 and it “serves as a critical intermediary to provide leadership for the coordination and identification of the best strategies for scale-up, the fusing of resources to maximize impact, and the implementation of evidence-based national strategies to help more students graduate.”<sup>4</sup>

The Center Director, Jennifer Miller, believes that coaches are important and necessary resources to facilitate institutional change initiatives that impact student outcomes. The Center has used funding from Phase I and II of the JFF SSCN Coaching Program to train three cohorts of guided pathways and peer mentor coaches through their [Coaching Academy](#). Guided pathways coaches engage with college teams before, during, and after institutes or workshops. They have two experienced lead coaches that serve as resources for the new guided pathways coaches and the participating colleges. Peer mentor coaches work on other, usually more short-term, institutional change initiatives during regularly scheduled meetings with college teams.

The overarching goal of the Center’s coaching work is to build a state-based coach certification model to create change agents for student success and make the case for additional colleges to use coaches to support their institution-wide student success reforms. The Center selects, instructs, assigns, and coordinates coaches on multiple change initiatives. Coaches are assigned to institutions via needs assessment or by an institution’s request for expertise. The Center is training and deploying coaches to build institutional leaders with the knowledge and skills to

support large-scale student success efforts throughout the state, as a strategic way to enhance impact.

The Center developed a Coaching Academy in 2019, which is a robust professional development and training curriculum designed for college leaders interested in serving as coaches who support campuses across the state with their student success reform efforts. To date, the Center trained 45 coaches over three cohorts. Coaches across all three cohorts continue to learn from each other during community of practice meetings. Of those coaches trained, coaches are supporting the 28 colleges currently engaged in guided pathways institutes or projects. Coaches also supported the five colleges participating in JFF's Student Success Center Network Demonstration Project (NDP) working on specific guided pathways goals. Coaches also supported colleges participating in the Strong Start to Finish project focused on multiple measures placement.

The length of time or how the coach interacts with the colleges varies by the initiative, but all coaches:

- Create personal connections with the college team to become a trusted advisor
- Use questions to help institutions see new perspectives and systems understanding
- Model collaborative problem-solving and decision-making
- Provide resources needed to facilitate change, such as, ideas, examples, or models of how to move to the next step
- Assess and enhance the institutional capacity to discuss, design and implement equity-based strategies and systems
- Support the development of organizational capacity to design, deliver and evaluate large-scale redesign and continuous improvement
- Question, challenge, encourage and inspire teams to create conditions, policies, and practices that enable students to succeed
- Model, guide and encourage college teams to create the conditions for institutional change

### *Unique Design Elements*

Similar to Oregon and Michigan, all coaches are volunteers who have other staff or faculty positions within their institutions. However, the pathways and project-based coaches are paid an honorarium for their work. Unique to New York, coaches apply to the Coaching Academy, and those chosen to participate in a six-month professional learning engagement created by the NYSSC and its leadership team. Participants earn a certificate and a Credly badge upon completion. The Coaching Academy learning objectives are that graduates will:

- Gain an understanding of organizational coaching and how it can be used to support student success
- Learn effective coaching skills to support student success projects including facilitation, project, and conflict management
- Identify and apply the essential coaching skills needed to manage individual and/or team sessions
- Demonstrate specific coaching skills and ability to apply them to help individuals and teams move a student success project forward
- Develop a thoughtful and intentional approach for how you will engage with your specific student success project
- Demonstrate how to assess the coaching process and reflect on effective coaching strategies used to support progress toward goals
- Learn skills and knowledge to be an equity-minded coach and advocate for equitable student outcomes

To incentivize institutions to allow their staff and faculty to attend the Academy, those institutions are given priority access to coaches. The Center has added equity training for coaches who complete the Academy. The training involves sessions on equity-minded coaching by CCRI. To sustain ongoing access to the coaching professional development and certification, the Center is discussing adding the Coaching Academy to the New York digital professional development system.

## Theory of Change

The goals of the Center’s coach training include developing confident, skilled thought leaders who serve as peer mentors and pathways coaches; building substantive student success reform capacity, innovation, and leadership across the state; implementing evidence-based strategies to support student success reforms at scale for all students; identifying structural and cultural practices and policies that positively impact campus-based student success; and supporting closing equity gaps. The Center’s short-term programmatic outcomes include engaging more colleges in student success initiatives, documenting how coaching supports guided pathway colleges, documenting changes at colleges who used peer coaches, and creating a coach network.

Longer term goals include gathering evidence of coaching impact on institutional change, increasing the number of colleges engaging coaches, and the Coaching Academy graduates will have the skills and knowledge to facilitate institutional change. As this phase of the SSCN Coaching Program developed, the Center evolved their theory of change to include the addition of engaging with coaching as a requirement for colleges to participate in new reform initiatives (SSCN Network Demonstration Project, Strong Start to Finish).

## Understanding Coaching Impact

To understand the impact of coaching, data are collected in surveys to coaches and college team facilitators, who serve as the college lead for the student success initiative and the point of connection for the coach. Also, data are collected during progress meetings with coach leads and at the coach community of practice meetings.

### New York Student Success Center Coaching Program Theory of Change



Guided pathway institute team facilitators and coaches were both surveyed about their work together. Team facilitators said coaches helped them meet their goals by providing suggestions and resources, being a sounding board, helping facilitate buy-in and team building, leading discussions, sharing examples of other institutions' work, and asking questions to help set goals. One facilitator noted that having scheduled meetings allowed them to dedicate time toward working on project goals. Another facilitator saw their coach as providing needed resources and perspective. As an institution they had stalled due to the pandemic and leadership change; the coach provided support to renew momentum and allowed the college to see themselves as part of a larger movement. “Having a coach as a point person, a representation that we are not going through this work alone, we can seek reassurance about the challenges we face, we can request resources, and know we are making progress.” The coach was seen as instrumental in helping the college regain momentum by providing connections to people to present at a convening to help reinvigorate the institutional change work.

## Oregon Student Success Center

The [Oregon Student Success Center](#) (OSSC) launched in 2016 to serve as a hub for community college transformation. The Center curates research, promising practices, and emerging trends; supports community colleges in synthesizing, analyzing, and using data; and creates space for professional learning to support the implementation of Oregon’s vision for student success. Ultimately, the Center’s goal is to support colleges in redesigning their policies and practices to better support improved student outcomes and close equity gaps.

In 2018, the Center launched the Oregon Guided Pathways Project, a cohort-based model designed to support institution-wide teams in designing and implementing clear and structured pathways for their students. Each cohort participates in a series of four institutes over a two-year period. Cohort A launched in 2018 with five colleges, Cohort B launched in 2019 with four colleges, and Cohort C launched in 2020 with six colleges.

OSSC’s coaching model assigns coaches to work with those colleges that are part of the Oregon Pathways Project. The OSSC cultivated a team of coaches with deep understanding of Oregon’s postsecondary context. Each coach has formerly worked or is currently working in an Oregon community college in a leadership position at the dean level or above. According to coaches, deep knowledge of the state’s landscape is key: “In Oregon, nothing is centralized. There is no [governing] body and few similarities across institutions.” Without common data systems and a governing body, coaching provides an individualized, tailored experience for each institution.

Coaches are also required to complete the Student Success Center Network Guided Pathways Coaching training program, which is offered in partnership with JFF and Achieving the Dream.

Each coach serves 2-3 colleges and is supported with modest stipends for the duration of their service. Coaches support college teams during a four-institute series and outside of the institutes through site visits and monthly coaching calls. The OSSC convenes all coaches monthly to create space for coach peer learning, sharing, and strategizing.

### *Unique Design Elements*

One of the unique elements of Oregon's coaching program is the implementation of a cohort and institute-based model, where colleges in each cohort attend four institutes over two years. Institutes offer college teams, coaches, and OSCC staff the opportunity to engage with each other, share ideas and experiences, foster helpful relationships, and the ability to update action plans. Colleges have overwhelmingly supported these institutes being virtual throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, which has allowed for increased access to college teams given the wide spread of Oregon's community colleges throughout the state. Beyond access to college teams, having these institutes be virtually led to a change in structure of the institutes, where the first day is now open to all individuals interested in guided pathways and coaching within the colleges' campuses.

Another unique design element is utilizing a "lead coach" to assist the OSSC Executive Director in facilitation of all coaches, as a coach recruitment and retention strategy. Nan Poppe, retired campus president at Portland Community College, served as the sole coach for Cohort A colleges and then moved into a leadership role for Cohort B before fully retiring. Nan facilitated coach meetings, working with coaches across two cohorts to guide their work and create space for learning across coaches. Nan facilitated monthly group calls while also working closely with the SSC.

For the current phase of the SSCN Coaching Program, the OSSC focused on coaching in the six Cohort C colleges, the newest and final cohort of Oregon's Guided Pathways Project. Cohort C launched in the summer of 2020 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, forcing coaches to adapt all of their engagements to virtual formats and making it difficult to establish relationships at the speed and depth they were used to. Despite these challenges, colleges continue to engage with OSCC's coaching program, indicating that there is still a strong interest in implementing institutional change. OSCC staff and coaches continue to provide technical assistance, resources, network connections, and guidance to increase equitable student completion and transfer rates across Oregon's community colleges.

Another unique element of OSCC's coaching program is a recent and increased focus on Trauma Informed Care. OSCC's executive director, Elizabeth Cox Brand, became trauma-informed certified and has begun to offer introductory sessions on Trauma Informed Care to colleges statewide, while simultaneously gauging interest in a full certification course among these

colleges. The focus on Trauma-Informed Care stems from increased traumatic and stressful experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and aims to validate and heal these experiences. Coaches will also be receiving introductory sessions and the opportunity to become fully certified in Trauma Informed Care.

### Theory of Change

The OSCC's coaching program theory of change has maintained a goal of increasing equitable student outcomes across the state of Oregon, primarily by building coaching capacity to support guided pathways implementation through the institute model and beyond via technical assistance. Short-term outcomes include coaches establishing working relationships with their assigned institutions; Cohort C's completion of their institute series; coaches documenting policy and programmatic changes across institutions; and colleges documenting changes in cross-campus engagement in their pathways work.

Additionally, long-term goals include improvements in the use of Early Momentum Metrics (EMMs) disaggregated data; scaling the use of the guided pathways framework in the state; and increases in equitable student outcomes statewide in program completion and transfer to a university. As of Summer 2021, an increased focus has been placed on prioritizing colleges' ability to collect and analyze student data, utilize data and analytical tools provided by CCRI and JFF, and ultimately begin mapping programs directly to labor market outcomes.

## Oregon Student Success Center Coaching Program Theory of Change





## **Understanding Coaching Impact**

Oregon's primary methods of collecting data on the coaching program are through college action plans, an engagement tracker sheet, EMMs, and SOAA.

**Action Plans and Engagement Tracking.** The college action plan aids institutions in identifying and implementing key priorities for designing and implementing guided pathways practices at scale. Colleges update the action planning template twice per year, often with the support of their coach. Additionally, this document is used to track any changes in college policy, especially those changes which may have a delayed impact on data. The engagement tracker spreadsheet is filled out by coaches any time they have a meeting or conversation with a college via phone call, virtual meeting, in-person visit, etc. This document is referenced during monthly meetings among coaches and OSCC staff to share information and lessons learned. The combination of college action plans and the coach engagement tracker has allowed coaches and OSCC staff to track any engagement, policy, and organizational changes on college campuses.

**Early Momentum Metrics.** EMMs are completed by colleges annually in the month of December. Analysis of these metrics is then shared with the presidents' council and is later discussed between the OSCC executive director and each college's president. More recently, OSCC has contracted with ASA Research to analyze EMMs and develop a written report. These reports are now shared with the Oregon Community College Association Board in their winter meeting and the college presidents' annual May meeting.

**Scale of Adoption Assessment.** The SOAA is completed biennially and is increasingly used by OSCC to determine common themes across institutions and high-priority topics for coaching support and institutional, professional development. The Center hired a doctoral student intern for the winter 2022 term who compiled previous SOAA results, wrote a briefing, and surveyed team leads to gather evidence of pathways adoption at college campuses. The analysis focused on the impact of guided pathways implementation on the student experience.

Apart from these data collection methods, OSCC aims to inspire colleges to see the value in collecting and properly analyzing data. OSCC does not want colleges to view data analysis as a checklist to see what colleges are missing, but instead wants colleges to approach data more openly to better understand certain aspects of coaching that may impact student outcomes and student experiences. One focus group interviewee noted that Oregon "has a lot of data but not a lot of information. Colleges lack the capacity to meaningfully utilize data for decision making." One goal is to train coaches to play a role in supporting institutions in examining data in deeper and more meaningful ways and for colleges to eventually make changes using the data.

## Findings to Facilitate Change

Passthrough grant funds, a strategic advisor, a community of practice, and professional development opportunities strengthened a cadre of state-based coaches to serve as change agents for institutional reform efforts. These coaches enhance the Center's influence on reforms in their states. The following sections describe our findings on how this work enhances centers' and coaches' capacity to facilitate change.

### Enhancing Center Capacity to Facilitate Institutional Change

Using institutional coaches increases the Centers' capacity to impact college transformation. By coordinating and training coaches familiar with broader state context and reform efforts, Centers cultivate change agents who extend their capacity to facilitate institutional reform. Even though Centers have very different contexts and models for supporting colleges with coaching, college leaders who engaged with coaches and the coaches themselves identified common ways that coaching supports state change initiatives.

Coaches provide important external perspectives to the colleges they coach while at the same time bringing the essential knowledge, experience, and understanding about their respective state's reform initiative environment. Coaches serve as resource hubs, provide strategies and information, facilitate meetings, and create connections across institutions. Coaches also help connect colleges to individuals at other institutions who provide examples of best practices or who have overcome similar barriers. They are trusted colleagues who provide colleges with customized supports to facilitate organizational change. They also serve as thought partners, someone to vent to and share ideas with, and someone who can provide feedback and critique to improve plans. Because transformational change work is large-scale and impacts all aspects of a community college, the practitioners immersed in that change process often do not know if what they are doing is what they should be doing. Coaches provide valuable insights and perspectives about their work by sharing what other state institutions are doing, allowing for comparison and perspective.

Center leadership utilized what they learned in their grantee community of practice to enhance their own coaching programs. Even though the state context varied dramatically—by geographic size, number of institutions, association or centralized systems, and methods of work on guided pathways—they share a common goal of facilitating change with the guided pathways framework across those varied realities. This allowed for knowledge sharing within the community of practice and throughout the SSCN. For example, Michigan's lead shared that she

copied the idea of embedding mentors into new initiatives from New York. The peer sessions typically leave her with “something to think about.”

Over both phases of the SSCN Coaching Program, it has been noted that it is easier for systems versus associations to create and scale coaching infrastructure to support change. An association’s “opt-in” model means colleges must understand the value of coaching and how it can assist them in reaching their goals more efficiently before engaging with coaches. The two association state Centers, Michigan and Oregon, have found many inventive ways to utilize their coaches, finding that once institutions have interacted with coaches, they are more likely to use coaches for change initiatives in the future. For both Centers, coaches must understand the state culture and structure around change initiatives to support institutions effectively.

For system states where coaches are assigned to colleges, their work starts with relationship building and getting institutions to see them as trusted colleagues and resources rather than compliance officers. The system’s structure allows for the creation of a more permanent coaching program infrastructure. For instance, California has the only full-time, paid coaches in the SSCN. It also has a tiered model with lead regional coordinators to support teams of regional coordinators. SUNY, another state system, also has lead guided pathways coaches that serve as mentors and resources to new guided pathways coaches and on the coaching academy leadership team. New York’s Coaching Academy is a large infrastructure investment that provides significantly more formal training to their coaches with six months of synchronous and asynchronous instruction and peer learning time. The Center’s role in coordinating the nearly 50 trained coaches is also an important part of the infrastructure.

## **Enhancing Coaches’ Knowledge and Skills**

Professional development provided by the SSCN Coaching Program and opportunities for peer learning are seen by the Center leadership and coaches as integral to coach development. Coaches across grantee states describe how they learn much from each other and benefit from being in learning spaces together to exchange information and ideas about what their colleges are experiencing at the state level. The SSCN coach training events allow those coaches to overlap, share, learn from one another, and expand their network.

To develop equity skills and knowledge for coaches, a five-part course on coaching for equity was led and facilitated by CCRI. Several Center leads also procured additional coach equity training for their coaches. Michigan and New York engaged CCRI to provide equity-minded coaching sessions. The training provided resources and time for coaches to learn and practice and build skills to support equity in change initiatives. California’s Regional Coordinators

participated in a National Equity Project professional development to enhance their equity work. Many of these extra equity trainings were financed by the Centers' grants.

Continued professional development for coaches is a constant need. External forces are dynamic and impact community colleges, and reform initiatives continue to evolve and change. The professional development opportunities for coaches in Phase II were designed to support coaches whose colleges felt the impact of several external pressures. These include changes driven by a pandemic, a national racial reckoning, enrollment challenges, natural disasters, and the fatigue felt by coaches and practitioners created by the confluence of these realities. The constantly changing nature of these and other external factors will mean coaches need to learn new knowledge and skill sets, emphasizing the need for continued professional development.

## Conclusion and Future Work

Because of the dynamic nature of their work, coaches will always need continued professional development. Their skills and knowledge will need to adapt to an institution's new challenges and state-level policy, demographic, and economic changes. Teachers engage in continuous education throughout their professional careers to impact student outcomes. Coaches use similar skills as teachers, such as inquiry, active listening, facilitation, and systems-level perspective to facilitate institutional change. Also, like teaching, the coaches' institutional context is ever-changing. The skills and knowledge necessary for coaches to impact institutional change in these dynamic systems would also benefit from a similar continuous learning model. In interviews with grantee coaches, they said they appreciate the learning provided by SSCN coaching program professional development opportunities. Coaches feel it provides them with a foundation to do their work effectively. They also said they benefit from dedicated time together to learn from their peers and to develop and hone their skills practicing with one another. The knowledge exchange, when coaches share experiences in professional development spaces, within their state networks, and across the SSCN, helps coaches adapt, learn, and grow to support institutional change.

As guided pathways institutes reach completion in many states, how will coaches continue to engage colleges? How will coaches be tied to future institutional change work? Student Success Centers currently serve a critical role in coordinating coaches: assigning them to institutions, providing training, and checking in with coaches and the institutions to continuously improve their support. Future work should focus on how to continue to enhance the Centers' capacity to use coaches to help institutions improve student success reform efforts, building on momentum and progress generated from the guided pathways institutes. In this phase we found some potential means of continuing beyond guided pathways institutes, such as embedding a role for

coaches into all new student success initiatives, creating regional working groups focused on a guided pathway practice area, and using coaches to engage colleges via social media. Coaches have expressed a desire for professional development beyond guided pathways. Some priorities for future learning sessions include equity-minded facilitation strategies, stakeholder engagement, maintaining momentum through transitions, incorporating student voice into institutional change, data sense-making, and using labor market data to inform institutional changes.

Creating a culture of coaching in a state requires support from the Student Success Center, institutional leadership and team buy-in, and coaches. When leadership and institutional staff begin to see coaches as resources to help them accomplish their student success goals, that is where synergy happens, and institutions develop the necessary scaffolding for change. Centers provide the infrastructure and the organization of the coaches, and the coaches build the relationships with the institutions and provide support that helps institutions make their desired changes. Making this happen in all state and coaching contexts--system or association; paid or unpaid coaches; volunteer or mandatory participation--will be important future work, as these state-based coaches provide the sustained support needed to impact student success outcomes.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The Pathways Collaborative. *Pathways Coaching Guide*. (2018). Available at: <https://www.pathwaysresources.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/PathwaysCoachingGuide04192018.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> California colleges participating in reform initiatives are required to work with a coach assigned to their college team.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Baldwin, Katie Kovacich, and Lia Wetzstein. *Student Success Center Coaching Program: Essential Design Elements in Five States*. (Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future, September 2020). Available at: [https://jfforg-prod-new.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/MPUB\\_SSCN\\_Design\\_Coaching\\_Elements\\_100120\\_V3.pdf](https://jfforg-prod-new.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/MPUB_SSCN_Design_Coaching_Elements_100120_V3.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> “New York Student Success Center,” NYSSC.org. Accessed July 28, 2022, <https://nysssc.org/>.