IMPROVING COLLEGE GRADUATION RATES WITH MULTIFACETED STUDENT SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Here's What Institutions and State Agencies Need to Know

*A*cross the country, postsecondary education leaders are striving to increase graduation rates. Among a variety of evidence-based strategies to boost those numbers, perhaps the most prominent are multifaceted student support programs.[1] These programs incorporate multiple components over two to three years to address students' barriers to success.[2] Multifaceted support programs have been proven to increase graduation rates. One notable example, the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) model, has been proven to nearly double graduation rates in multiple colleges across diverse states and for a variety of student populations.[3]

This brief presents some considerations for states looking to allocate funds to implement similar evidence-based programs. It summarizes the rationale underlying the programs themselves, the evidence from existing studies that shows what works, the state and institutional factors necessary for successful implementation, and advice on how to balance fidelity with local needs while measuring and ensuring positive impacts on graduation rates.

WHY MULTIFACETED STUDENT SUPPORT PROGRAMS?

Postsecondary education is widely seen as a necessity in the modern economy. Yet research shows that college students face many barriers to completing a degree. They may be

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stymied by expenses not covered by financial aid, a confusing array of requirements and paperwork for enrolling in school and accessing financial aid, a lack of academic preparedness for college-level courses, and competing priorities such as the need to work to support themselves and their families.[4] At the same time, state investment in public colleges has been declining in recent decades. In particular, community colleges, which serve a disproportionate share of low-income, first-generation, and otherwise historically underrepresented students, are severely underfunded and may not be able to provide the level of support and financial resources their students need to get to graduation.[5] All of these factors contribute to low graduation rates nationwide.[6]

More than two decades of rigorous research conducted by MDRC and others has identified several interventions proven to increase college graduation rates.[7] The most effective by far are multifaceted student support programs, which typically combine a proactive, holistic coaching or advising model with additional financial supports, enrollment messaging, and other supports. Many postsecondary interventions target a single issue and do so on a short-term basis, often with positive but modest impacts. But research shows that students—particularly those in community college—need support on a variety of issues throughout their time in school. By keeping them engaged for multiple semesters and by meeting their changing needs along the way, multifaceted support programs have been proven to improve students' persistence, credit accumulation, and graduation rates.

Do These Programs Work for All Students?

The research literature indicates that these programs can work for students of all ages, genders, races, and ethnicities. Variations of multifaceted support programs have yielded positive results in small and large colleges as well as in various state and local political contexts. Additionally, while most of these programs have been rigorously tested in the two-year college environment, there is growing evidence showing their promise in four-year institutions, too.[8]

Why Aren't These Programs Already Widespread?

While the research evidence is clear, multifaceted support programs have not been widely adopted. In MDRC's experience, the most common reason has been cost: Despite their efficacy, these programs are expensive. Many states and institutions have found it challenging to build the political will needed to fund such programs at a time when postsecondary education budgets have been cut.

Indeed, creating new programs during the economic upheaval of 2020 seemed all but impossible for states facing budgetary shortfalls.[9] But as the economy recovers, and with the possibility of increased federal investment in postsecondary education on the horizon, many states are looking for high-impact, evidence-informed programming to improve outcomes. Multifaceted support programs are an effective option: They can help improve persistence, credit accumulation, and graduation rates for students drawn back to college following pandemic-related drops in enrollment.

There are other upsides to investing in evidence-based, multifaceted support programs. For example, studies of CUNY ASAP and the ASAP Demonstration in Ohio show that robust programs,

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while expensive, can reduce the cost per degree.[10] Additionally, costs typically decrease over time as the program serves more students. Programs that increase persistence can also be a potential revenue source in the form of added tuition, books, and additional funding in states with performance-based formulas.

WHICH FACTORS MATTER WHEN INSTITUTIONS CREATE NEW PROGRAMS?

When determining how to allocate funds to pay for multifaceted support programs, state agencies and academic institutions have decisions to make. Based on MDRC's research and technical assistance work, here are three factors worth considering: (1) the institution's well-articulated implementation plan; (2) existing institutional strengths; and (3) the institution's plans for the program's future.

States that are contemplating an application process to select institutions for funding should be able to incorporate these factors into the process. For states using an existing funding formula to allocate funds for multifaceted support programs, the measurement of the implementation plan is the hardest thing to execute. In that situation, it may be easiest to rate implementation plans on fidelity to a proven-effective model.

What is the Institution Planning to Implement?

A well-articulated implementation plan includes the following five factors: evidence-based program components, equity considerations, targeting of funds, data monitoring, and a dedicated staffing team.

Evidence-Based Program Components. While the nature of experimental research makes it methodologically impossible to measure which specific components contribute most to a program's positive impacts, implementation research lessons indicate the following are essential for a strong program:

- Dedicated coach/holistic case management with a low caseload ratio of advisors and coaches to students, not to exceed 1:150

- Proactive and frequent outreach, versus waiting for students to come to staff members for assistance

- Financial support to help students meet costs not covered by financial aid. Some examples of incentives that students respond to include textbook vouchers, transportation passes, and cash transfers. These incentives can be tied to program participation to further encourage student engagement. For instance, students can earn monthly incentives for meeting with an advisor or coach as directed.

- Messaging the importance of full-time enrollment and summer/winter enrollment, both of which keep students on track academically and increase their likelihood of graduating on time

One example of an implementation plan that institutions may choose to draw from is the CUNY ASAP Resource Guide.[11] CUNY ASAP and its adaptation in Ohio have both been proven to nearly double graduation rates.

Equity Considerations. Colleges can use multifaceted support programs to help reduce achievement gaps. Equity considerations should take place both at the institution level, where students receive the services, and at the state level, through the allocation of funds.

At the institution level, equity translates into leaders proactively identifying and engaging students who are at higher risk of not graduating and who might not otherwise participate in programs like these. It also requires adequate funding for the core program elements that have been proven most effective. Institution leaders face difficult choices, for instance, whether to maintain a robust, intensive approach for a concentrated caseload of students, or to try to reach a larger number of students with a more diffuse intervention, even though the impact may be smaller. Understanding existing achievement gaps can help illuminate this decision-making process and justify the expenditure.

At the state level, the agency allocating funds can design a fair and accessible process for all institutions to apply for the funds. Strategies to do this include: (1) minimizing the application burden by designing a simple, short application; (2) leveraging information or data the state already has rather than requiring institutions to provide it; (3) establishing minimum requirements for an institution to effectively implement a multifaceted support program; (4) setting aside or carving out funds for institutions that may not be as equipped as others to respond to lengthy or complex application processes for external funds (such as small rural institutions without grant writers on staff); and (5) offering assistance to interested institutions that might need help to compete. Beyond the application process, the state agency can explicitly prioritize the inclusion of institutions that may have fewer resources to implement the program and design a strategy to provide them additional implementation support.

Targeting Funds. Within each individual institution's plan, states can assess which students will be prioritized to benefit from the programs. Considerations include the institution's capacity to spend the funding appropriately and leverage other funding streams to support the programs, the financial need of institutions to effectively serve priority student populations, the potential return on investment or benefit for institutions who serve the largest number of historically underrepresented students or have the most room for growth, and equity considerations.

In addition, states may want to look across all applicants to ensure they are funding a diverse portfolio of institutions that reflects the overall composition of colleges and universities in the state. This can allow for more learning and can facilitate wider adoption across more schools over time.

Data Monitoring/Tracking for Program Management. All of the most successful multifaceted student support programs use some form of data tracking to ensure that the program is operating as

intended and to help staff identify areas for continuous improvement. Most programs use a management information system to track data, including students' enrollment status, number of credits, participation in the program, and main areas of need. Some programs also track students' other activities on campus, such as whether they are attending tutoring or career services workshops.

Reviewing students' interactions with program staff can yield highly valuable information. It's important to track both those students who are participating and those who aren't, so that specialized outreach messaging can go out to students as needed. In addition, regular data review helps program staff members discover more quickly if a student who previously participated in the program has become unresponsive—often an indication that something is going on with that student. The earlier that staff notices a change in behavior, the sooner they can intervene, identify resources, and ideally, support the student's ability to remain enrolled.

Staffing Plans for the Program. Dedicating mid-level staff members to operate the program—rather than pulling on already stretched staff—is a hallmark of successful multifaceted support programs. This is just as important as a committed leadership team. Identifying managers to oversee effective program operations signals that the new program is not just another task added to their existing workload. Ideally, the institution can set aside specific staff at full time or majority time for the program. Mid-level leaders are also important because they have the organizational authority to make decisions.

Putting together the right staffing *configuration* is also key and requires an understanding of local dynamics to recruit, hire, and retain effective frontline staff, especially the coaches and advisors who meet with students. One dynamic is the nature of the institution's workforce and staffing structure, such as whether there is a unionized workforce or receptiveness to using external contractors. Another dynamic is the student culture, including whether program staff need to be of the same race or ethnicity, from the same cultural background, or from the same community as the students, in order to make them feel comfortable sharing openly about their experiences.

What Are the Institution's Existing Strengths?

Alignment. Both the state and institution should ensure that investment in this kind of program is supporting an institutional priority or goal, for example, aligning with strategic plans or equity plans. The successful programs connect clearly with existing efforts to ensure buy-in on campus and to prioritize staff and financial resources for the longer term. One program that deployed existing resources to implement and sustain a multifaceted support program over the long term is at Lorain County Community College (LCCC). In 2014, as part of the ASAP Demonstration in Ohio, LCCC launched Students Accelerating in Learning (SAIL), a multifaceted student success program that is substantially improving persistence and graduation rates among students with low incomes. The college took steps early on to implement SAIL in a way that made it easier to sustain the program by aligning with other institutional priorities and state funding streams. Given the program's results, LCCC committed to sustaining the program and expanding it to serve most of its full-time students.[12]

Leadership. Committed institution leaders play a critical role in the successful implementation of new services or programs. They are willing to advocate both publicly and internally for the program to secure short- and long-term political and financial support. These leaders, in concert with their team, can make sure that program staff members remain motivated and that a mix of voices are being heard throughout program implementation to meet students' needs over time. Additionally, they can advocate at the state level and for other funding sources to sustain the program. Marcia Ballinger, the president of LCCC, knows what it takes to successfully sustain an evidence-based program.[13] She has maintained SAIL with a mix of internal and external funding, including both philanthropic and public dollars, over the seven years of program operation.

How Will the Institution Support and Sustain the Program?

Sustainability. This element can be easily overlooked in the short term when states and institutions are focused on how to allocate new funds. Early discussions about how to sustain a program beyond the initial grant or start-up funding stage prepares everyone to treat it as core to their ongoing operations. The state can augment an institution's ability to continue and expand a program by doing the following: (1) Identify long-term funding support, such as using annual grants, repurposing existing funds, or offering a partial return on investment from any state performance-based funding; (2) identify state policies that strengthen (or weaken) the program's ability to continue or expand; and (3) offer state infrastructure such as management information systems or data that facilitate institutional program monitoring and continuous improvement at low cost to the institution.

Integration. The surest way to sustain and scale a program in the long term is to integrate it with business operations and not treat it as a time-limited grant that will soon end. This might mean repurposing or bundling existing services into the new program, incorporating the program into specific departments or majors as standard operating procedure, or mainstreaming the program into the budget as a line item. Some colleges have scaled up multifaceted support programs so that all first-time, full-time students are automatically enrolled. This both ensures a program's long-term sustainability and makes it the default for incoming students, increasing equitable access. [14]

Balancing Fidelity of Implementation with Local Adaptation. Closely aligning a new program with existing, proven-effective programs, or what researchers call "fidelity to the program model," is one of the most reliable ways to replicate positive impacts in a new location. At the same time, many states and institutions may also want to make adaptations to align a program's offerings more closely with the unique needs of their students. For instance, programs serving older students or students who are working full time might find that they need to offer advising sessions during evening hours or on weekends. Some programs have found it helpful to employ staff members who are community college graduates themselves or members of the local community, because students find it easier to relate to them and are more willing to discuss their needs.

MDRC's research has found that it is best to use internal institutional data, interviews, or town halls with local students and recent graduates, or some other systematic way of gathering information

about student demographics and needs, to understand what students are looking for in a program—versus relying on staff or faculty assumptions. This is an area where states and institutions can iterate over time, using student voices to illuminate ways to strengthen programs in the future.

When in doubt, start with a higher-fidelity replication of a proven-effective program, and use a continuous improvement approach that combines students' voices with data review to identify changes that could make the program more effective.

TAKING ACTION TO BUILD A PROGRAM

This brief offers guidance for implementing multifaceted support programs that can increase post-secondary graduation rates. MDRC has also compiled a set of downloadable tools that may help states and institutions plan, monitor, and improve their programs, listed below.

The evidence is clear: These programs help students succeed. With funding and support, colleges can make widespread adoption of these programs a reality.

- How to create a process map for program intake (or other uses) https://www.mdrc.org/publication/creating-process-map and https://www.mdrc.org/publication/process-maps-many-voices-help-make-change

- How to create internal benchmarks https://www.mdrc.org/publication/mdrc-college-promise-success-initiative-benchmark-template

- How to use student voices https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/LA_Promise_%20Path.pdf

- Cost calculator https://www.mdrc.org/publication/college-promise-success-initiative-cost-calculator

- Behavioral science SIMPLER framework https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Developing%20SIMPLER%20Solutions.pdf

- Webinar on behavioral science for student messaging https://www.mdrc.org/webinar/using-behavioral-science-improve-student-outreach

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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