

LISTENING TO LEARN

USING COLLEGE STAFF MEMBERS' PERSPECTIVES TO IMPROVE THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

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MDRC's Center for Applied Behavioral Science (CABS) is an initiative that combines MDRC's expertise in social and education programs with insights from behavioral science. CABS develops innovative, low-cost interventions, tests their impact through experimentation, and provides technical assistance to programs incorporating behavioral insights.

Community colleges are a gateway to postsecondary degrees for many students, including those from low-income backgrounds and marginalized populations. Yet once students enter community college, they are faced with a host of complex administrative processes that can make it difficult to succeed. The pandemic exacerbated these and other barriers, as students were deciding whether they would continue to enroll full time, or enroll at all in college, and colleges were digesting new policies, implementing virtual classes, and determining the availability of new federal and state funding.

To address these challenges, 11 community colleges in New Jersey and two Historically Black Community Colleges (one in Alabama and one in Mississippi) joined the OnPath project. The goal was to help community college students stay enrolled during the pandemic. OnPath developed student outreach campaigns to encourage student enrollment and persistence, trained college staff members about student-centered design principles for policies and procedures, and generated ideas to advance systems change at colleges. OnPath researchers collaborated with college staff members who interact directly with students—advisors, financial aid officers, registrars' assistants, and student services staff, who are all essential to running a college. These individuals have key insights about how to address issues related to academic success, but their insights are often lost. As the first point of contact for many students and the administrators of systems such as the financial aid office, the registrar's office, and the admissions office, these staff members often know exactly when, where, and why students confront barriers to success, and they often come up with powerful strategies and workarounds to overcome those barriers. Yet these insights and innovations rarely result in changes to the college system or process, which means colleges are not taking full advantage of a source of deep expertise.

OnPath facilitated a powerful combination of people and knowledge by bringing together college staff members with operational knowledge about what needs to change, evidence from rigorous MDRC research about what helps students

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persist in college, and facilitators from MDRC's Center for Applied Behavioral Science. Through a series of workshops, one-on-one coaching sessions, and evidence-based templates of messaging strategies, researchers collaborated with staff members to (1) develop student outreach campaigns that simplified registration information, connected students to available financial aid, and encouraged continuous enrollment based on prior rigorous evidence about what works to encourage enrollment; and (2) design new student-centered strategies to improve student persistence during the pandemic.¹ The messaging strategies were informed by best practices and research evidence from MDRC evaluations.² These integrated approaches enabled colleges to implement new messaging campaigns to better address students' needs and begin to implement new policies to reduce barriers to student success.

KEY PRINCIPLES OF THE ONPATH PROJECT

MDRC, with support from Ascendium Education Group and ECMC Foundation, helped colleges use the OnPath approach to accelerate innovation and improve student retention at the same time. The four key principles of the OnPath approach aim to (1) assemble staff members from various departments in the college to work together to achieve the goals; (2) encourage staff members to be "designers" in all aspects of their jobs, focusing on where they have autonomy to change outcomes for students; (3) build on available evidence about effective strategies; and (4) convey that all communications and ideas need to be student-centered, that is, focusing on the student experience and student needs during each phase of the project.

Cross-Functional Teams

Bringing together the perspectives of different staff members who deal directly with students can create a better student experience and facilitate coordination between different departments. Each college assembled a team that included staff members from the departments of financial aid, student services, communications and marketing, as well as the Office of the Registrar. In one example, a college cross-functional team worked together to review the college's online registration process. They realized that several links were broken, language was outdated or incorrect, and students could get caught in a website loop that would lead to registration errors. Having this team assembled ensured that the college could effectively fix the website's errors. The team also helped to ensure that proposed ideas would be implemented, by bringing staff members who were responsible for implementation into the decision-making process.

What colleges shared:

Kindly said, it forced collaboration between financial aid processes to support enrollment processes leveraging the availability of potential [state aid] funds as the carrot. Students who we interacted with appreciated the

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more personal assistance to navigate the issues they were experiencing with financial aid at the federal/state/college level as we broke it down into smaller, bite-sized steps, so they could get answers regarding the availability of funds, etc.

Designing with Intention

By keeping students' perspectives at the center of the OnPath approach and being explicit in thinking about the student experience in each of these decisions, staff members were able to mitigate negative outcomes for students.

College staff members focused on changes to their college environment, for example, their websites, messaging strategies, and registration processes. The goal in taking this approach was to reduce the tendency to attribute student actions to individual characteristics, and instead focus on ascribing their behavior to the situational factors outside of their control, which can reduce biases. In short, MDRC and the colleges focused on how the colleges are organized and structured, and scrutinized college policies and procedures through the student lens.

What colleges shared:

I think there has been an emphasis on intent behind messaging to students. I learned that there is a difference in talking “at” students and starting conversations with students in mind.

Building on Evidence to Inform Best Practices

OnPath leveraged insights generated from past evidence-based communication strategies and adapted them to new contexts. The communication strategy was anchored to MDRC work with 10 colleges in Ohio as part of the Encouraging Additional Summer Enrollment (EASE) project, which increased persistence from the spring to the summer term through a messaging campaign, implemented with and without last-dollar tuition assistance to cover any gaps in funding for students to take summer courses. The messaging campaign directly addressed student and institutional barriers to summer course-taking, simplified registration information, clearly informed students of available federal and state aid, and integrated information across college departments. A rigorous, randomized controlled trial evaluation that included 10,000 students across the 10 colleges in Ohio found that the messaging campaign increased persistence into the summer term for students with low incomes by 5 percentage points. When the campaign was combined with last-dollar tuition assistance, the impact was even greater (12 percentage points). OnPath built on this research that demonstrated how student-centered communications that simplify financial aid and registration information and incorporate principles from behavioral science can increase persistence and help students advance toward a degree.

What colleges shared:

With the behavioral competencies MDRC has presented, our messaging has become more personable and engaging for our student outreach. Many have inquired about their opportunities to enroll and receive financial assistance, and this has given our prospect for retention a new advantage.

Creating Student-Centered Messages and Policies

College staff members that deal directly with students are responsible for translating policy regulations and guidelines for students who are reading the message and need to take action. Colleges took a hard look at their communication strategies to students and rewrote them from the perspective of the student, instead of writing from the perspective of a college staff person. This led to some very different messaging strategies and often, led to reflecting on the policy and how to improve other aspects of the college system. For example, colleges revamped their messages about new funding options during the pandemic. A standard message may have shared information like, "There is new aid available, and you might be eligible for it. Contact the [X] Office." Through OnPath, the colleges provided more specific information based on the student's circumstances, including some personalized funding estimates, and sent messages that more closely linked how this new aid might impact the student. They also coupled messages with policy changes, like crafting communications that they were eliminating small fees for students when possible (under federal regulations) and made those messages prominent for students.

What colleges shared:

It's been helpful to see which mediums students are most responsive to – texting was a lot more effective than emails, snail mail, or phone calls. It was also helpful to emphasize one clear action step, rather than overloading students with lots of direction at once.

OnPath collaborated with nearly 100 college staff members across 13 institutions. Each college crafted messaging campaigns that met their students' needs, collectively sending over 100 messages using multiple modalities (emails, text messages, and mailings). The messages were simple and action-oriented. Researchers also spoke to students to better understand students' communication preferences, how they decide what to open and read, their awareness of financial aid resources (such as Pell Grants and state aid) and barriers and facilitators to persistence during the pandemic. Major themes were centered around finances (clarifying funding sources for students, especially with new federal funding available); advising and student services (helping students' complete registration and navigating college processes); and balancing enrolling in higher education with other priorities and roles to fill

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at home. The messaging campaigns incorporated these themes and were adjusted and sent out through the lifecycle of the project.

Creating effective messaging campaigns was central to the project, but researchers also recognized the many other structural barriers that colleges could address to facilitate continued enrollment. Often reviewing communications closely is a key first step to uncovering other, bigger challenges that may exist within an organization. As a result, in the later phase of OnPath, colleges shifted their focus to other changes they could make to transform their students' experiences and keep them enrolled.

REFORMING COLLEGE PROCESSES TO REMOVE STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

The insights described in this section are based on the ideas that college teams identified as their top priorities combined with MDRC knowledge and evidence in these areas. During the course of the two-year OnPath project, researchers identified three specific pain points that cause tension for students and highlighted target areas that could improve the student experience. Each section is followed by a "possible solutions" section, which MDRC and the colleges will be further refining and potentially implementing in the coming years through a future phase of the OnPath project.

Financial Aid Barriers Cause Major Roadblocks

Staff members relayed that the key problem in the financial aid system centered around the difficulty in filing applications, including conflicting deadlines, heavy documentation requirements, and a lack of assistance, among other issues. The main words used by staff members to describe the system were "complex," "overwhelming," and "confusing." Staff members reported that students feel frustrated by the need to keep track of required information (such as tax documents) and perform certain functions (such as filling out financial aid forms). Students may not have access to required information, such as tax records or parental income information, further complicating the completion of application forms. Staff members also noted how technology designed to make things easier can sometimes go wrong, thus causing additional hurdles. Simply put, these barriers take time away from learning and focusing on classwork.





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Colleges discussed new introductory videos with personalized attachments that would provide targeted resources for students depending on their specific financial aid eligibility (e.g., New Jersey Dreamers, New Jersey STARS, documented students with undocumented parents). Staff members also noted that the process should feel easier for students and attempts should be made to minimize anxiety and fear of not understanding the application. They suggested acknowledging students when they do things correctly, instead of focusing on their errors. Staff members also discussed the importance of building relationships through simple actions like taking the time to personalize information. They recognized that the trust built between staff members and students can help individuals bypass barriers.

Possible Solutions

AUTOMATE THE FREE APPLICATION FOR FEDERAL STUDENT AID (FAFSA) RENEWAL PROCESS by having colleges prepopulate applications with information they have on file and have students simply sign off on renewals. Although this would be more labor-intensive for financial aid offices, the EASE project has tried similar solutions that were effective, for example, by calculating aid amounts for students on their behalf. While it may be more work for colleges up front, this solution might cut down on work overall for financial aid offices and smooth the process for many students. In other domains like child support, MDRC has tried prepopulating applications and found it effective.³

PILOT EXTENDING FINANCIAL AID ELIGIBILITY for two years. Completing the FAFSA every year is a cumbersome process, and research has shown that many students do not complete it because of the barriers. To address this problem, colleges could extend eligibility so that students do not have to renew every year. In other domains like childcare vouchers, changes in policy have extended eligibility windows for applicants.⁴

Data may support that students' financial circumstances are unlikely to change drastically enough from year to year to require refile, though it would remain an option for students who have had a significant negative or positive change in income. Using available administrative data, researchers could demonstrate the patterns of changing eligibility and simulate the potential effects of extending the policy to two years. Colleges do not have the autonomy to extend eligibility but could take proactive steps to demonstrate the potential benefits of creating this type of policy change. For example, financial aid offices and college data teams could analyze patterns in their financial aid data and indicate how different changes could impact students.

Lost in an Admissions and Registration Maze

To begin college, staff members described the cumbersome documentation requirements, including providing test scores, transcripts, and vaccination records,

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and the complicated registration and course selection processes. Financial aid requirements are another critical roadblock, as students may be missing their FAFSA renewal information or state aid applications. The registration process often has flexible deadlines, which makes the process feel less urgent. Once students have made it through the first semester, they may be confronted with registration holds and financial aid deadlines. If students have a hold on registration, they often do not know why it is there (but they will be blocked from registering for courses) and may be unsure of who to contact for assistance to resolve the hold. Colleges suggested several ideas to streamline the registration and advising processes.



Possible Solutions

PREPOPULATE ACADEMIC PLANS. Staff members suggested creating one document that contains all of the pieces of a student's academic plan and crafting a communication strategy with targeted reminders and easy to understand language that includes *all* aspects of college processes the student would need to complete to graduate (e.g., financial aid requirements, course registration processes, and advising requirements, among others). Another idea would be to provide students with prepopulated academic plans that outline what (and how many) courses a student should take each semester. This could help smooth the registration process. Ideally, students could register for their second semester at the same time as their first semester (a concept known as year-round scheduling). Alternatively, students could be sent a list of courses for their second semester and be encouraged to register for them by a certain date. These types of solutions may signal to students that someone is looking out for them and their unique circumstances.

REDUCE HOLDS. Colleges discussed chargeback processes, where students could still register even if they owe money for past semesters and then be charged after the fact. Staff also suggested action-based communications to students to make sure that minor holds do not prevent students from registering. Colleges also considered developing materials (webpages and talking points for staff) to better communicate to other staff about the registration process so that everyone has the information needed to resolve the hold and staff are better equipped to assist students.

Making Progress Toward Degree Completion

The Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) system serves as an accountability mechanism for federal student aid by suspending the receipt of financial aid funds if students fail to meet certain academic benchmarks. Colleges raised the issue of a sizable number of students who have not maintained SAP and have been placed on “warning,” with some losing federal and state aid, and some being suspended from college. In previous studies, researchers found that up to a third of students are placed on “warning” by the end of their first semester and half of these students do not re-enroll the following semester.⁵ Of the half who did re-enroll the following semester, only 2 percent had returned to good standing, while the rest remained in unsatisfactory standing. Colleges suggested changes to their protocols to improve academic progress metrics, which have implications for financial aid status and remaining enrolled. The colleges discussed both increasing the number of students who maintain SAP and the number of students who are restored to good academic standing after being placed on SAP warning, suspension, or probation. Ideas include leveraging early alert systems at colleges and using them to intervene quickly if a student is veering off track and changes to the appeals process once a student is placed on suspension.



Possible Solutions

EARLY ALERT. Colleges discussed the importance of connecting students to resources that can support them before they receive SAP warning. Many at-risk students do not get connected to the academic and personal supports they need to maintain SAP. This could include increased faculty engagement with existing early alert systems to identify struggling students as soon as possible; using student-centered communication to advisors and support staff to connect more struggling students to resources and to reinforce information about SAP requirements; developing a peer support system that provides additional support to at-risk students to ensure follow through and supplements existing services; and targeting actors throughout the system including students at risk for SAP warning, students who have received a warning, students who are on or have been on probation, and faculty and student services staff. Behavioral strategies can strengthen the use of existing systems so that students at risk of receiving a warning in their first semester are connected to the supports they need more often, and actionable intervention plans are available for the students who are identified.

REDESIGNING APPEALS. Once students are suspended for SAP, they are required to submit an appeal to be placed on probation and begin receiving financial aid again. One suggestion was to reduce the number of steps and time needed to receive

approval for an appeal. Strategies to improve the appeals process could include streamlining notifications and using multiple modes to send reminders, simplifying the appeal application by prepopulating available fields, and providing a hotline to reach counseling or advising staff for help in drafting the appeal.

WHAT'S NEXT

MDRC has been using student-centered approaches to build evidence about and provide support for how to sustain enrollment among students who begin college, but do not graduate. Listening to staff members who interact with students every day can change the college landscape. To fully realize the benefits of staff members' cross-functional wisdom, colleges must build systems to deliberately listen to their perspectives and convey those perspectives to the school body at large. The various perspectives, including departmental needs and requirements, should be wrapped up into broad and clear communications and policies that students understand. College leaders must adapt a learning and listening mindset to try new strategies with the best intentions to help their students. Difficult problems—like why many students, especially those from at-risk backgrounds, do not graduate—will not have simple solutions. Building on prior research and direct engagement with colleges, OnPath will be designing a multi-pronged approach that matches the root problem to the intervention, building on recent federal changes and colleges' commitments to improving student experiences and increasing enrollment.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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