

“THESE PEOPLE JUST KEEP TRYING TO HELP ME”

SUPPORTING STUDENTS TO SUCCEED IN COLLEGE AND CAREER PATHWAYS



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

Despite national economic growth, far too many Americans are stuck in low-wage jobs or unable to find work at all. Millions of people are struggling to gain the skills and credentials they need to land middle-skill jobs that can lead to careers and enable them to support their families.

Jobs for the Future, a national leader in developing college and career pathways to middle-skill work in high-demand industries, convened education and workforce innovators to share ideas about strategies that:

- › best equip underprepared youth and adults to access and succeed in postsecondary education and the workforce
- › provide employers with a strong pipeline of qualified workers
- › strengthen regional economies.

Want to Improve Student Supports? We Can Help

For information on JFF services to develop student supports, contact Barbara Endel, Senior Director, bendel@jff.org or 617.728.4446 x235.

This brief is part of a series that highlights key issues and best practices discussed at [Bridging the Gap: Postsecondary Pathways for Underprepared Learners](#). Other topics include: engaging employers as customers, strategies for working with employers to diversify their talent pipelines, and college and career pathways for students returning from correctional facilities.

Community colleges have always offered struggling students support services, such as academic assistance and tuition aid. However, many of today's community college students face multiple barriers—personal, financial, and academic—to achieving their postsecondary goals. One important way to help more people stay in school and complete credentials, says Barbara Endel, a senior director at Jobs for the Future, is for institutions to deliver a broader range of support services in a coordinated manner.

As open-access institutions, community colleges serve everyone who walks through their doors: low-income students, underprepared learners, immigrants, and first-generation college goers. Because many are older than traditional college students, they juggle a host of competing priorities that can disrupt their education. Many work part time to support a family or pay for school and most have childcare responsibilities. Finances are often limited.

In addition to academic and career services, community college students may need assistance to access housing, transportation, health care, child care, and even food assistance or legal aid. Often called “wraparound” or “comprehensive” supports, such services are intended to address the myriad facets of daily life that make it difficult for many students to make it to class, or to learn once they get there.

Daunting as it may seem to meet such complex needs, providing these supports to students is not just a dream, says Priyadarshini Chaplot of the National Center for Inquiry & Improvement, a JFF partner that works to help colleges increase student completion. “Providing this type of support is not impossible,” Chaplot says. “It is really possible and, in fact, many colleges are doing it well.”

WHY COMMUNITY COLLEGES SHOULD INVEST IN COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORTS

A large and growing number of students in the United States could achieve their postsecondary goals—and enter family-supporting careers that also contribute to our economy—if not for the challenges created by limited financial resources. In fact, it is estimated that half of community college students drop out due to financial challenges, according to Kate Bucko,

the director of a student supports center at Delgado Community College in New Orleans.

A Lumina Foundation study comparing college completion rates of high-achieving students from low-income and

higher-income backgrounds underscores the problem: Only 26 percent of low-income students with above-average test scores complete college, compared to 50 percent of upper-middle income students and 70 percent of the wealthiest students surveyed with the same scores. This indicates that financial factors lead many students to leave school. Eliminating these barriers would increase their likelihood of success.

Helping individual students succeed is certainly the most important reason for community colleges to invest in student supports. But educators emphasize that there are also many strategic reasons that colleges should consider offering these services:

- ▶ Increasing student success improves key indicators of institutional performance, such as student retention, progression, persistence, credential completion, and graduation rates.
- ▶ Colleges consistently receive more state funding when they demonstrate improved performance. The additional resources can make a significant difference at a time when traditional state appropriations for higher education are shrinking.
- ▶ Improvement in certain performance indicators, such as fall-to-fall retention, also increase revenue for a college, due to the additional tuition collected from more students re-enrolling.
- ▶ Over time, colleges that increase graduation rates and other key indicators improve their reputation, which attracts more students and raises more tuition revenue.

“Too often we blame society in general for these ills. But we can fix this, without being a social service agency.”

—Rob Johnstone, National Center for Inquiry and Improvement

HOW TO CREATE EFFECTIVE SUPPORT SERVICES

The first step in implementing comprehensive supports is getting to know the low-income and underprepared students the institution serves. “A community college should see its role to identify barriers and act systemically to remove them,” Chaplot explains.

Tracking and analyzing student data is crucial to this process. Key data needed includes the number of low-income students, levels of financial need, how many receive supplemental nutrition and other public benefits, and more. Much of this information is available from each school's financial aid office on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

However, colleges also must go beyond the facts, figures, and data trends, to understand student perspectives on accessing assistance. Some students are reluctant to accept help because of the stigma associated with using social services. Educators suggest that community colleges try the following

approaches to “normalize” use of student support services:

1. Reframe the campus conversation from a bias against “taking a government handout” to the benefits of accepting a short-term investment with big long-term payoffs.
2. Automatically screen all students for public benefits eligibility. Eliminating the need to “opt in” can persuade people to take advantage of assistance.
3. Market services in ways that enable students to realize they are not alone in needing help. One example: a flyer publicizing a college food pantry

Accelerating Opportunity for Underprepared Learners

Accelerating Opportunity is a JFF initiative that aims to dramatically reduce the amount of time it takes for low-skilled adults to gain the skills and credentials they need to start family-supporting careers. Working with community colleges across the country, Accelerating Opportunity combines Adult Basic Education with career and technical training into one integrated pathway. Comprehensive support services are essential to the model’s success. The supports are embedded into the program for every student, to help them stick with their studies until they complete a postsecondary credential with value in the local labor market. Accelerating Opportunity programs are improving life prospects for underprepared adults in seven states: Georgia, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, and North Carolina. For more information, see <http://www.jff.org/initiatives/accelerating-opportunity>.

Components of Comprehensive Student Supports

<p>Academic Advising Supports academic success</p>	<p>Examples: Skills assessment, course selection, tutoring, monitoring progress, alignment of courses to career pathways</p>
<p>Nonacademic Advising Fosters students’ sense of connection to the college, enhances self-confidence and decision making</p>	<p>Examples: Student success skills (e.g., time management, organization), referrals to other needed supports</p>
<p>Career Services Support transition to employment</p>	<p>Examples: Interest assessment, career exploration, internship opportunities, job readiness training, job placement, and assistance with resumes, cover letters, and interviews</p>
<p>Financial Services Build students’ self-sufficiency in managing finances</p>	<p>Examples: Help applying for financial aid, screening for public benefits, financial literacy and planning, tax assistance, financial coaching (including for families)</p>
<p>Social Services & Counseling Help manage students’ personal lives to support persistence and completion</p>	<p>Examples: Child care, food assistance, legal assistance, behavioral health counseling (including mental health services, addiction treatment, grief counseling)</p>

Source: Adapted from *Promoting Persistence through Comprehensive Student Supports*, from the Accelerating Opportunity team, *Jobs for the Future*, 2014.

that says simply, “3 out of 4 students are using the food bank. Why aren’t you?”

4. Review internal processes with a comprehensive diversity framework in mind. This can reveal unintended consequences of decisions that were made for all the right reasons. For example, allowing for online course sign up generally seems like a good way to make the registration process easier for all. However, if online enrollment starts at midnight, students without home Internet access are automatically many hours behind, potentially boxing them out of needed courses.
5. Try small tweaks that can encourage students to use aid more effectively, such as calling financial aid an “allocation” instead of a “refund.” Meredith Hatch and Elyssa Shildneck of Achieving the Dream, a national initiative co-founded by JFF to increase college completion, have found that this can cause students to spend more prudently.
6. Link the receipt of aid to advisor visits. Rather than receiving a lump sum at the beginning of a term, students receive installments after meeting with an advisor throughout the semester. Achieving the Dream has seen this increase engagement, persistence, and sustainable spending of the aid.

BRINGING COMMUNITY RESOURCES TO CAMPUS

One of the most effective ways for community colleges to provide additional supports to their students is by creating partnerships with external organizations, or leveraging existing relationships. This can be an easy three-way win:

1. The community college can strengthen its connections within the community and reach new populations, which potentially can also boost recruitment or enhance the school’s reputation
2. The community-based organization (CBO) can do more to fulfill its mission, such as raising the education and skill levels of clients
3. Students can receive better support services, because they are being provided by organizations in their community, with expertise addressing complex issues facing people in that community

The services are generally cost effective, too. It is typically far less expensive for a college to partner

with a CBO that offers needed services than for a community college to create these supports from scratch.

Single Stop at Delgado Community College

Delgado Community College in New Orleans is one example of a school that has made great strides in improving student supports over the past few years, primarily through community connections. The college, which is part of JFF’s Accelerating Opportunity network, partnered with Single Stop, a national organization that sets up campus-based centers and helps students figure out if they qualify for public benefits such as food stamps, child care subsidies, federal financial aid, or the earned-income tax credit.

Delgado’s Single Stop center served more than 5,600 individuals and families from 2012 to 2014 and connected them to over \$8 million in public benefits, tax refunds, and other services.

“What might be minor annoyances to us—we get a flat tire, we get sick, we have to take a day off work—might become major crises for other types of students.”

—Priyadarshini Chaplot, National Center for Inquiry and Improvement

Single Stop keeps down costs to colleges by using existing community resources. For example, the center uses an external tax team contracted through the United Way, and legal assistance from local attorneys working pro bono.

“We keep our ears to the ground for anything in the community that we can work with, where we can align students with any resources that would help them, that doesn’t incur cost to our college,” says Kate Bucko, the director of Single Stop at Delgado. “We have to be very creative in making these resources work, and these resources change day by day.”

The office employs two full-time staff—Bucko and a social worker—plus a work-study student and an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer. Services provided include:

- **Tax services**, which are particularly helpful for students filling out a FAFSA. Accurate, on-time tax filings ensure students a fair and timely financial aid application process.

Challenges and Solutions of On-Campus Centers

Presenters and participants at Bridging the Gap noted common challenges to operating on-campus centers that provide comprehensive student support services and offered solutions from their own experiences.

Challenge: Beginning and sustaining services

Solutions:

- › Be aware that the initial costs will be higher before the services become institutionalized
- › Move toward mixed funding (grant/foundation funding, leveraging community resources, college funding)
- › Use existing, underutilized resources wherever possible
- › Consider options for launching programs without a large outlay of resources (e.g., contracted partnerships with tax specialists paid through another source; data already collected by other offices)

Challenge: Avoiding becoming overwhelmed with responsibilities or duplicating services offered elsewhere

Solutions:

- › Refer students to more specialized offices (e.g., the student records office for immigration issues) rather than trying to solve every issue within the center
- › Create internal Memoranda of Understanding between departments of a college so there is a clear framework for the roles and responsibilities of each

Challenge: Paying for services to meet state mandates to improve community college completion that do not have funding attached

Solutions:

- › Make some practices mandatory for all students (e.g., orientations, benefits screenings)
- › Acknowledge and communicate the “return on investment” of practices that require upfront funding from the college

Challenge: Ensuring efficacy of partnerships

Solutions:

- › Invite all involved parties to the table: CBOs, employers, city/county agencies, trade unions
- › Write partners into one another’s grants, look for opportunities to leverage one another’s services

Challenge: Recruiting

Solutions:

- › Basic marketing: flyers, social media/texting, online advertising, classroom visits, features in college-wide publications, direct mailings
- › Co-referral/word of mouth is most effective for getting students to use services
- › Barriers to entering career pathways programs can best be overcome with a transition advisor

- **Legal services**, which can include family matters and traffic offenses, but are also helpful for students seeking to expunge a criminal record—something that can be important when seeking post-graduation employment.
- **Health insurance services**, which can be more difficult to access in some states than others. One example is Louisiana, which did not expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act.
- **A wide variety of other resources**, such as energy, food, and transportation assistance.

WHEN CAMPUS-BASED SERVICES ARE NOT ENOUGH

Opening the Door to College for Opportunity Youth

For all of the young people who find their way to college and are able to succeed with help from intensive support services, there are many more who never make it to campus. Millions of young adults in their late teens and 20s are neither in school nor working and have few good prospects.

Today there is a growing recognition that this group, known as opportunity youth, needs a distinctive approach to support them in pursuing and persisting in postsecondary education—carefully designed “on-ramps” to show a clear, accessible pathway to college success and a good career.

Some community colleges are joining forces with community-based organizations that specialize

“I want every student to have ‘pronoia’...the sneaky suspicion that everybody here is trying to help me. Everyplace I go, everything I do, these people, they just keep trying to help me...That contagious commitment has to be so thoroughly ingrained in every aspect of every relationship that you build, that ultimately, you can’t get around it.”

—Michael Baston, *LaGuardia Community College*

in serving opportunity youth in order to build such on-ramps. Working together, the colleges and community organizations can be much more effective in helping vulnerable young people develop the skills and credentials they need to enter and advance in the workforce.

With support from JFF and the James Irvine Foundation, several innovative partnerships in California are demonstrating how a range of CBOs can provide a new “front door” to community college, says Terry Grobe, a JFF director who focuses on improving outcomes for struggling students and out-of-school youth.

“For people who have faced a lot of educational challenges and come from communities where there are not a lot of people who have been to college, it can be really intimidating,” Grobe says. “They really need a supported pathway to and through postsecondary education. And they need to start in a place where they’ve already experienced some success, they know the staff, they feel safe.”

CBOs are well positioned for this work because they already serve as the entry point for young people trying to get their lives back on track. With deep roots in the neighborhoods where their clients live, they offer an impressive array of assistance, from job training and budgeting to finding an affordable apartment and feeding children healthy meals.

Taller San Jose, Santa Ana College

For 20 years, Taller San Jose has offered job training and life skills needed to help unemployed, undereducated, and impoverished young adults support themselves and their families in southern California. The organization decided to make the leap into offering college courses when its community college partner, Santa Ana College (SAC), was set to eliminate a program in business because of low enrollment. Taller San Jose was able to do so with the help of a grant from the Irvine Foundation and the support of JFF.

Executive Director Shawna Smith says they persuaded Santa Ana to participate by promising to bring 20 students per semester and guarantee that 75 percent would finish the coursework in 16 weeks. And they did. SAC faculty who teach the same courses at Taller San Jose and the college campus tell Smith that, as a result of the unique supports offered by the CBO, the TSJ students are “extremely competitive in their performance” compared with traditional college students.

Identifying barriers to persistence is the most critical contribution of the CBO and results from the ability to build a relationship with each student, ensuring they

“We believe that the support mechanism will create success, because usually that’s the difference in a student retaining or completing or not.”

—Alison Bordelon, Louisiana Community and Technical College System

“Community colleges are not equipped with enough supports needed to get students with significant instability in their lives to completion. But CBOs can provide that critical role of helping students see, I can be a college student and succeed at that level.”

Today Taller San Jose runs four workforce training academies—two in health care (medical assisting and healthcare administration), one in building trades, and another in general business technology.

Together the college and CBO have learned a lot in their first pilot. One big lesson is that having college instructors lead the classes makes a difference in helping young people get comfortable with college instruction.

In the beginning, colleges may be uncomfortable working with this population, or sharing roles and responsibilities with a CBO partner. On the flip side, a college’s willingness to work with the CBO in selecting appropriate faculty ensures the right fit for students, who may be overcoming their own negative attitudes about their academic abilities. In addition, for highly intensive programs, such as Santa Ana’s 16-week program with Taller San Jose, coordinating homework and project loads can significantly increase the likelihood of success for opportunity youth.

truly understand their needs and can help meet them.

“The biggest barrier they have is that people underestimate their potential,” Smith says.

Northern Virginia Community College

Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) is a frontrunner in the field. NOVA has pioneered partnerships with CBOs that provide job training including organizations like Goodwill, YearUp, and Training Futures.

Bill Kosanovich, director of NOVA’s community-based co-enrollment programs, acknowledges that the relationships can be tricky at first. But he is hopeful they will become much more common.

NOVA coordinates closely with CBOs on the academic side to plan curriculum and certify their instructors as adjuncts to deliver accelerated coursework in several key employment sectors. Students co-enroll in the local job training program and NOVA, and they receive college credit upon completion. At Training Futures for example, participants train in medical billing and coding and office operations, intern in health-related companies, and come out with college credits and skills to get jobs that exist in their local labor market. A number of participants triple their incomes as a result of their skills training in this program.

One of NOVA’s strengths is its innovative funding model. NOVA passes back a majority of students’ Pell grant awards to the sponsoring CBOs, to help cover their costs, such as faculty, facilities, and support services.

“CBOs and colleges have very different cultures,” Kosanovich says. “We are a huge college in northern Virginia, part of a regulated statewide system, but our CBO partners live in a world of direct service, customer sensitivity, and compassion. There’s something beautiful in bringing those together in ways that respect and satisfy their own and each other’s mission.”

RESOURCES

These publications and tools highlight promising models of providing support services and on-ramps to improve college and career outcomes for underprepared students.

> **Jobs for the Future**

- » [Opening the Door: How Community Organizations Address the Youth Unemployment Crisis](#) (2015)
- » [Promoting Persistence Through Comprehensive Student Supports](#) (2014)

> **Achieving the Dream Initiative**

- » [Working Families Success Network](#)

PRESENTERS

The following leaders from higher education, national nonprofits, and community-based organizations led conversations at Bridging the Gap about student support services and on-ramps to college. Material for this brief was drawn from their sessions. More information about their backgrounds is available on the list of [biographies](#).

Kate Bucko

Director, Single Stop, Delgado Community College

Michael Baston

Vice President for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, LaGuardia Community College, NY

Priyadarshini Chabot

Director of Strategy and Engagement, National Center for Inquiry & Improvement

Barbara Endel

Senior Director, Building Economic Opportunity Group, Jobs for the Future

Terry Grobe

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Meredith Hatch

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Henan Joof

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William Kosanovich

Director of Community Based Organization Co-Enrollment Programs, Northern Virginia Community College

Elyssa Shildneck

Assistant Director of Programs, Achieving the Dream

Shawna Smith

Executive Director/CEO, Taller San Jose

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Jobs for the Future works with our partners to design and drive the adoption of education and career pathways leading from college readiness to career advancement for those struggling to succeed in today's economy. Across the country, we work to improve the pathways leading from high school to college to family-supporting careers. Our work aligns education and training to ensure that employers have access to a skilled workforce.



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