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Lessons from 15 Years of MDRC's Postsecondary Research

Low-income students in college face many challenges, including the cost of postsecondary education and competing demands on their time from work or family obligations. They may not be prepared for college academically. They may also lack the skills and experiences other students rely on to help them navigate college, or the social support that can help them overcome challenges in college. MDRC has developed a deep body of evidence on interventions designed to help low-income college students succeed. This issue brief looks back over 15 years of rigorous evidence to draw lessons that can help colleges and policymakers as they work to improve college completion rates for low-income students.

COMBINING EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGIES THAT ADDRESS DIFFERENT FACTORS INCREASES THE ODDS OF BIG EFFECTS.

MDRC has found that short-term interventions like financial awards and enhanced guidance have small effects. When these strategies are combined, however, they can have much larger effects. The City University of New York's (CUNY's) Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), for example, [nearly doubled](#) the number of students who graduated with associate's degrees within three years, and a follow-up demonstration of ASAP in Ohio shows that the program can be replicated with [similar early results](#). A different program, the Detroit Promise Path, gives students additional financial support if they meet regularly with academic coaches. It has also produced [large, early impacts](#).

FREQUENT ADVISING AND COACHING ARE VITAL STRATEGIES TO INCREASE ACADEMIC PROGRESS.

MDRC research on projects that include advising (such as [Opening Doors](#), [CUNY ASAP](#), the [ASAP Ohio Demonstration](#), and the [Detroit Promise Path](#)) suggests that advising or coaching works best when an adviser actively and frequently makes contact with students instead of waiting for them to show up, and when each adviser works consistently with the same group of students. Research on other programs supports this conclusion. (See, for example, research on [InsideTrack](#).)

APPROACHES INSPIRED BY BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE CAN INCREASE PARTICIPATION AND KEEP STUDENTS MOVING FORWARD.

Insights from behavioral science can help colleges see the unnecessary hindrances or hassles that may be in students' paths. Simple adjustments such as reminders or clearer presentation of information can boost the numbers of students who go to advising sessions, submit their financial aid applications, or enroll in summer courses. MDRC is increasingly applying these insights to its work in postsecondary education. For example, [several MDRC studies](#) show that students can earn more credits if they are encouraged to enroll in summer and winter intersessions and are given financial support to do so. Research by other organizations suggests that summer courses can help students stay in school and increase their odds of completion.¹

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¹Paul Attewell and Sou Hyun Jang, "Summer Coursework and Completing College," *Research in Higher Education* 20 (2013): 117-141.

INSIGHTS FROM REGULAR ANALYSES OF DATA CAN BE USED TO HELP STUDENTS MAKE GREATER USE OF AVAILABLE SERVICES AND TO ENSURE PROGRAMS ARE PRODUCING THE DESIRED EFFECTS.

MDRC has studied several programs that have used innovative management information systems. Staff members can employ these systems to monitor student activity, respond quickly when students veer off track, reach out to students when it appears they might be having trouble, and reinforce positive behavior with incentives or messages when appropriate.

THOUGH IT CAN BE DIFFICULT TO CHANGE INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES, IT IS POSSIBLE.

MDRC and its partners have conducted research at institutions that have accomplished major changes in structure and content through concerted effort. Institutions have successfully changed teaching practices in both the [Dana Center's Mathematics Pathways](#) and [CUNY Start](#) projects, for example, and there are early signs that these changes are helping students. Still, there is little rigorous evidence about instructional practices, and the field needs guidance about how to improve teaching.

STRONG INTERVENTIONS ARE NOT ENOUGH. MORE FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE AT THE INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL IS PROBABLY NEEDED TO ACHIEVE LARGE INCREASES IN COMPLETION.

Finding highly effective strategies is not enough to improve outcomes on a large scale, especially when those strategies require a major reallocation or commitment of resources. MDRC has also studied institution-level initiatives such as [Achieving the Dream](#) and [Completion by Design](#), and has observed how difficult it is for colleges to change practices system-wide and substantially alter the experiences of large numbers of students.