



# THE NEW NORMAL

## Supporting Nontraditional Students on the Path to a Degree

The population of nontraditional students is growing—including part-time students, older students, and students with work and family responsibilities—but New York has been slow to develop policies and programs that can help these students succeed.

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# THE NEW NORMAL: SUPPORTING NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS ON THE PATH TO A DEGREE

More New Yorkers than ever are enrolling in universities and community colleges, driven by seismic changes in the economy that have made postsecondary credentials nearly indispensable for today's workforce. But on college campuses across the state, the makeup of the student body has changed. College is no longer just for "traditional" students who graduate high school at age 18, enroll directly in college, and are financially supported by family. Today, much of the growth is occurring among nontraditional students—people who are over the age of 25, enrolling part-time, have a full-time job while attending school, or are raising children.<sup>1</sup>

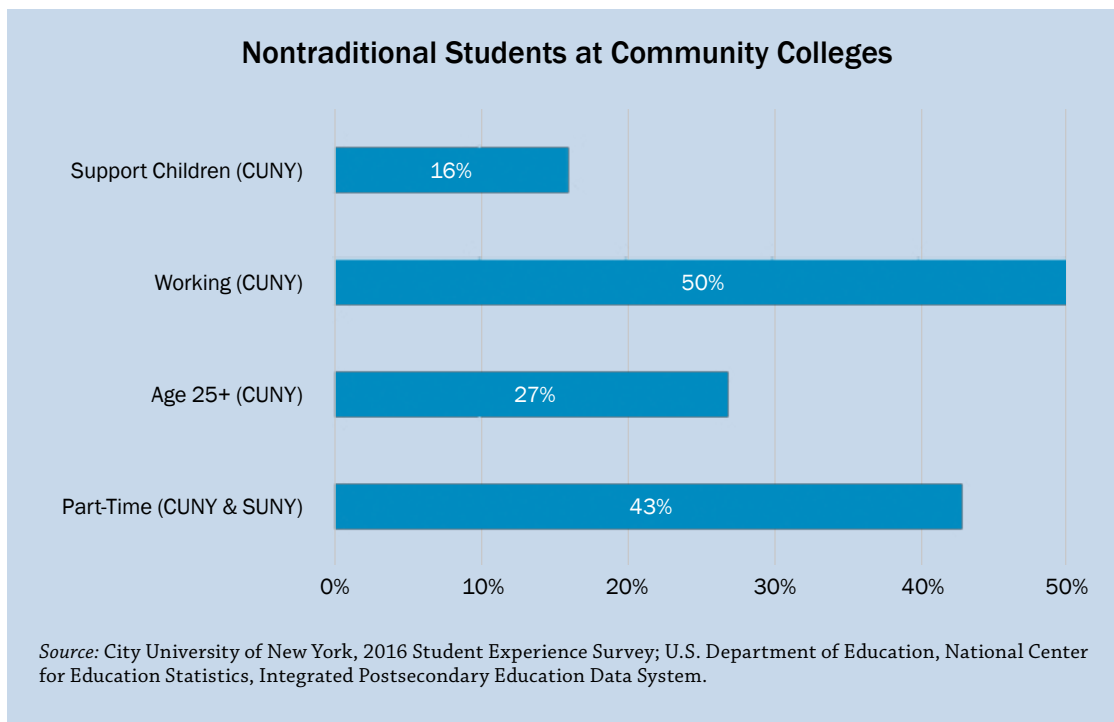
In New York, part-time students comprise 43 percent of all those enrolled in public community colleges statewide—an increase from 32 percent in 1980.<sup>2</sup> Overall, 139,501 students are enrolled on a part-time basis at community colleges operated by the State University of New York (SUNY) or the City University of New York (CUNY). Part-time students outnumber full-timers at 13 of the state's 37 public community colleges, including Onondaga Community College, Orange County Community College, Schenectady Community College, and Dutchess County Community College.<sup>3</sup>

In New York City, 27 percent of community college students are age 25 and older; half have a paying job, with 52 percent of working students employed more than 20 hours a week; and 16 percent have children whom they are supporting financially.<sup>4</sup>

"The nontraditional is now the traditional," says Lisette Nieves, a commissioner of the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics and founding partner at Lingo Ventures.

But while part-timers, older students, students with jobs, and students who are caring for children have become the new normal in community colleges from the Bronx to Buffalo, New York has been slow to develop a support system for helping nontraditional students succeed. Although the state has one of the most generous tuition assistance programs in the country, few nontraditional students can take advantage of it. Likewise, New York is home to some of the most innovative programs in the nation to increase graduation rates at community colleges—including the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) initiative at CUNY—but these programs are primarily geared toward full-time students. Community colleges and education agencies in other states have experimented with new models to support nontraditional students, but education officials and academic leaders in New York have mainly watched from the sidelines.

The need for new approaches is clear. In today's economy, community colleges are one of the most important platforms for elevating low-income New Yorkers into the middle class and enabling out-of-work New Yorkers to develop marketable skills for the new economy. But far too many of the New Yorkers enrolling in these institutions are dropping out without a degree—and much of the problem stems from alarmingly low success rates for nontraditional students.



The average four-year graduation rate is 28 percent at SUNY community colleges and 24 percent at CUNY, but many of the individuals we interviewed for this report say that the success rate is considerably lower for nontraditional students.<sup>5</sup> Although there is little data on graduation rates for nontraditional students, the *six-year* graduation rate for part-time students at CUNY community colleges is only 20 percent.<sup>6</sup>

For many nontraditional students, the biggest problem is that the road to graduation takes too long and costs too much. Faced with little money in the bank and a child or family member to care for, college ends up competing with paid work, childcare, family obligations, doctor’s appointments, and a host of other demands. Without the right supports, students end up chipping away at just one or two courses per semester—and the reward of a diploma recedes years into the distance. Too often, nontraditional students use up their lifetime supply of federal and state financial aid and run up student loans, raising the odds that an outside event or crisis will derail them from the path to a degree.

“I was a pretty good student, but I could not do what we’re asking our students to do,” says David

Gómez, president of CUNY’s Hostos Community College. “Support a family, sometimes an extended family including parents and grandparents, support a child, go to school full-time, and somehow figuring out how to pay for all of this in the city of New York.”

Some educators in New York and nationwide argue that student success initiatives should be targeted to full-time students. These arguments aren’t without merit. Data suggests that those enrolling on a full-time basis have a higher likelihood of graduating. But while encouraging students to attend full-time is advantageous, for countless New Yorkers the prospect of attending college full-time remains a fantasy. The reality is that thousands of poor and working poor New Yorkers with family obligations or paltry savings simply can’t afford to quit their jobs and make college their only priority. In 2016, 71 percent of CUNY’s community college students lived in households with combined incomes under \$30,000, up from 62 percent a decade ago.<sup>7</sup> Even though tuition assistance programs help defray the cost of college, low-income students still need to cobble together enough money to pay rent and absorb an array of everyday expenses—from groceries to subway fares.



The thousands of community college students who have kids at home face additional costs for everything from daycare to diapers.

New York has proven that it can be at the forefront of efforts to improve student success. CUNY's remarkably successful ASAP initiative—which more than doubles the graduation rate of students who participate compared to the traditional approach—has been heralded by education reformers around the nation. But in a state with roughly 140,000 part-time community college students, it's glaring how little has been done to support nontraditional students.<sup>8</sup>

By implementing strategies that help more nontraditional students earn a postsecondary degree or credential, New York's institutions of higher education can provide a path to sustainable employment for millions of under-credentialed New Yorkers. A postsecondary education is now an essential prerequisite for middle-income jobs in New York. Of the 25 fastest-growing occupations in New York State with a median wage of \$40,000 or more, 22 require a postsecondary degree or credential.<sup>9</sup> By 2018, an estimated 63 percent of jobs nationwide will require some level of postsecondary education, compared with just 28 percent in 1973.<sup>10</sup> Currently one out of every five New Yorkers works in a job that pays below the level required to keep a family of four out of poverty.<sup>11</sup> And poverty is more prevalent among the least educated families; among working families in New York that earn wages at less than 200 percent of the federal poverty line, more than half lack an adult with any postsecondary education.<sup>12</sup>

Accelerating the completion of postsecondary education for nontraditional students will require the state's public colleges and other state officials to adopt a set of coordinated interventions and reforms designed specifically to help nontraditional students progress more quickly and balance college with other serious responsibilities. This could include interventions such as block scheduling and year-round scheduling, guided pathways, awarding credits for prior learning, and expanding wraparound services and nonacademic supports. Meanwhile, state legislators should consider reforms to the state's Tuition Assistance Program

(TAP), which effectively bars part-time students from receiving aid.

Nontraditional students are more likely to blend work and school, but postsecondary institutions still treat holding down a job as an ancillary activity—a distraction from the ideal of full-time academic pursuits. "It's a survival penalty," says Nieves. "Because you have to work, you are trading off on school. We have a generation of students that really believes both school and work are valuable but we force them to choose one over the other."

This policy brief—funded by the Working Poor Families Project and based on numerous interviews with community college presidents, education experts, and policymakers—presents a menu of options for New York education officials and community college leaders designed to speed the progress of nontraditional students toward a degree.

### **Helping Part-Time Students Succeed**

Most experts agree that full-time study improves student outcomes. Students acquire credits more quickly, build stronger relationships with faculty and staff, and make education their primary focus. But for many of New York's aspiring college students, full-time study is a pipe dream. For a single parent with sole custody of children or a young person struggling to survive without any family support or savings, earning a postsecondary credential part-time is the best hope for a more stable future.

Helping these nontraditional students earn degrees will require a mix of interventions and reforms that support the needs of part-time students while enabling more to adopt full-time courses of study. However, CUNY's lauded ASAP initiative—its flagship program for community college students—is restricted to full-time study, which means it can only reach a fraction of the nontraditional student population.

ASAP has become a national model by offering community college students a complete package of supports, including proactive advising, free MetroCards and books, and streamlined class scheduling. An evaluation by MDRC showed that ASAP more than doubled the three-year graduation rates of program

# Far too many New Yorkers are dropping out without a degree—and much of the problem stems from alarmingly low success rates for nontraditional students.

participants—the best results of any community college intervention.<sup>13</sup> “ASAP worked so much better than anything else anyone has ever studied,” says Susan Scrivener, the lead author of the evaluation. “Other things help people only incrementally.”

Despite the program’s impressive results, too many community college students cannot take advantage of ASAP. As a result, there is a clear need for alternative supports and learning structures that serve students who cannot manage a traditional full-time course load.

Although CUNY officials say that ASAP’s extraordinary effectiveness is a result of the whole package of requirements and components, including the full-time study requirement, MDRC’s evaluation notes that the precise correlation between the program’s components and results is unknown. It is also unclear whether ASAP would be effective for students such as low-income parents who struggle to attend college full-time. In fact, the effectiveness of programs targeted toward nontraditional students is under-researched and poorly understood. MDRC researchers noted that a sizeable minority of the students in their program group had some nontraditional characteristics, yet did not differentiate between nontraditional and more traditional students when reporting the results.<sup>14</sup>

ASAP’s strict full-time requirement reflects the belief of many education experts and college administrators that students are better off committing to full-time study. “Part-time is an uninformed choice rather than a subgroup of CUNY students,” says Tracy Meade, CUNY’s director of strategic planning and program development. “If students were made aware of how long it would take them, you would see shifts in enrollment patterns.”

However, other experts emphasize that many students—nontraditional and adult students in particular—would be willing to take more credits per year if postsecondary institutions prioritized resources and supports that serve their specific needs. “We need to challenge the notion that part-time is a given when actually it’s often institutional behavior that forces students to go part-time,” says Bruce Vandal, a vice president at the national research and advocacy organization Complete College America. “Institutions haven’t designed and structured their offerings in a way that is student-centered and appreciates the circumstances that students bring.”

Despite the ongoing questions surrounding part-time study, individual ASAP program component—such as block scheduling, intensive advising, year-round class scheduling, tuition waivers for students receiving financial aid, and affirmative messaging to students about the benefits of completion—bear significant promise help more nontraditional students complete their programs. Many of these are standalone best practice interventions that have been attempted elsewhere; the great innovation of ASAP is to deliver these services in a single package.

Helping more nontraditional students succeed will require pooling both academic and nonacademic interventions, as ASAP does, while make these supports available to part-time students. Academic interventions include guided pathways models that combine set curricula, efficient scheduling, and intensive advising to fast-track students toward a degree in a high-growth field—an approach currently being piloted at CUNY’s Guttman Community College. Splitting degree programs into shorter, industry-recognized stackable

certificates will allow workers with limited time to advance their educational objectives in tandem with career advancement, as opposed to requiring workers to pursue their education all at once before returning to a career path. Other reforms should target unnecessary barriers to credit accumulation, including insufficient systems for granting credit for prior learning, which can help move the start line forward and return students to the workforce more quickly, and a remedial education system that culls far too many students who could otherwise be successful.

In addition, nontraditional students face a host of nonacademic challenges that can derail their academic ambitions. Colleges can help address these issues by ensuring that advising and counseling services go beyond tutoring and course selection to include navigating institutional bureaucracy and finding ways to pay for college. Counselors can provide access to income supports and public benefits such as work-study opportunities, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds. Lastly, changes to financial aid rules could help more nontraditional students afford college by covering accelerated and short-term technical education programs, part-time study, and summer classes. Such interventions can help bridge the gap between the prevailing model of higher education tailored to full-time study and the needs of students with multiple barriers and extensive responsibilities outside of their academic work.

### **Making Time for School**

For nontraditional students, time is on par with cost as an obstacle to college completion. Students who work, raise children, take care of relatives, or have other major responsibilities outside of school cannot make themselves available on campus at all hours of the day to accommodate a traditional college course schedule. Most colleges offer classes based on the availability of faculty rather than the availability of students, in deference to a model that prioritizes full-time students with few other responsibilities. Interventions that allow students to plan their schedules around school and work include block scheduling and year-round

courses. In addition, granting credit for prior learning and offering remedial courses as co-requisites with college-level courses can help push forward the start line for a degree. Finally, interventions that split degree programs into modular, stackable certificate programs while integrating work experiences into academic study can help the most time-pressed students gain meaningful skills more efficiently.

### **Scheduling classes around students' needs**

ASAP features two key scheduling components—block scheduling and year-round scheduling—that would help accelerate degree completion by nontraditional students. Scheduling all of a semester's required courses in longer blocks over fewer days allows students the opportunity to work more full days, too. Year-round scheduling accelerates the pace of degree completion by offering classes in the summer and winter intersessions, allowing students to complete more credits every calendar year. Because students in the same degree program would be taking many of the same classes at the same times during the week, block scheduling can create natural cohorts of students and increase beneficial socialization among students who would otherwise feel disconnected from campus life.

Combining these interventions would provide tremendous flexibility to students who would otherwise choose to take only a few credits every year. “The way community colleges and colleges in general are designed gives no real consideration for how students can get to campus, get the courses they need in a timely way, and then go on and do the other things in their lives,” observes Bruce Vandal of Complete College America. “By definition students will inevitably enroll part-time because they can do the course at 8 a.m. on Monday but they can't hang around campus until 2:30 p.m. to take the second class. So, they all end up having to make a choice: they'll do the 8 a.m. but they'll skip the 2:30 p.m.”

Taking the logic behind block scheduling a step further, a guided pathways model can create a set menu of courses that provides the quickest route to a degree. Under a guided pathways plan, students are first tracked into “meta majors” that encompass broad

courses of study such as healthcare, social sciences, or humanities, based on the students' general interests. This allows students to begin taking courses toward an intended degree while they decide on a specific major like nursing or economics. In some programs, students are automatically registered into courses each term, and can opt out as needed after consulting with advisors. This approach is sufficiently versatile to help students finish one- or two-year degree programs and also guide community college students who intend to transfer to four-year colleges for a bachelor's degree.

Monroe Community College (MCC) in Rochester employs the guided pathways model in its advanced manufacturing programs. "Sometimes the depth and the breadth of the curriculum gets in the way," says Anne Kress, MCC's president. "We need to analyze where students seem to flock and see how we can build a more manageable schedule for the university by looking at what courses students are taking. We need to map it all out for students." This process can serve multiple purposes, helping students manage their schedules while allowing the institution to assess which courses are necessary to produce graduates with the right skills for the workforce. As such, the guided pathways approach is as much a scheduling and advising intervention as it is a planning tool that can help schools link educational and career pathways.

Using block and year-round scheduling to meet the needs of working students requires postsecondary institutions to design their course schedules so that students can complete a degree only at night or on weekends. This presents a formidable cultural and logistical challenge for many schools, particularly in finding instructors willing to teach classes at inconvenient times. Some observers fear that moving toward student-centered scheduling may accelerate the already prevalent trend of relying on poorly paid adjunct faculty—often part-time workers themselves—to teach block-scheduled courses or during intersessions.

"The university is so reliant on part-time faculty to plug holes in less-desirable teaching slots," says Kate Pfordresher, director of research and public policy at the CUNY Professional Staff Congress, the faculty and staff workers' union. "They don't have job security, they

don't have support, and they don't get the pay. If CUNY wanted to create a dental hygienist track that can be done on Saturday mornings, they may have to rely on very underpaid adjunct faculty." Institutions should seek buy-in from faculty to support student-centered scheduling, while addressing the larger question of increasing reliance on adjunct faculty to shoulder the heaviest teaching loads.

### **Reducing redundancy by offering credit for prior learning**

Older students are not blank slates. Most have accumulated useful skills through work experience or job training that should be built on during postsecondary education. Yet most colleges do not offer credit for courses or training received outside the degree-granting divisions of their institutions. In fact, many colleges do not even accept courses from their own continuing education departments for credit toward a degree. As a result, many would-be students are deterred from pursuing postsecondary education by the prospect of having to sit through—and pay for—classes that review material they already know. With 39 percent of students in New York State attending more than one two-year institution in their postsecondary careers—and many more taking job-training courses outside of accredited academic institutions—offering credit for prior learning would prevent experienced workers from having to start their education from scratch at every institution.<sup>15</sup>

This work is already underway at SUNY's adult-focused Empire State College. In addition to evaluating credentials for their own students, Empire has collaborated with community colleges from across the state to evaluate each other's courses, so that classes taken at one school can be fully transferrable to another. Although such collaborations between individual colleges are an important start, establishing them among colleges at a regional level would give a significant boost to regional workforce development infrastructure by expanding the education and training choices available to students.

Assessing students based on competencies requires an up-front investment from colleges. But by allowing



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students to move the starting line for their degree forward, colleges can increase the chances that a student will stay in school and continue paying tuition. Placing out of basic courses is also good value for students. Merodie Hancock, president of Empire State College, says that the average student at her school saves about \$5,000 annually in credits received through prior learning assessments.

## **Stacking Credentials to Support Career Pathways**

Today's economy places a premium on continuous, lifelong skills building. This is particularly true for workers in growing fields such as technology and healthcare, where best practices are constantly evolving. Many New Yorkers would benefit from stackable certificate and degree programs that allow workers to access education as they need it—not all in one go.

In addition, these programs should be linked, allowing working students to build toward each subsequent degree or certificate by receiving credit for skills previously learned. “That’s a missing chess piece that is unfair to students,” says Lisette Nieves. “There is nothing worse to that student than going to a school, coming back a few years later, and realizing their credits are not accepted. Stacking and recognizing existing credits is important and often ignored.”

Splitting degree programs into certificate programs that can stand on their own also allows students to return to employment more quickly. For instance, a program that would normally take two years to complete can be split into six-month segments. Students would be able to earn a certificate after each six-month period, and each certificate would count for a quarter of an associate's degree. Students could continue to work

between certificate programs—each time advancing to the next level in their career trajectories—and return for the next segment as the need arises and their time and finances allow.

However, MCC President Anne Kress cautions that degree programs should be split carefully to ensure that the resulting stackable certificates have value in the labor market. “You only want to stack credentials that have actual value for students,” she says. “This means looking at programs to see where there is a natural exit point and where the student can take the credential out and add meaningful value to the economy.” This model allows students to more quickly obtain a credential while meeting the skilled-labor needs of employers. Monroe Community College doubled the completion rate for its precision machinist program from 40 percent to 80 percent after reformatting a year-long program into two six-month segments.

## **Rethinking Remedial Education**

Students who enter college with remedial or developmental education needs are highly likely to make no progress toward degree completion while burning through their limited lifetime supply of financial aid dollars. There are many reasons why nontraditional students may be underprepared for college, including poor secondary school preparation, a lengthy gap between high school and college, and work or family responsibilities that get in the way. Colleges usually determine college readiness by requiring entering students to take placement tests for remedial courses in mathematics, reading, and writing. Just over half of students entering the state's community colleges end up taking at least one remedial course.<sup>16</sup> Nationally,

# Nontraditional students are more likely to blend work and school, but colleges still treat holding down a job as a distraction from the ideal of full-time academic pursuits.

adult students are ten percentage points more likely to have taken a remedial course than younger students.<sup>17</sup> These students are twice as likely to drop out before completing a degree.

At CUNY's community colleges, for example, progress for students in remedial classes often grinds to a halt. Only 13 percent of students who place into mathematics remediation complete their degrees within three years. For remedial writing courses, the three-year completion rate is 11 percent and for reading, it's just 10 percent. These rates stand in stark contrast to the three-year graduation rate of 28 percent for all other CUNY community college students.<sup>18</sup> Although part of the difference in performance stems from the higher average level of academic preparation among students not assigned to remedial education, a study by the Community College Research Center that reviewed the outcomes for urban community college students nationwide concluded that remediation does not effectively prepare students for college-level work.<sup>19</sup>

In addition, more students are spending more financial aid on remedial courses before they even accumulate a single college credit. In the 2011–2012 school year, 2.7 million undergraduates nationwide took at least one remedial course, spending \$4.6 billion in Pell grants, compared to one million students in the 1999–2000 school year who spent \$1 billion in Pell grants.<sup>20</sup> Remediation is expensive for institutions, too. SUNY spends \$70 million annually in helping students attain basic competencies in preparation for a degree program.<sup>21</sup>

Making matters worse, numerous studies have shown that remedial tests are not always effective as predictors of college success. One often-cited study

showed that mathematics and English placement tests correctly predict success in college-level classes just 58 and 48 percent of the time, respectively.<sup>22</sup> If these numbers are accurate across institutions, it means that about half of all students placed into remedial classes could have succeeded in regular courses on the path to a degree. “Many adults have been away from school for a while—for a year, two years, five years—and maybe they were good high school students or they did pretty well in math and English, but they’re now a little rusty,” explains Bruce Vandal. “Then they take a placement exam that they don’t particularly prepare for when they haven’t seen a test in four or five years. They get placed in remedial education, when in fact their skills are not that bad but they just need a brush-up.”

Strategies for reforming this failed system of remediation include co-requisite models, in which students take remedial classes in conjunction with college-level courses and intensive advising, and the Integrated Basic Education Skills Training (IBEST) model, which incorporates basic skills material into occupational skills courses. Both present promising alternatives to the currently bleak outcomes for remedial students. “We need to put these students directly into college-level math and English courses and then provide all the support they need to be successful in those courses,” says Vandal. “That way you’re more efficiently meeting their needs and you’re not asking them to spend more time and money on a degree.” In addition, students in co-requisite programs receive comprehensive academic advising, tutoring, and mentoring as they work their way through college-level classes.

The state of Tennessee’s co-requisite model has demonstrated dramatic success in boosting completion

rates by nontraditional students. In the first full year of implementation, the Tennessee Board of Regents reported that the share of students who completed gateway math courses increased from 12 percent before implementation to 55 percent, and the share who completed gateway English courses increased from 31 to 62 percent. These results were about the same for adult students. Warren Nichols, a vice chancellor for community colleges at the Board of Regents says that not only are students succeeding under this co-requisite model, they often outperform students who are not in remedial classes. “When I give reading [for a class], probably less than a third [of students] have read the book and understood it,” he says. “But if I have a student doing a co-requisite reading as well as my class, they are reading my material in the co-requisite reading class and learning how to read it. So co-requisite students are better prepared for class and outperform students who are not [receiving] learning support.”

CUNY has also seen promising results in its efforts to rethink remediation. The CUNY Math Mainstreaming Experiment found that 46 percent of adult students passed traditional math remediation compared to 41 percent of adult students who are offered enrichment workshops along with remediation. That rate jumps to an astounding 78 percent for students who are placed directly in a college-level course as well as an enrichment workshop.<sup>23</sup>

### **Expanding Wraparound Services and Nonacademic Supports**

Nontraditional students are likely to be juggling significant responsibilities outside of their academic lives, such as caring for children or relatives, and holding down multiple jobs. These students would benefit from advising and counseling that goes beyond classroom success to address major nonacademic issues, including paying for college, supporting a family, balancing work and school, and developing the life skills necessary to succeed in college.<sup>24</sup>

Advisors should be able to connect students to a wide range of supportive services and serve as cheerleaders to keep students motivated. “Students often have five hundred reasons why they should not

continue on in their degrees,” says Merodie Hancock of Empire State College. “Advisors should be there to reinforce that one good reason why they should.”

Student services offices should be open and ready to serve nontraditional students whenever they are on campus—including weekends, evenings, and during intersessions—and their services should be expanded to allow advisors to proactively address more nonacademic problems before they become debilitating. “We know that if a student that comes in, sees an advisor first semester freshman year, and then never sees them again until they graduate, they are not likely to actually graduate,” says David Gómez, president of Hostos Community College. “So we need to build those things into our regular business practices in addition to strategies to address the needs of underprepared students.”

For nontraditional students struggling to pay for college while supporting themselves and their families, income supports can make the difference between persistence and dropping out. Expanding work-study programs is particularly crucial, because working on campus allows students to earn income while remaining close to academic resources, and work-study can be especially effective if the job is related to the student’s course of study. Campus jobs can also help avoid the scheduling challenges and long commutes that present major obstacles for working students. In addition, colleges can help connect students with other income supports by offering seamless access to public benefits such as SNAP and TANF, and subsidized childcare for students who qualify. Colleges should also consider expanding nonacademic services to include family and personal development supports, such as on-campus childcare, emergency grants for medical or other life emergencies, access to tax preparation, financial counseling, and career counseling services.

Community colleges do not have to tackle this alone. Colleges should partner with community-based organizations to support students as they cope with major life responsibilities. All CUNY community colleges already do this to differing extents through the Single Stop Community College Initiative, which provides coordinated access to public benefit programs.

However, among SUNY's 30 community colleges, only two—Westchester Community College and MCC—offer Single Stop. Leaving students to arrange all of these services themselves makes it less likely that they will succeed in education. “For years, ‘life’ has been a great excuse for why people stop out, but now the challenge is higher,” says Merodie Hancock of Empire State College. “We need to rethink what we can do to get in front of life so students can access and succeed in education.”

### Reforming Financial Aid to Spur Innovation

Financial aid is perhaps the best-known nonacademic support for traditional students, but financial aid policies designed for traditional students often leave nontraditional adult and working students behind. State and federal financial aid policies exacerbate the problem of slow progress to completion by failing to support students with nontraditional schedules or the courses of study that would best serve them. As the Center for an Urban Future detailed in a previous study—*Tapped Out* (2014)—New York's main source of grant funding, the Tuition Assistance Program, requires students to have completed at least two consecutive semesters of full-time study before they can be eligible for financial aid as a part-time student.<sup>25</sup> TAP is also unavailable in the summer, which creates an unnecessary delay in students' progress toward completion. Lastly, older students who previously attended college as young adults may have used up their lifetime allotment of state and federal financial aid, leaving them without financial aid resources when they return to school.

Colleges seeking to better serve nontraditional students run into state and federal regulations that limit the kinds of programs eligible for financial aid. These convoluted rules make it difficult for colleges to offer non-credit programs and certificate programs that are shorter than a standard semester, because students would not be able to use financial aid to cover the full cost of tuition. For example, TAP grants are only available to new students who attend classes on a full-time basis, which is defined as twelve 50-minute “semester hours” over no fewer than 100 calendar days, or a total of 24 semester hours in a single year.<sup>26</sup> Aid is

only granted for “collegiate-level programs leading to a degree, or programs leading to a diploma or certificate that are fully creditable towards a degree program in that institution, and does not include “courses taken solely to meet teacher certification, licensing, or other external requirements”<sup>27</sup> At the federal level, regulations require that programs eligible for Pell Grant funding provide at least 600 hours of instruction across 15 weeks.<sup>28</sup>

The regulations are especially counterproductive given how valuable some ineligible programs can be for workers looking to gain skills and boost wages. For instance, CUNY offers a 30-credit medical coding certificate that it developed in partnership with the 1199/SEIU Training and Upgrading Fund, but because TAP regulations exclude licensing courses from aid eligibility, students must seek outside financial support. Although 1199 offers some aid for students interested in taking this course, one CUNY official said that other programs that could lead to industry-recognized credentials are consistently under-enrolled because students cannot afford to pay for the classes out of pocket. Anne Kress of Monroe Community College has encountered the same problem. “Some of the shorter-term programs that have the highest economic benefit are non-credit, like welding,” she says. “Students either have to pay out of pocket or take out loans or find a scholarship. But in four months they can get a welding certificate that would enable them to get into an entry position for welding at very little investment of time. That's significant.”

At the end of that four-month program, the welding student will have acquired useful skills that will help them advance in their career path, but may not have accumulated credit toward a degree. This is a major missed opportunity for students, as the time and money invested in education should ultimately help move the student forward on the path to a degree. Programs that impart in-demand skills such as welding should be designed to grant credits that are transferable to a degree program. Otherwise, workers who decide to pursue a degree in the future will be forced to start from scratch, rather than receiving a boost from their prior learning.



New York State’s regulations governing TAP are much less flexible than Pell Grant rules. Whereas the state has a fixed minimum of 15-week semesters for financial aid eligibility, Pell rules allow accelerated programs at schools with vocational programs to make their courses eligible for financial aid at a rate proportional to the amount of time it takes to complete the program. For instance, Monroe Community College’s accelerated advanced manufacturing degree program takes 24 weeks to complete, which is 80 percent of the standard 30 weeks a year required for full financial aid eligibility under Pell rules. Students in that program are therefore able to cover 80 percent of the cost with Pell funding. MCC was able to secure private scholarship funding from a foundation to cover the remaining 20 percent of the cost for some students, but there is not enough funding available for all students in the program.

This financial aid gap for accelerated programs puts New York at a disadvantage compared to states such as Texas and Florida that have adopted more flexible rules. Although New York’s education statutes say that programs may grant credits for fewer hours of instruction and study only with special approval from the commissioner, it does not specify what the procedure is for making those courses eligible for financial aid.<sup>29</sup> “If state can come forward and say that they are interested in the same thing the schools are interested in—putting people into the workforce—and say how we may be able to get financial aid for these types of programs and lay out the process, it would be a big help to the school,” says Jerome St. Croix, the director of financial aid at Monroe Community College, who secured approval from the federal Department of Education for their accelerated programs. By failing to clarify its procedures for obtaining financial aid for non-standard degree programs and credit-bearing certificates that lead to industry-recognized credentials, the New York State Department of Education is undercutting the ability of New York’s postsecondary institutions to innovate.

Financial aid policy should move away from judging the adequacy of programs based on time spent in the classroom rather than the competencies that

students gain. Many of the specialized skills that are most in demand across the state—in industries such as advanced manufacturing, healthcare, and social services—do not require a traditional education to master. Institutions including Monroe Community College and CUNY recognize this and are offering relevant programs. But financial aid policies have not kept up with the times. “Our financial aid system is a product of the time in which it was initiated and it has not really changed substantially since then,” says Jay Quaintance, president of SUNY Sullivan Community College and Governor Andrew Cuomo’s former assistant secretary for education. “But the way that students experience college has changed considerably.”

### **Recommendations: Six Ways to Help Nontraditional Students Succeed**

As the population of nontraditional students swells, the term itself becomes a misnomer: nontraditional is the new traditional in New York’s public system of higher education. In order to help more New Yorkers access good jobs in growing fields—and support themselves and their families—it is essential that the education system work better for nontraditional students. A strategy to support nontraditional student success should offer a suite of interventions in concert, including measures that address both the academic and non-academic challenges that these students face.

*Design programs and schedules for working students.* Students in programs of study that have many required courses can benefit from block scheduling. Colleges should ensure that students can complete entire degree programs in a limited number of blocks and encourage the creation of student cohorts as a built-in support network. Students in programs that allow more electives may benefit from a guided pathways model that can help them find the shortest route to a degree while cutting down on unnecessary courses.

*Decrease the time required to obtain degrees or credentials.* Colleges should conduct environmental studies of the training and education landscapes for their most in-demand fields of study to determine what skills are essential to gain entry and to advance. In addition, colleges should develop assessments for skills

that working students may have developed on the job or through other training programs. These steps can become the basis to determine credit for prior learning, which can allow students to start a program from the point where they left off, rather than spend limited financial aid dollars on courses that repeat what they have already learned. Community colleges can cooperate at the regional level to offer credit for each other's courses in order to better serve students who have taken classes at various postsecondary institutions.

By splitting programs of study into stackable credentials, students can gain practical knowledge more quickly and return to the workforce with new, marketable skills. These credentials take much less time to complete than standard degree programs, but can be acquired sequentially at various points along a career pathway. Students with limited time would be able to walk away with an industry-recognized credential after just a few months and use it to get a raise or take the next step in their careers, and then return to college as time and money allows.

*Reform remediation and provide academic supports.* Colleges should adopt co-requisite remediation models that allow students to develop basic skills while also taking college-level courses for credit. CUNY and SUNY's current model, which requires students that place into developmental education to take non-credit courses, delays and often derails students' education without actually preparing students for college-level work. Co-requisite models would allow students to begin taking credit-bearing courses immediately after enrollment while receiving strong tutoring and other academic supports to ensure their success. This model has demonstrated tremendous results in Tennessee's community college system, among others, and leads to a quicker route to graduation.

*Expand wraparound services and improve nonacademic supports.* Nonacademic challenges bedevil non-traditional students as much—if not more so—than academic ones. These students are even more susceptible to interruptions for nonacademic reasons such as family responsibilities, financial crises, or health issues. It is therefore crucial that schools offer coordinated nonacademic supports on campus, such as

childcare, public benefits enrollment assistance, work-study programs, and counseling services that help students develop life skills beyond the classroom.

*Improve the financial aid system to help nontraditional students.* The state should clarify its procedures for obtaining financial aid for nonstandard degree programs and credit-bearing certificates that lead to industry-recognized credentials, opening the door for colleges to create innovative stackable credential programs and accelerated degree programs. To do so, the state should follow the procedures already in place under the federal Pell Grant program. In addition, the state should remove the barriers that limit access to TAP aid by part-time students and students in summer programs.

*Build the evidence base for nontraditional student supports.* The secret to ASAP's success is that students in the program receive a suite of academic and non-academic supports in concert. However, the extent to which each support contributes to the overall success of the program remains unknown. Also unknown are the specific benefits of these interventions for non-traditional students. CUNY should continue to track the outcomes of ASAP participants as well as study how interventions delivered together may help students who do not attend school on a traditional full-time basis. Researchers should also construct student outcome evaluations of guided pathway and stackable credential programs to determine what interventions are most effective for nontraditional students in those contexts. Finally, researchers should build the evidence base around receiving financial aid for part-time study.

# APPENDIX

## Total Enrollment at CUNY and SUNY Community Colleges by Full-Time/Part-Time Attendance, Fall 2015

### CUNY Community College Enrollment

	Full-Time	Part-Time	% Part-Time
BMCC	18,074	9,235	33.8%
Bronx	6,995	4,439	38.8%
Guttman	744	80	9.7%
Hostos	4,192	3,179	43.1%
Kingsborough	9,769	7,263	42.6%
LaGuardia	10,584	8,995	45.9%
Queensborough	9,290	6,203	40.0%

### SUNY Community College Enrollment

	Full-Time	Part-Time	% Part-Time
Adirondack	2,294	1,699	42.5%
Broome	4,265	1,661	28.0%
Cayuga County	1,799	2,385	57.0%
Clinton	910	952	51.1%
Columbia-Greene	711	1,070	60.1%
Corning	1,929	2,043	51.4%
Dutchess	4,284	5,262	55.1%
Erie	7,931	4,091	34.0%
Fashion Institute	7,409	1,977	21.1%
Finger Lakes	3,003	3,752	55.5%
Fulton-Montgomery	1,426	1,125	44.1%
Genesee	2,846	3,675	56.4%
Herkimer County	1,752	1,268	42.0%
Hudson Valley	6,253	5,543	47.0%
Jamestown	2,353	2,473	51.2%
Jefferson	2,095	1,653	44.1%
Mohawk Valley	3,632	3,043	45.6%
Monroe	8,856	5,730	39.3%
Nassau	12,956	8,602	39.9%
Niagara County	3,610	2,506	41.0%
North Country	816	1,067	56.7%
Onondaga	5,895	5,991	50.4%
Orange County	3,226	3,756	53.8%
Rockland	4,018	3,162	44.0%
Schenectady County	2,234	3,892	63.5%
Suffolk County	14,722	12,107	45.1%
Sullivan County	809	783	49.2%
Tompkins Cortland	2,179	904	29.3%
Ulster County	1,437	2,031	58.6%
Westchester	7,062	5,904	45.5%

Sources: City University of New York, Office of Institutional Research, Student Data Book; NY Open Data, Headcount Enrollment by Student Level and Student Load by Institutions of the State University of New York

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