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How Community Colleges Address Basic Needs and Financial Stability of Low-Income Students to Boost College Completion: Lessons from the Working Students Success Network

OBJECTIVES OF THE INITIATIVE
 To improve students' academic, employment, and financial stability in the short term, while laying a foundation for long-term economic success (Figure 1)

Community colleges serve as the gateway to career success for many people, allowing them to compete in an environment that increasingly demands higher skills and education beyond high school. Yet for many low-income students and students of color, financial and other barriers can derail their efforts to complete a postsecondary credential. In addition, students often have work and family responsibilities that compete with their educational goals. Although financial aid is widely available, other types of supports may also help such students succeed.

In 2014, the Working Students Success Network (WSSN) was launched by a group of philanthropies—the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Lumina Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Kresge Foundation, MetLife Foundation, and Bank of America. WSSN is a consortium of 19 community colleges in Arkansas, California, Virginia, and Washington, led by the national reform network, Achieving the Dream. This innovative strategy seeks to support colleges as they create pathways and provide integrated services to improve students' academic, employment, and financial stability in the short term, while laying a foundation for long-term economic success. The colleges were charged with addressing low-income students' widespread needs by offering group-based and more intensive, one-on-one services in three pillars. (Figure 1)

Working Students Success Network's Service Pillars

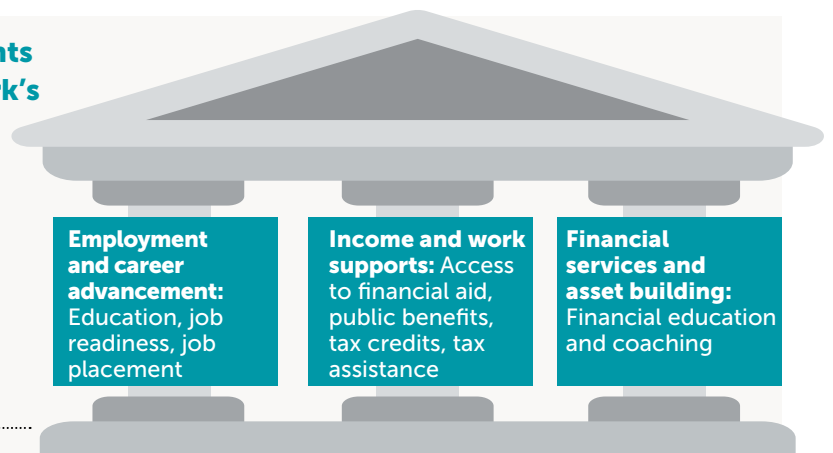


Figure 1

WSSN STRATEGY AND EVALUATION

The theory undergirding this effort suggests that providing integrated services to address financial and other basic needs will increase students' college persistence and completion, as well as their employment and financial prospects, ultimately leading to economic success (Figure 2). By broadening the kinds of supports they provide students, colleges would promote equity and inclusion and drive institutional change to create a positive, supportive environment for serving low-income students and students of color.

Mathematica and its partner DVP-PRAXIS conducted an evaluation of the initiative and

provided technical support to colleges for data collection and reporting. Because this was the first major expansion of an integrated service delivery approach in community colleges, the goal of the evaluation was to describe how WSSN was implemented and identify outcomes that might be associated with participation. The research also revealed factors that may lead to success and tradeoffs colleges may face in meeting students' needs. For example, intensive, one-on-one services appear to make a difference in helping students achieve success, but they typically reach fewer students than group-based services. This brief distills the evaluation findings and presents implications for similar efforts moving forward.

WSSN strategy for integrated service delivery

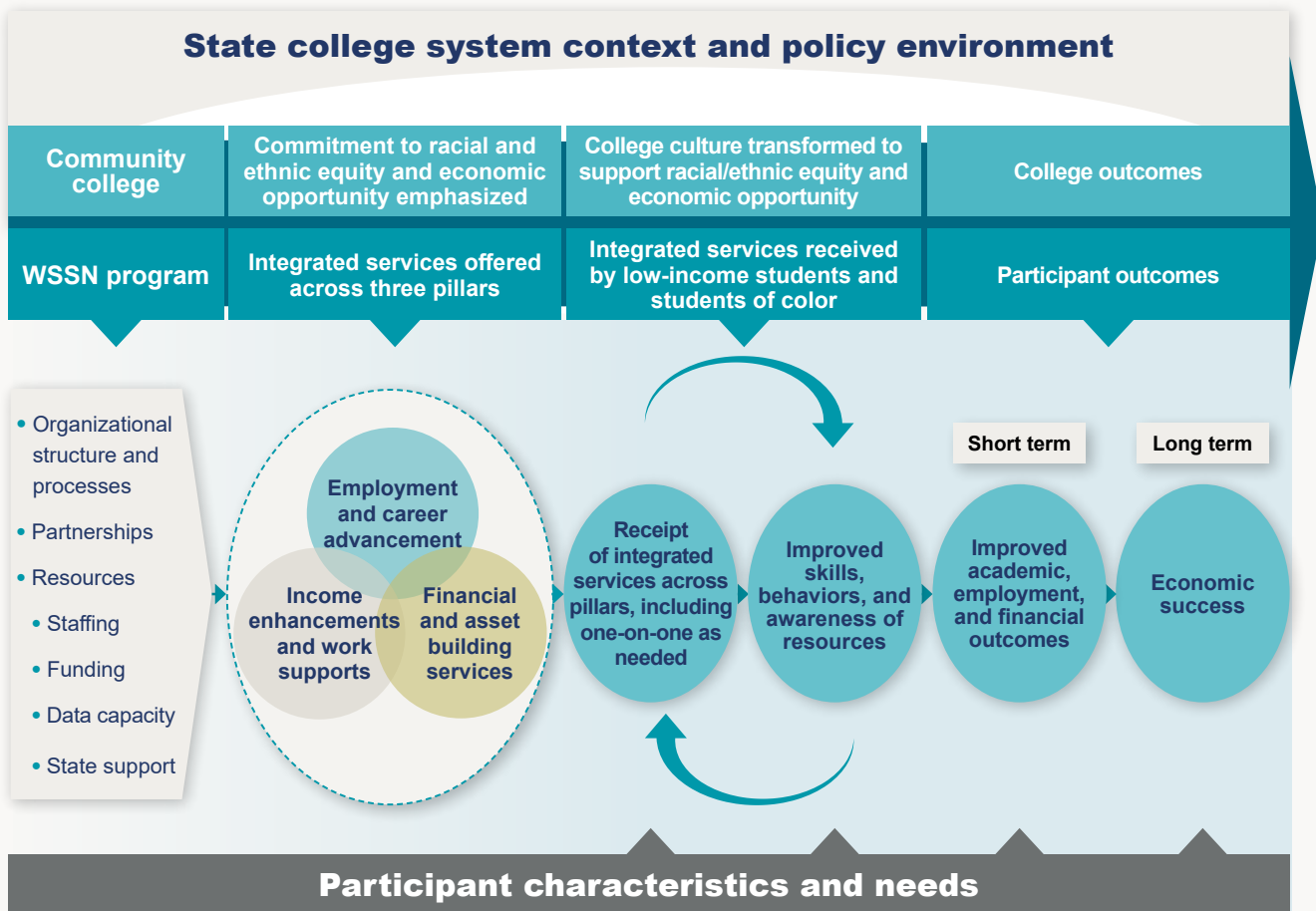


Figure 2

ABOUT THIS STUDY

To document implementation and measure progress toward sustaining the strategy, the research team reviewed colleges' background documents and annual reports, conducted phone interviews with all study colleges, and led site visits at eight institutions. The team also analyzed administrative data 18 colleges provided from student records for fall 2015 through spring 2017 to examine participant characteristics, service receipt, and the relationship between service receipt and academic outcomes, overall and by subgroups targeted by the strategy.

FINDINGS ON STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS AND EXPERIENCE

- Relative to their student bodies, the majority of colleges served larger shares of blacks, Hispanics, or Pell grant recipients, in line with the strategy's focus on low-income students and students of color.
- One-third of participants received services in multiple pillars, and one-third received intensive, one-on-one services; 17 percent received both.
- Receiving at least one intensive, one-on-one service was associated with improved persistence and credential completion. Receipt of services across two or more pillars was associated with increased persistence but decreased completion.

FINDINGS ON COLLEGE AND PARTNER PROCESSES

- Colleges approached WSSN services in several ways: (1) developing and delivering new services to help students access public benefits and improve their financial stability, (2) incorporating new services in success courses or orientation programs, (3) providing prepackaged services in multiple areas, and (4) providing customized services—including intensive one-on-one coaching—to select students.
- Colleges targeted intensive, one-on-one services to students participating in special programs, such as those on public assistance and those in adult basic education, basic skills, or workforce education and training programs.
- External partners shared their expertise by delivering services directly to students, as well as training college staff.



53,000 students served between fall 2015 and spring 2017



More than 225 services provided



1/3 of participants received services in multiple pillars or intensive, one-on-one services; 17 percent received both

PROMISING PRACTICES

The research team identified six factors that helped colleges implement services to meet students' needs effectively.

1. **Obtaining commitment from executive leaders and having a stable, distributed leadership network with responsibility and accountability for implementation.** Some senior staff, such as vice presidents of student services, engaged their deans and directors, as well as counterparts in academic affairs, to move the effort forward and build buy-in and support.
2. **Integrating services that break down silos between student services programs and academic departments.** Collaborations among programs and departments helped eliminate redundant services, embed new ones into existing programs, and in some cases facilitate centralization of student services.
3. **Ensuring widespread, collective buy-in and support for the college to provide one-on-one coaching to address students' basic needs and improve their financial stability.** Most administrators, faculty, and staff concurred that providing students a personal contact who could provide holistic supports, and be aware of the variety of barriers that students experiencing poverty face, furthered their mission.
4. **Building cultural responsiveness to the needs of students in poverty.** Professional development and campus events promoted awareness and reflection about the stigma of poverty, and heightened collective responsibility for student success.
5. **Establishing service centers that increase visibility of and commitment to addressing student poverty and educational success.** Service "hubs" provided a one-stop, on-campus location for a variety of internal and external resources, easily accessed by

HUB MODEL EXAMPLE

Patrick Henry Community College in Martinsville, Virginia, created a Student Success Center to serve as a hub for engaging and supporting students. Key features include:

- Securing dedicated space and fundraising for ongoing improvements
- Establishing an identifiable brand
- Training staff to deliver a wide range of services to meet students' needs
- Establishing a co-located food pantry
- Incorporating the center into ongoing strategic planning at the college

students, to address financial and other basic needs. In addition, some colleges created food pantries, which highlighted their institution's commitment to addressing students' basic needs and empathy to carry culture change forward.

6. **Broadening engagement and collaboration with external partners.** Community organizations, public agencies, and nonprofits were important for sharing resources and helping colleges deliver services.

LOOKING AHEAD

Going forward, community colleges and other partners engaged in similar efforts may want to consider the following implications as they think about how to sustain services to improve the economic success of low-income students and students of color.

Receiving an intensive, one-on-one service may matter more than receiving services across multiple pillars. Although the evaluation was not designed to measure the effectiveness of WSSN, and outcomes may reflect dissimilar students selecting to participate in different services, the findings indicate that receiving an intensive, one-on-one service is related to positive academic outcomes, including persistence and credential completion. This suggests the potential importance of personalized assistance to address such basic needs as food, housing, and child care. Indeed, administrators, faculty, and staff praised the relationships that developed between coaches and students as a “game changer.” Conversely, receiving services in two or more pillars was associated with increased persistence but decreased completion. This may reflect a mismatch between students' needs and services received when services are prepackaged across pillars, rather than tailored to students' needs. It might also suggest that students requiring services in multiple pillars may need more time to earn a credential.

Colleges may reach more students with less intensive services delivered in group settings, but one-on-one services can be customized to align with individual needs and goals. Offering services in group settings based on typical student needs may be easier and less resource intensive than customizing services for individuals, and doing so may reach more students, supporting longer-term scale-up and sustainability goals. Many colleges included WSSN services in existing college success courses, often as a

prepackaged combination across multiple pillars, but this did not always result in student referrals to more intensive, customized services such as coaching. Given the potential value of customized services and the difficulty of offering them in group settings, finding ways to address individual student needs outside of student success courses may be important.

A one-on-one service delivery approach may not be the only way to target services to meet individual needs. While one-on-one services—including coaching—appear to be associated with positive outcomes, some colleges may need to explore less resource intensive approaches to addressing individual student needs. For example, colleges could monitor student behavior in real time and service referrals could be triggered by specific events (such as withdrawing from a course). Some colleges around the nation have turned to predictive analytics to identify which services are needed by specific groups of students based on their behavior and history. Such data-driven strategies may require up-front costs but, over time, could be a way to customize services without assigning a counselor or coach to every student. Finally the “hub” model is another alternative to assigning students coaches. Allowing students to drop by a single location when they have a need may improve efficiency for both students and colleges.

The WSSN sites provided useful lessons regarding ways colleges can address the needs of low-income students and students of color. More evidence about these and other innovative approaches can help colleges and students succeed. For example, further qualitative data collection could investigate the extent to which services received across two or more pillars are actually targeted to an individual student's needs, whether intensive one-on-one services are used to determine the appropriate customization of services across pillars, and how the WSSN fits within the larger ecosystem of related programs available across academic, workforce, and student services. In tandem, a more rigorous impact analysis could be designed to study whether WSSN services improve student outcomes relative to services otherwise available at the colleges, and whether one-on-one services lead to better outcomes for students.

This brief is based upon the final implementation and outcomes evaluation reports for the Working Students Success Network.

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