

Supporting Best Practices in Student Success: Lessons from the Field

An Evaluation by the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP)



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About the Partners

The Supporting Best Practices in Student Success project was funded through the generous assistance of the **TG Public Benefit Program**. The findings and conclusions in this report do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of TG, its officers, and employees. TG promotes educational access and success so that students can realize their college and career dreams. As a public nonprofit corporation, TG offers resources to help students and families plan and prepare for college, learn the basics of money management, and repay their federal student loans. www.tgslc.org

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The mission of the **National College Access Network (NCAN)** is to build, strengthen, and empower communities committed to college access and success so that all students, especially those underrepresented in postsecondary education, can achieve their educational dreams.

Incorporated in 1995, NCAN's mission is to build, strengthen, and empower communities committed to college access and success so that all students, especially those underrepresented in postsecondary education, can achieve their educational dreams. With its members and partners, NCAN develops and supports programs and policy solutions that help more students aspire to, apply to, enter, and succeed in college or other postsecondary training. NCAN's hundreds of members span a broad range of the education, nonprofit, government, and civic sectors, including community-based nonprofit organizations, federally funded TRIO and GEAR UP programs, school districts, colleges and universities, foundations, and corporations. www.collegeaccess.org

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IHEP is committed to improving college access and success in higher education for all students—with a special focus on underserved populations—by providing timely research to inform public policy decisions.

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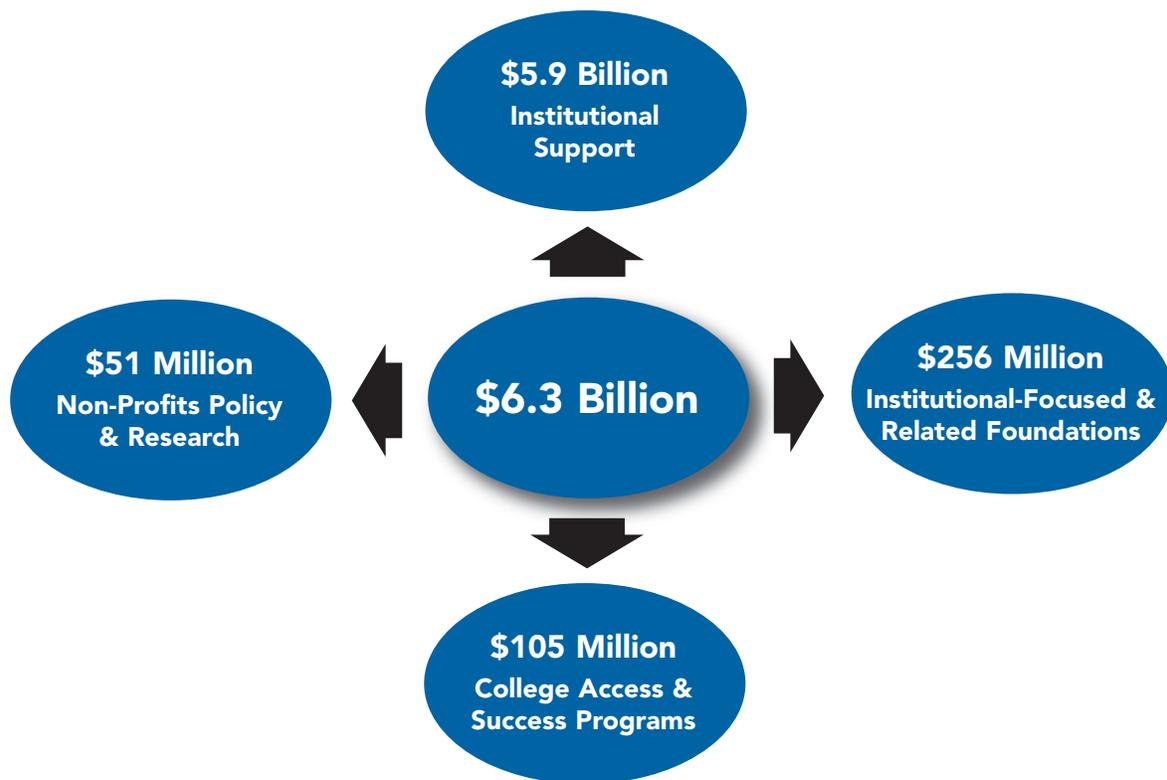
A Brief Historical Context of College Access and Success Work

The United States has witnessed great increases in college-going rates over the last three decades —no doubt due to widespread efforts by our nation’s policymakers and the tireless work of our college access and success practitioners. Yet, despite progress in increasing postsecondary education attendance across the nation, only half of the students enrolled in four-year institutions graduate within six years.¹ Fewer than half of students who enter community colleges with the goal of earning a degree or certificate have attained that goal, transferred to a four-year institution, or are still enrolled six years later.² What’s more, we’ve yet to meaningfully address the multitude of barriers to completion that many of our nation’s most underserved students face. With persistent gaps in degree attainment across racial/ethnic groups and only 20 percent of low-income students in higher education completing a bachelor’s degree within six years,³ implementing and enhancing strategies to increase college completion rates for underserved student populations continues to challenge federal and state policymakers, philanthropists, and education practitioners alike.

With growing globalization, stagnant social mobility, soaring college costs and deep demographic change, the need to increase college degree completion is paramount. If the U.S. is to maintain and elevate its competitive status in the global economy, workplace productivity and innovation must increase,⁴ and the general agreement among many stakeholders is that investments in college completion will provide the fuel needed to accelerate the slow crawl out of the economic recession. However, the current economic climate has forced our policymakers to exercise more prudence over current and future investments in postsecondary education. From 2003-2008, federal and state governments spent 9.1 billion dollars on first-year students who did not return to college for their second year.⁵ As illustrated in Figure 1, the philanthropic community has also contributed greatly to postsecondary education, much of which has supported efforts to increase student success. The private and social benefits of a college degree are particularly relevant for historically underserved students, such as first-generation, low-income, and racial/ethnic minority students, and as such, the political, economic, and social realities suggest that the stakes have never been higher.

Critical to the national college completion movement, the role of college access practitioners has evolved into one that focuses on ensuring that students not only gain access to college, but also successfully graduate. College access practitioners have put forth much effort and spent many resources developing effective approaches, strategies, and programs to increase college retention and success for underserved students. However, many such efforts have been derailed by the many implementation challenges that arise when incorporating retention services onto an already robust programming platform focused on college enrollment. Further, access practitioners have been steadfast in their pursuit of establishing much stronger data systems, to include well-considered evaluative measures focused on effective retention programming. As stakeholders invest in and implement strategies to increase college completion, data collection and analysis has become critical as a means of improving programs, informing decisions and communicating outcomes to external audiences.⁶

Figure 1: Private Philanthropy Commitments to Postsecondary Education, 2007-2010



Source: Figure extracted from *Smart Money: Informing Higher Education Philanthropy*, Institute for Higher Education Policy, (2011).

Adopting the Access and Success Mantra

For several years, the National College Access Network (NCAN) has been working to address educational attainment gaps by building capacity of its member programs to better support historically underserved students through degree completion. Access programs that track their students through college often find that they are not retained or graduating at the institutional average. As a result, access programs are increasingly adopting the concept of college “access and success,” as the mantra that guides their programming platform. Although most college access practitioners understand the pressing need for this extended support, many programs need technical assistance and other resources to plan for this work—program design, building partnerships, collecting data, leveraging resources, evaluation—and to implement the new or expanded services. These efforts to create partnerships with school districts, postsecondary education institutions and other stakeholders provide low-income, first-generation, and/or underrepresented racial/ethnic minority students the academic, financial, campus and personal supports they need to be successful.

To help build the capacity of its members in this area, NCAN targeted student success as a major theme of its work, including at recent annual conferences and regional meetings, featuring effective success practices in technical assistance seminars and webinars, and helping organizations develop a framework for program development and sustainability. In addition to discussing and sharing best practices among the access and success community, NCAN has taken a keen interest in working with organizations to provide technical assistance focusing on building and strengthening programmatic activities and investigating ways to measure the extent to which these programs are effective.

Overview of the Supporting Best Practices in Student Success Project

The overarching goal of the *Supporting Best Practices in Student Success Project* to create, enhance, or expand successful programs that are replicable and can be scaled to greatly improve the percentage of underserved students who complete postsecondary education. In doing so, NCAN aimed to build its capacity and expertise to serve as a key resource for organizations seeking to engage in college success work going forward.

To accomplish this goal, NCAN worked with four member organizations to create, enhance, or expand their student persistence, retention, and college success programs. The four organizations were selected through a competitive Request for Proposals (RFP) process. The RFP was released in October 2010 and asked applicants to address elements that, according to the wide body of literature on student success and program development, lead to positive student outcomes. In their proposals, applicants articulated their vision for creating or enhancing/expanding their student success programs and outlined work to be done over the course of the project, which included both a planning and an implementation phase:

- **Planning Phase:** During the six- to eight-month *planning phase*, applicants mapped out all aspects of the program including its design; how partnerships would be built, resources leveraged and data collected. In addition, they created a work plan that detailed the major activities, desired outcomes and objectives, benchmarks against which to compare their future outcomes, methods of data collection, and a complete timeline for the duration of the grant period and evaluation periods.
- **Implementation Phase:** Upon successful completion of the planning phase, grantees would receive an award to implement and execute all program activities and targets.

Throughout the planning and implementation phases of the grant, NCAN provided technical assistance virtually through phone calls and webinars, as well as in-person through convenings at its national conferences, regional meetings and site visits. NCAN also provided other resources such as an online evaluation toolkit, training manuals for access and success advisors, and tools for data collection on student tracking, and program sustainability. In addition to serving as the project evaluator, the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) provided technical assistance on evaluation methods, and participated in email correspondence as appropriate.

Supporting Best Practices in Student Success: Lessons from the Field

The evaluation of this project consisted of three sets of activities occurring over a nearly two-year period. First, IHEP reviewed the literature on promising, evidence-based strategies that similar organizations have implemented to link college completion goals to college access programs and practices. The second activity involved grantee site visits to conduct staff and student interviews and perform a review of student tracking data. Finally, IHEP analyzed information and lessons learned from the four programs to inform the field. This analysis provides the foundation for the remainder of this report.

The following pages offer an overview of the grantee organizations that participated in this project, a summary of the success work they implemented, and the outcomes they achieved. Subsequent sections describe common themes among grantee organizations, the specific practices and strategies they used to increase student retention, the success and challenges they experienced, and recommendations for organizations in the access and success field to consider as they endeavor similar programmatic work.

Funded by the TG Philanthropy Program, *Supporting Best Practices in Student Success* provided four grants of \$25,000 to NCAN member organizations to create, enhance, or expand their student persistence, retention, and college success programs. Staff members from NCAN and IHEP provided technical assistance, evaluation, and have produced this report of outcomes, to be shared with the college access and success community.

Supporting Best Practices in Student Success Project Goals:

1. Help college access programs develop successful retention programs that are replicable and scalable.
2. Build capacity and content expertise for NCAN to serve as a resource for success work specifically.

Organizations that Created New College Success Programming

Scholarship Foundation of Santa Barbara

Location: Santa Barbara, California

Website: www.sbscholarship.org

Organizational Mission: Founded in 1962 to inspire, encourage, and support Santa Barbara students in pursuit of college, graduate, and vocational education through financial aid advising and the granting of scholarships.

College Success Program Description: The Achieve Program provides increased student services to focus on student retention of scholarship recipients attending Santa Barbara City College and Allan Hancock College.

College Success Program Specifics and Outcomes: Scholarship Foundation of Santa Barbara's (SFSB) new Achieve Program provides support services to scholarship recipients in local area community colleges by actively promoting campus-based student support services, monitoring participants' academic progress, and assessing the impact of retention services on those participants. The Achieve Program provides participants with eight, one-hour presentations on college support services. Additionally, the Achieve Program's recipients receive one-on-one counseling, and are required to attend a series of workshops related to student success.

The Supporting Best Practices in Student Success grant allows the new Achieve Program to better serve their first-year students at Allan Hancock College and Santa Barbara City College through workshops, connecting them with campus resources, and providing academic and financial aid advising sessions. Further assessment and follow up meetings with students help program staff understand the financial barriers students faced while attending local area institutions. This year, program staff determined that economic barriers were largely attributable to unforeseen circumstances, and the Achieve Program incorporated strategies for overcoming financial barriers in their campus workshops, focusing on finding jobs on campus, money management, and accessing and paying for public transportation.

Students in the Achieve Program saw increases in grade point averages of between .3 and a full point and were more likely than other SFSB scholarship recipients to submit their financial aid applications and supplemental financial aid documents on time. Compared with other SFSB scholarship recipients, students who participated in the Achieve Program were found to be more engaged and more likely to sign up for and attend academic advisement sessions. The Achieve Program was successful in retaining 78% of their program participants from the first to second year, well above the first-year retention rate for all SFSB scholarship recipients. With excitement growing about the work in the Achieve Program, there has been a staggering increase in applications for participation, forcing SFSB to focus on long-term strategic planning for college success work.

Organizations that Created New College Success Programming

Cincinnati Youth Collaborative

Location: Cincinnati, Ohio

Website: www.cycyouth.org

Organizational Mission: Established in 1987 to make a significant difference in the lives of young people by providing mentoring and college readiness services.

College Success Program Description: First Degree provides supports and guidance for students' college experience to make sure they successfully graduate and get the most out of their degree.

College Success Program Specifics and Outcomes: The Cincinnati Youth Collaborative (CYC) brings together people, institutions, and community resources to help youth graduate from high school and succeed in postsecondary education. CYC believes that all youth can graduate from high school and complete postsecondary education with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors to actively contribute to and participate in society. Since its founding in 1987, CYC has assisted more than 120,000 Cincinnati youth in graduating from high school and enrolling in college. CYC collaborates with over 1,700 volunteers, over 100 businesses and faith-based organizations, and social service agencies to meet its mission.

CYC's strategic planning process included a review of the college completion rates of students participating in its college access programs. The organization came to the realization that college enrollment doesn't equate to college success, and the Supporting Best Practices in Student Success grant helped CYC forge ahead with a robust plan to strengthen its student support services and identify key action steps to support this effort. Action steps included strengthening relationships with postsecondary education institutions in the service area (including a few in Kentucky), establishing a mentoring program at the college level, building a college alumni network, creating a college coordinator position, and establishing data collection methods and key benchmarks for college success.

The First Degree Program has helped retain 67% of participating first-year students to the second year in college. According to pre- and post-survey data and qualitative data from focus groups, the First Degree Program has successfully increased the number of students applying for and renewing scholarships, increased students' awareness to navigate campuses, and increased the level of comfort students have with connecting with faculty for academic help.

Organizations that Expanded/Enhanced Existing College Success Programming

ACCESS College Foundation

Location: Norfolk, Virginia

Website: www.accesscollege.org

Organizational Mission: Founded in 1988, with the commitment to provide students with the tools necessary to make informed choices about postsecondary education and provide academic, financial, and personal support while in college.

College Success Program Description: The College Success Program utilizes direct services and advising to provide one-on-one counseling, provide financial supports and advocate for students.

College Success Program Specifics and Outcomes: In an effort to increase the persistence, retention, and success of low-income, underrepresented students in higher education, the Supporting Best Practices in Student Success project helped ACCESS College Foundation's College Success Program expand to Christopher Newport University, George Mason University, and Hampton University, raising to 8 the number of postsecondary institutions in the service area and increasing the total number of student participants by 75. Through a system of one-on-one and group counseling sessions, students receive pertinent assistance on academic, transition, financial and personal issues.

All College Success Program students are required to attend monthly seminars and meetings with their College Success Advisor. The College Success Program retained 100% of its first-year students through fall and spring enrollments. 96% of participating sophomore students remained in school (including students who transferred out of a College Success school) and enrolled in the fall semester of their junior year.

The retention rates accomplished by ACCESS through this project are 2.5 times higher than the current Virginia state average, indicative of this project's positive impact on college students. To build on the project's success, ACCESS plans to expand service to Longwood University, thereby increasing its impact on college students in Virginia.

Organizations that Expanded/Enhanced Existing College Success Programming

Project GRAD, Los Angeles

Location: Los Angeles, California

Website: www.projectgradla.org

Organizational Mission: Founded in 1999 and driven by the mission to help more first-generation college students from low-income backgrounds graduate from college.

College Success Program Description: The College Success Initiative at California State University Northridge, addresses the most common barriers for first-generation college students.

College Success Program Specifics and Outcomes: Project GRAD Los Angeles works to promote college success all the way through the educational pipeline to prepare students for the rigors of college, ensuring that students graduate from college within six years. As early as middle school, Project GRAD staff members working at school sites are engaging students and parents in programs and activities that increase college aspirations and support academic performance.

In 2010, Project GRAD created the College Success Initiative to implement strategic efforts that addressed the areas in which their first-generation college students struggled: accessing academic and student support services; connecting to campus activities; paying tuition and fees; and harnessing social and cultural capital. Today, two full-time staff members are dedicated to tracking the progress of 550 College Scholars (scholarship recipients) throughout California and across the nation, of which 70% are enrolled in four-year institutions and 30% enrolled in community colleges.

Project GRAD's enhanced retention program at California State University Northridge (CSUN) offers one-on-one social and emotional counseling, cohort case management, and helps students strengthen existing relationships with faculty and staff. Project GRAD emphasizes optimism, resilience, self-regulation and grit. Project GRAD decided to operate the College Success initiative at California State University Northridge (CSUN) for two reasons; a high proportion of their Scholars (22%) attend CSUN, and they have an eleven-year partnership with CSUN. The Supporting Best Practices in Student Success grant helped Project GRAD retain all 21 of its first-year College Scholars through to their sophomore year, and increased the next cohort of students to 38 during the second year of the project, 37 of which have matriculated to their sophomore year.

Common Implementation Strategies Among Grantee Organizations

The existing research on the outcomes of programs designed to increase college success of historically underrepresented students concludes that although academic preparation and performance play a major role in student retention, up to 75 percent of all drop-out decisions are non-academic in nature. Recognizing such barriers as college costs and family/work responsibilities, the four community-based, nonprofit organizations studied in this evaluation targeted their strategic efforts to respond appropriately. Many of these efforts fall into the categories of social supports—strategies that foster and strengthen social networks, school connectedness, self-confidence, and academic motivation, and financial supports—mechanisms to assist students with the costs associated with obtaining a college degree. Further, grantees provided insights on other impactful approaches used when working with students, parents, and families.

Social Support:

College retention relies heavily on students' perception that they are socially integrated into campus life. At times, this integration or "sense of belonging" can help mitigate risk factors that impede college success. Grantee organizations worked hard to promote and better facilitate their students' connection to campus resources. In many cases, the sites connected students to peer-led academic and social mentoring organizations; liaised and partnered with student affairs units to present relevant information or facilitate workshops; connected students to faculty and staff; and promoted out-of-class enrichment experiences like study abroad programs, service learning initiatives, and professional development opportunities. For example, ACCESS's College Success program offered workshops at each institution with the purpose of introducing students to campus staff working in academic and student support units. These workshops offered valuable information and resources about the academic and social supports available to students and offered counseling on promoting emotional and physical well-being. They also created an atmosphere for peer networking and relationship building, both of which are conducive to college success for underserved student groups.

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Financial Support:

Grantee organizations provided financial awards in the form of last-dollar or gap scholarships to help students pay college tuition and fees, unaccounted for by federal, state, and local financial aid. Supplementing the financial awards, counseling on Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion and scholarship applications was a common theme across all sites. Grantee organizations also provided financial assistance to cover non-tuition expenses like books and other course materials, meals, and transportation. Financial support helped reduce the hours many students spent working part- to- full-time to cover these costs. This decision was grounded in the longstanding research suggesting that increasing work responsibilities, especially job responsibilities off-campus, are associated with lower chances of college persistence. College success advisors at Project LA GRAD worked individually with every college scholar at California State University Northridge, ensuring successful completion of the FAFSA; helping students complete scholarship renewal forms; determining the requirements and eligibility for state scholarship and grant awards; and making available last-dollar scholarships to help fill gaps between tuition/fees and student financial aid.

Intrusive Advising:

Program staff used intrusive advising techniques to reach and motivate students. Many of the staff knew these students before they entered college and had developed relationships that would allow them to push just a little harder or more frequently or in a way that was more “familiar” if needed. The research tells us that many students need someone inside their circle, so to speak, to challenge and motivate them to focus and work hard toward their goals. Thus, this rapport coupled with the cultural sensitivity and social applicability of services, granted program staff “permission” to employ strategies and practices specifically designed to be intrusive in nature.

Instilling Hope, Empowering Students:

One of the most noted areas of program effectiveness was the ability of program staff to help empower students and give them a sense of “hope.” Interviews with program participants and a review of student feedback suggested that students believed they could succeed and felt empowered to make sound, purposeful decisions and actions about their academic programs. Although this may seem amorphous and perhaps trivial to some, project staff—and emerging retention literature—affirms that it is an essential element of retention programming. Program staff spent a lot of time following up and following through, meeting the needs of students, parents and families. Lines of communication were always open in formats most likely to be used by the students (e.g., text-messages, or via Facebook and Twitter, as opposed to e-mails and phone calls). Program staff worked hard to sustain a presence in students’ lives off-campus, often to make sure that they were perceived as a visible and reliable force and to advocate for the students.

Engaging Families:

Parents/guardians and families are key educational allies and can serve as powerful motivating agents for academic and social success. While cultivating family support, program staff remained sensitive to students with family responsibilities, knowing that commitment to on-going family support typically posed challenges for academic and social engagement. As such, program staff attempted to meet and communicate with parents/guardians and families, as well as invite them to programmatic functions. Program staff also devised ways to inform parents/guardians and families about campus events, thus strengthening campus connections to the institution and the college success program. They also helped students translate important messages from the institutions to the home and helped students communicate to parents the increased social pressures and academic demands they were experiencing.

*"The College Success Program changed my life –
I don't know where I would be right now, without their support;
I don't even want to think about it."*

LaShan Porter, senior, Hampton University

CR²EWS at Project LA GRAD

Rather than try something new, Project LA GRAD chose to intensify promising activities, specifically the CR²EWS program (College Retention Excels With Students), which they consider to be one of their most productive retention strategies. CR²EWS asks thriving junior and senior Project GRAD Scholars to support the academic and social success of freshmen through peer-led advising and mentoring activities. The program groups incoming first-year students as a cohort, or "crew" that provides the leadership and support systems necessary to ensure each student enjoys a fulfilling and successful college experience. Crews are managed by a "Crew Leader," a peer mentor who is responsible for organizing and leading the group (organizes meetings, recommend campus resources, demonstrate a positive influence, etc.). Crew Leaders meet with their "crew" of scholars twice per month.

A Summary of Best Practices

As described in the prior section, the work of the four grantees fell into several major strategic areas. These areas, operationalized through the implementation of best practices which are described below and summarized in figures 2 and 3, corroborate the research on effective practices for increasing college success for underserved students. Most of these practices imply mandatory attendance at workshops and meetings, and frequent interaction with peers, mentors, college success advisors and/or counselors, all in an effort to provide a reliable structure of sequential activities, a sturdy safety net with continued oversight, and just-in-time, intrusive advising. Grantee organizations used evidence-based and measured approaches to student success to create a culture of ongoing inquiry and support that leads to innovation and creativity to better support underserved students.



Student Success Strategies Common to Project Participants:

Cohort model support and advising: Students were grouped with peers to meet with advisors for academic, social, and interpersonal support seminars and meetings.

Course scheduling and sequencing: Careful guidance and encouragement was provided on course scheduling, navigating college bureaucracies and systems such as course registration, course sequencing, and credit transfer policies.

Peer-to-peer mentoring programs: Grantees organized peer-to-peer and upper-to-lower classmen mentoring programs.

Individual advising sessions: Students had regular individual meetings with project staff or retention advisors to discuss pressing academic, social, family, financial, and emotional issues.

Enriching co-curricular experiences: Program staff directed students to enriching experiences outside of and beyond their academic programs, such as study abroad and service learning experiences.

Career exploration: Students were offered guidance on career exploration opportunities such as internships, apprenticeships, and other professional development experiences.

Financial awards: Students were given scholarships to fill gaps between their financial aid and tuition and fees. Students also received awards to cover books, course materials, meals, and transportation.

Financial literacy services: Students were counseled on how to access resources to promote their general financial literacy, including checking account management, and budgeting for semester and yearly college expenses.

Data Systems: Sites developed and implemented early warning data systems to avoid foreseeable risks, and monitor academic performance and program attendance.

“First Degree helps students develop a framework on how to think about college and staying in college. There’s a wealth of information —sometimes students need a framework to think about it.”

Monica Adkins, vice president of college access and success programs,
Cincinnati Youth Collaborative

Figure 2: College success services provided or facilitated by newly created programs

Academic Supports			Social Supports						Financial Supports		
Academic Advising	Study Skills & Note-Taking	Campus Resource Workshops	Career Exploration	Strengthening Connections to Faculty and Staff	Mentoring Program	Meeting with Families	Time Management	Health and Well-being	Scholarship (including Last Dollar and Gap Scholarships)	Financial Aid Application Counseling	Financial Literacy and Money Management
Scholarship Foundation of Santa Barbara Achieve Program											
X	X	X	X	X	X		X		X	X	X
Cincinnati Youth Collaborative First Degree Program											
X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X

Figure 3: College success services provided or facilitated by expanded/enhanced programs

Academic Supports			Social Supports						Financial Supports		
Academic Advising	Study Skills & Note-Taking	Campus Resource Workshops	Career Exploration	Strengthening Connections to Faculty and Staff	Mentoring Program	Meeting with Families	Time Management	Health and Well-being	Scholarship (including Last Dollar and Gap Scholarships)	Financial Aid Application Counseling	Financial Literacy and Money Management
ACCESS College Foundation College Success Program											
X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Project GRAD, Los Angeles College Success Initiative											
	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X

Common Programmatic and Organizational Strategies Among Grantee Organizations

In addition to social and financial support, and facilitating impactful advising approaches, a number of programmatic and organizational strategies emerged from IHEP's evaluation. These themes are summarized in Figure 4 below:

Figure 4: Framework for creating, enhancing, or expanding college success programs



Creating and implementing a plan grounded in the cultural and social realities of the students and families of the service area:

- Students characterized direct contact with project staff as critical to enhancing their academic and social engagement. College success advisors were perceived as a trusted friend, counselor, advisor, problem solver, and coordinator of the student's overall social—and financial—support system (to most students, they were considered all things at the same time). The college success advisor was skillful in fostering supportive connections to campus and community resources, as well as other peers.
- Although social and financial supports were the distinct pillars on which these programs were developed, each program identified and provided services in areas of emphasis beyond these pillars, including accessing and navigating public transportation and balancing a checking account, both important for students to master in order to succeed in college.
- Each site seemed to encounter a sub-group of students often marginalized or overlooked when studying underserved students as a whole. The organizations would sometimes augment certain approaches to meet the needs of these populations, including student-parents, undocumented students, English Language Learners, and foster children.

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Developing strong partnerships with educational institutions and community agencies:

- All sites were long-established organizations with deep community roots and long-standing relationships with educational institutions in their geographic area, both in the K-12 and postsecondary education sectors.
- Sites drew strongly from community resources and groomed college access program alumni to become success program staff. In addition to providing coherence, continuity, and program loyalty, this practice was likely to expose their students to program staff acutely aware of the challenges they experience themselves as they matriculate through degree completion.
- One challenge all sites had to prepare for and face was moderate to drastic budget cuts at the state and local levels in education and related areas. These cuts affected public transportation and social services, as well as scholarships and student support programs such as TRIO and GEAR UP. The prospect, and in some cases, the reality, of such cuts impacted each site's work plan, and sometimes disrupted workshops and partnerships with institutions within the service areas.

Committing to on-going communication and alignment with the K-12 sector and area institutions of higher education:

- All sites leveraged their strengths by expanding existing services that already had been proven effective.
- Program staff demonstrated strong coordination of support services with student support staff at participating institutions. This allowed them to complement the work of high school counselors, avoid duplication of existing services at colleges, and provide extensive advising and mentoring to students in college to facilitate their transition.
- Community agents were called on to support and/or endorse the sites' college success work, helping grantee organizations secure additional funds for future programming efforts, increasing fundraising capacity by making key connections to philanthropic organizations or donors, and helping build or advance a strategic plan for program sustainability.

Common Successes and Challenges

Interviews with program directors and college success advisors, community partners, and analysis of data and documentation yielded common successes and challenges experienced across these exemplary programs.

Successes:

Although modest, the funding allowed grantees to strengthen the alignment of student support services between K-12 and postsecondary education providers and increase the retention rates of their students attending postsecondary institutions. Perhaps more significantly, everyone interviewed said the award had positive repercussions beyond its actual monetary impact. In their words, the three ancillary, yet significantly positive consequences of the grant were: 1) increased visibility and credibility for the organization and its work; 2) strengthening of relationships with essential stakeholders, such as educational institutions, community partners, students, and families; and 3) avoiding the duplication of services.

Increased Organizational Visibility and Credibility

The NCAN grant conveyed recognition by a prestigious national membership organization and endorsement of the grantees' aspirations to engage in college success work. As a result, the grant motivated staffs of all organizations at large, enhanced the organizations' credibility among their governing boards and communities, and spurred additional fundraising activities and sustainability efforts involving corporate partners or local community-focused agencies. For example, the program staff from Scholarship Foundation of Santa Barbara's Achieve program received praise from their Board of Directors and scholarship awards committee, manifesting in the approval of additional long-term college success planning, capacity building, and staffing. Cincinnati Youth Collaborative's First Degree program attracted the attention and support of the managing consulting firm Accenture, providing a huge endorsement and financial commitment, and seeding future plans for long-term career advising for students, professional development training for staff, and organizational consulting on program sustainability.

"The NCAN grant has given us confirmation that we're headed in the right direction. It's given our organization much needed validation and momentum to go forward with college success."

Colette Hadley, executive director, Scholarship Foundation of Santa Barbara

Strengthening the Alignment of K-12 and Postsecondary Education

Far too often, the requirements for high school graduation and expectations for entering and succeeding in college are misaligned. This may leave students and families mystified about the college admissions process—and about what it takes to succeed in postsecondary education. Each site partnered with both K-12 and postsecondary education institutions to strengthen linkages in their service area. In turn, this helped students and families reconcile the preparation information with persistence and success information they obtained from their high schools and colleges. The sites realized that access and success needs to be understood as a K-16 issue, not just as a K-12 or a higher education issue. By all accounts from community partners, grantee organizations were able to conceptualize a vision for this alignment and partner with institutions to operationalize and align outcomes. For example, interviews with institutional representatives and TRIO and GEAR-UP staff affirmed the notion that Cincinnati Youth Collaborative's First Degree program was becoming more familiar with the success space and tailored programming in both the access and success areas to achieve the end goal of degree completion. In essence, the First Degree program became the "glue" that kept communication lines among all institutions and community partners intact.

Avoiding Duplication of Services

Many times, community-based college access and success programs provide similar services and resources to those that can be found on campus or elsewhere in the community. Simultaneously, student support services personnel may lament their under-utilized campus-based resources, services, and programs. For this project, grantee organizations were careful to complement and promote existing student support services offered on campus, rather than duplicate them. Often the motivating factor behind the skillful coordination of resources was the influential relationship among parties developed by the college success advisor. For example, the Scholarship Foundation of Santa Barbara's college success advisor led an inventory and assessment of programs and services offered by all service area institutions during the planning phase of the grant period. Included in the assessment was a detailed analysis, including meetings with institutional staff and students, covering program accessibility, quality, and the frequency of existing retention services. This allowed the Achieve Program to develop a plan to buttress or help coordinate between institutions and programs.

Challenges:

Grantee organizations also experienced challenges to the delivery of college success programming. Many of these revolved around: 1) deteriorating external fiscal conditions that strained their community partners and agencies during the slow recovery from the nation's economic recession; 2) connecting with and supporting students across great geographical distances; and 3) developing and enhancing comprehensive student data and tracking systems.

Deteriorating External Fiscal Conditions

Although the rescission of state funding of higher education and social programs is not solely responsible for all challenges caused by external fiscal conditions, the grantee organizations (particularly those from California) noted that the state funding trends exacerbated existing economic hardships experienced by students, families, community partners and institutions and impacted the grantee organizations in a myriad of ways.

- Although grantee organizations established strong relationships with postsecondary education institutions, those partnerships were sometimes strained by unit and department budget cuts, furloughs, lay-offs and the restructuring of the physical space of many partnering institutions, particularly at community colleges. Sites had to scale back the frequency of workshops or cancel and reschedule altogether because co-facilitators from the partnering institution sometimes failed to show up, were laid-off immediately before the workshop, or the intended room was repurposed to address more pressing institutional priorities.
- In 2011-12, state money per full-time student at public institutions declined by 10 percent, marking the fourth year of deep reductions totaling 25 percent over the past five years.¹⁰ College access and success practitioners in particular, understand how these changing economic forces have materially impacted the choices and behaviors of our nation's most underserved college students. Grantee organizations reported seeing students pursue full-time employment at much higher levels than they had anticipated, or were accustomed to seeing in prior years. This made program attendance and individual appointments more difficult to account for and sustain.
- On a day-to-day basis, coordinating logistics—specifically, transportation to and from campuses for program activities—was, at minimum, time consuming and challenging for both staff and students alike. However, the aforementioned economic trends exacerbated the challenge of regular student attendance at workshops and counseling/advising sessions. Many students had taken on additional family responsibilities that affected their attendance and impeded their academic achievement. At some sites, students simply stopped attending in-person workshops, even if they expressed a strong desire to continue participating in activities on campus and maintained consistent communication with program staff.

Economic Hardships Affecting the Scholarship Foundation of Santa Barbara

Of the students who withdrew from the Achieve Program, 75 percent cited the need to earn money to meet basic living expenses to support themselves or their families. In an effort to respond to this reality, staff from the Achieve Program developed workshops and provided resources focusing on helping students transfer to a lower-cost institution in the local area or advised them on certificate or credential programs within the student's field of study. Staff also advised students of the positives and negatives if they considered enlisting in the military. All Achieve participants are first-time college students who come from very low to modest economic backgrounds and staying in college was sometimes viewed by students as a drain on family resources.



Connecting With Students from Afar

In-person meetings with students at campuses located further from the grantees' headquarters—and in Cincinnati Youth Collaborative's First Degree program, across state lines—proved to be a challenge, particularly for those success programs expanding to new schools. Responding to this challenge, staff worked tirelessly to drive to the students' home communities, easing the burden of students always to traveling to campus or organizational headquarters to meet. Although a key component in a successful retention program, helping students navigate, coordinate, and finance public transportation was challenging, in general. Students without cars were at a disadvantage, particularly in suburban or rural service areas because public transportation options are limited. Already price-sensitive in many facets of financing a college experience, underserved students are very sensitive to changes in the price or schedule of public transportation and changes in both became complicated for grantee organizations to negotiate.



Data Collection and Tracking

As referenced above, many college access and success organizations struggle with building and implementing data systems that can track student inputs, trends, and outcomes from year-to-year. It was sometimes overwhelming for a grantee to make decisions about the specific data they wanted to track regarding student performance and behaviors. What's more, navigating privacy protections such as Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) has been time-consuming and often frustrating. It was often difficult for the grantee organizations to know where their students were, how they were doing in their courses and how to build data systems that captured this information.

ACCESS College Foundation's Data Tracking Measures

In an effort to improve and monitor the persistence, retention, and success of low-income, underrepresented students in their service area, ACCESS College Foundation's College Success program collected and reported outcomes monthly utilizing a database they called CBART. This database was used to collect, track and store student contact information, attendance at workshops and advisor sessions, and GPAs. Additionally, all electronic communication between advisors and students was collected and tracked on Excel spreadsheets, which were reviewed and analyzed quarterly by the program committee of the Board of Directors with input from the organization's president and CEO, program director and ACCESS advisors. ACCESS also benchmarked performance data against the National Student Clearinghouse and data from the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV). Progress was measured by the extent to which ACCESS impacted the specific population of students targeted by this program, taking into account the effectiveness of program activities on participants' ability to achieve semester goals set forth by ACCESS. These efforts, funded by the *Supporting Best Practices in Student Success* project, helped the College Success Program retain their students at 2.5 times the year-to-year average of students attending postsecondary education institutions in the state of Virginia.

Recommendations

The themes and practices discussed throughout this report lend themselves to four major areas of recommendations for helping traditionally underserved and marginalized students matriculate and graduate from a postsecondary institution that fits their desires, aspirations, and goals. These areas are organizational considerations, programmatic services, data-collection, and student-level practice, all of which are crucial for college access organizations to consider when moving into the success space. It's important to note that some of these recommendations are derived from the literature on student success, while others are derived from addressed or unresolved challenges faced by the grantee organizations and are provided here to help flesh out a framework of thought for the college access and success field.

Organizational considerations for creating college success programs

- **Be aware of the external policy and funding climate.** Become familiar with changing federal, state, and local governance, economic, and policy climate. Further, it's important to be mindful of the funding appetite to support college success work and where to access the resources needed to support the intended programming goals and aspirations.
- **Perform an organizational assessment.** Thoroughly assess the organizational will and staff capacity to engage in college success work. Given existing demands and organizational priorities, staff may have reservations about moving into college success work that might require a degree of re-training or additional resources. A thorough assessment must be conducted to determine whether expanding into success work might be too ambitious of a goal.
- **Seek to partner with—instead of “help”—existing institutional programs and community resources.** In order to develop credibility in the college success space, the organization must be viewed as an important partner with postsecondary education institutions and community agents; it can't be on the periphery or auxiliary. It's important to study the community and campus service area, and work hard to establish deep roots and connections with students, families, community agents, and institutions. Seeking to partner with—instead of helping institutions and programs in the service area—will highlight a program's knowledge of and respect in the area where it does have expertise and communicate an effort to strengthen and support—instead of supplant—existing efforts to increase college success.
- **Recruit staff from within the community.** Develop a formal pipeline to bring qualified alumni back into the organization as program staff once they graduate from college. This will help address staff turnover and attempt to achieve real-world relevance of a program, incorporating the views and perspectives of staff acutely aware of the challenges its students are experiencing.

Organizational considerations for *expanding or enhancing* services

- **Take stock.** Where are the programmatic or geographic gaps in service to students? Look at the research—are there services a program should be providing but hasn't yet implemented? What programs and services does an organization facilitate most effectively? What area of college success work has it yet to pursue? Which practices can be differently administered? To whom? Once an organization takes stock, it can work collaboratively with staff, leadership, and the board of directors to develop a plan to move forward.
- **Stay abreast of changes.** Changes in admissions and academic performance standards are bound to occur. Stay abreast of changes at the state and institutional level, while being cognizant of how those changes will affect programs/services. Once an assessment has been conducted, effectively communicate those changes to students, families, and other constituents.
- **Carve out time to step back and plan.** It is critical that staff find ways to evaluate and reflect on past or current retention services. However, access and success organizations know all too well that this is easier said than done, especially when program staff are frequently out in the trenches advocating for the students they serve. Consider systematically carving out time to perform a thorough analysis of existing efforts before strategically planning to expand them.
- **Seek assistance from champions.** Supporters and spokespersons or "champions" from the business or philanthropic world can endorse and support geographical or programmatic expansions. Partnerships with these external allies provide numerous benefits for long-term and sustained program success. These relationships will help advance organizational priorities and connect students to untapped resources available through local foundation or corporate programs.

In Pursuit of Sustainability – Accenture as a "Champion" for the Cincinnati Youth Collaborative

Grantees developed strategies to leverage and secure financial support to sustain their respective student success programs. The Cincinnati office of the managing consulting firm, Accenture, expressed interest in supporting Cincinnati Youth Collaborative's First Degree program. Accenture was initially excited when hearing about the program and believed its objectives fit the educational and philanthropic divisions of the firm. After meeting with officials from Accenture, First Degree was awarded \$10,000 and a commitment from staff volunteers to mentor and advise students in a range of college and career development areas.

Programmatic Services:

All grantees underscored the importance of frequent communication and coordination with student services staff at participating institutions of higher education. The following should be considered by organizations seeking to create, enhance or expand college success programming.

- **Engage faculty and staff on campus.** Seek to engage faculty and staff who are willing to do more for students than just teach and manage services. Identify faculty who are willing to advise and connect students to research opportunities, help with career planning and direct students to courses and other resources that will be abundantly supportive.
- **Support students financially.** The non-tuition costs of college, including books, food, fees, and transportation can have a tremendous impact on the ability of underserved students to persist. Organizations should create or modify existing programs that provide financial assistance to address these types of costs in a meaningful way.
- **Provide financial literacy and money management counseling.** Consider providing student guidance on how to balance a checking account, manage discretionary finances, wisely use credit cards, manage decisions about housing, and obtain summer jobs, internships, and apprenticeships.
- **Support holistic personal development.** Build the non-cognitive skills that are critical to college and personal success such as time-management, goal setting, and maintaining a balance in physical, mental and emotional health. Encourage students to explore these topics in depth, helping them understand how these skills relate to their academic and personal development.
- **Encourage peer and cohort-based learning and social communities.** Supplement academic coursework with academic and student development learning communities. In a living-learning community, students are able to create strong connections among their academic passions, their personal relationships, and their extracurricular interests—all of which support student development and healthy intellectual curiosity.

Data Collection and Evaluation:

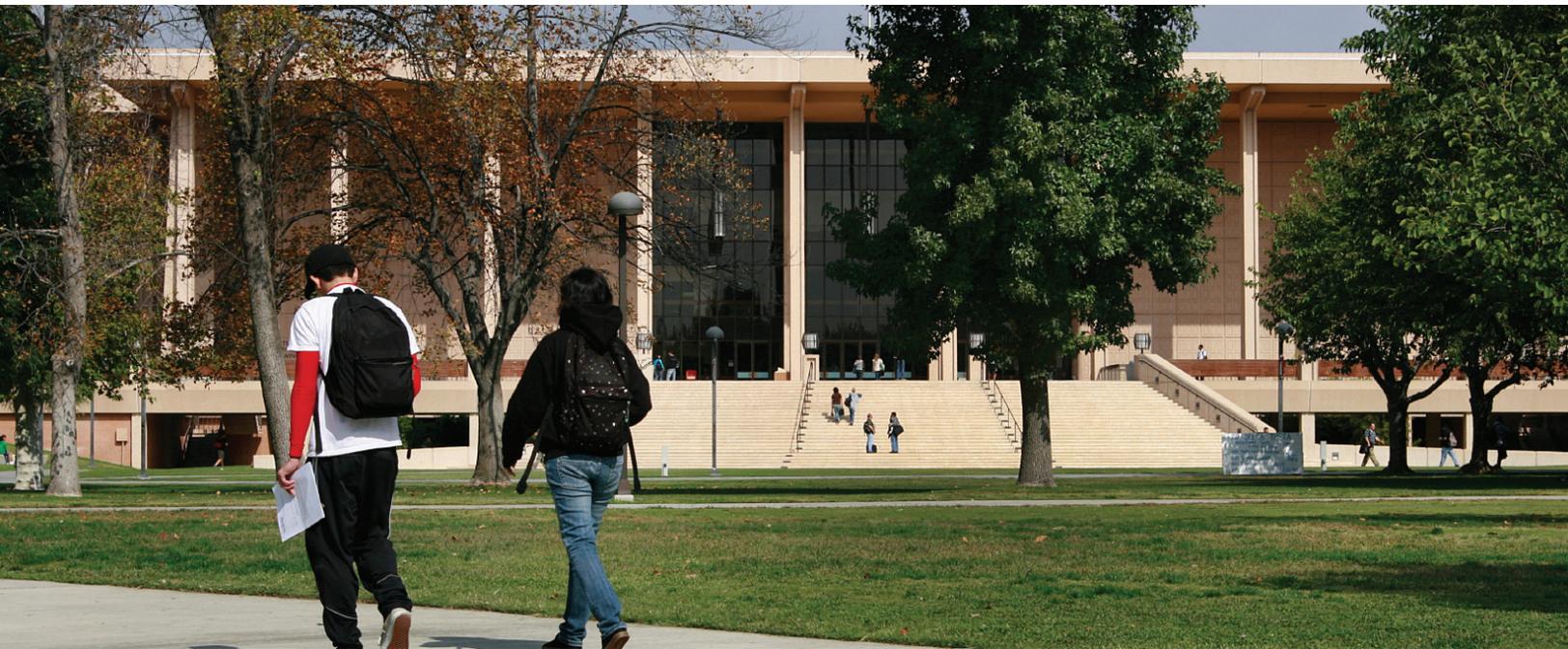
As the field has grown in effectiveness and sophistication, college access and success programs will need to adopt certain common measures to track their outcomes. This will make it easier to decide which data to track; collect and use data to make decisions about improving student services; and demonstrate program effectiveness. Having this data available will also make it easier for programs to analyze and make decisions that can enhance equitable outcomes for subgroups of students served.

Organizations seeking to *create, enhance or expand* college success work should consider the following with respect to data collection and analysis:

- **Evaluate.** Create an evaluation plan from the beginning. Engage students, institutional partners, organizational staff, and even the board of directors (if appropriate) to collaboratively evaluate services and interventions early and often. These stakeholders can help provide feedback on progress toward organizational goals.
- **Monitor.** Develop research-based interim points of progress or “benchmarks,” based on a program’s determined end result, which can indicate whether students are on the right path. Require students to complete a one-on-one assessment with a project staff every semester to track academic progress, assess financial standing and do a general “check-in” on related issues.
- **Disaggregate student demographic data.** Disaggregate retention data to target services that may be more or less effective with specific subgroups. These may include looking at first-generation students, disaggregating data by race/ethnic groups, Pell Grant recipients, gender, English Language Learners, decided vs. undecided majors, veterans, and/or student-parents.
- **Coordinate data sources.** It’s helpful to obtain data from a variety of sources such as institutional common data sets including the Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (IPEDS) and the National Student Clearinghouse, and others such as self-reported student data and program specific data sources. This can help organizations paint a robust picture of both access and success by providing institutional information on where they send their students, as well as how their students succeed within various institutional contexts. This will also help an organization make statements about its success with specific populations of students and the level of services these students need to stay on track to completion.
- **Track financial assistance data.** Consider tracking the percent of students who complete and submit renewal FAFSA forms, percent of students awarded financial aid, amount of financial aid awarded per student, and percent of students working part- and full-time.

Using Multiple Sources to Track Student Data: Project GRAD LA

Project GRAD LA catalogued and saved qualitative information such as case notes and reports from Cityspan, an online data tracking/reporting and case management tool; pre- and post- student surveys; attendance sheets; and transcripts from focus groups. Project GRAD has also integrated Beyond 12, which has a robust student and alumni tracking and documenting platform, Facebook, Twitter, text message student engagement documenting abilities and calendaring utilities. These efforts helped program staff develop meaningful relationships with students and in return, students formed more impactful connections to the success program. On a programmatic level, these efforts allowed Project GRAD to add an important layer of advising, including cohort management, case management, and strengthening the management of an already robust peer mentoring program.



Student-Level Practice | Organizational considerations for working with students:

- **Meet students where they are.** Consider appropriate, timely, and relevant ways to connect with and engage students. They are on campus, so meet them there, but keep in mind the level of complexity of their schedules. Organizations should maintain contact with students using technology. Students invest a lot of time in social media and it can be used as a viable tool for connecting with students.
- **Engage families.** Work with students and families to help them develop or maintain supportive relationships with family once they leave home for college. Staff should consider direct communication with parents/guardians through in-person meetings, phone calls, and inviting families to night and weekend events and activities to provide updates about student performance. If students continue to live at home while enrolled in college, work with families to help them understand the academic rigor of the college environment and the academic and social transition challenges students may face.
- **Acknowledge and support students with off-campus responsibilities.** Schedule programmatic services and create healthy social outlets (individually or in groups) that recognize the need for students to travel to activities, work schedules, and family responsibilities.
- **Seek student perceptions.** For organizations considering enhancements or expansions, make sure to be aware of student perceptions of program quality, relevance, and accessibility. It's important to gather information directly from the student, not just about the student.

Conclusion

Ultimately, we all want to know what works to help more underserved students obtain a postsecondary degree. We engage in projects to determine the best approaches and strategies to effectively motivate students to persist and succeed academically and socially, leaving postsecondary education with a degree, adequately equipped to serve themselves, their families and communities. This project found that the “best way” to effectively deliver success services was to create and implement a plan grounded in the cultural and social realities of the students and families of the service area; develop strong partnerships with educational institutions and community agencies; and, commit to on-going communication and alignment with the K-12 sector and area institutions of higher education. Furthermore, implementing strategies focused on social and financial supports, intrusive advising, instilling hope and engaging families were key to the success of the grantee sites. In so doing, these organizations crossed the threshold from high school to college along with their students and exemplify the extraordinary effort needed to create, enhance, or expand pathways for student success.



Footnotes

- ¹ Among all 2003-2004 first-time postsecondary students, 49.4 percent earned a certificate, associate's degree, or bachelor's degree within six years. 50.6 percent of students had not earned a degree or certificate within six years. *Six-Year Attainment, Persistence, Transfer, Retention, and Withdrawal Rates of Students Who Began Postsecondary Education in 2003-04*, U.S. Department of Education, July 2011.
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- ³ Engle, J., and Tinto, V. (2008). *Moving Beyond Access: College Success for Low-Income, First-Generation Students*. Washington, D.C.: The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Education
- ⁴ "Education Attainment," *OECD Factbook 2011-2012: Economic, Environmental and Social Statistics* (OECD Publishing, 2011), http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/economics/oecd-factbook-2011-2012/education-attainment_factbook-2011-85-en
- ⁵ Schneider, M. (2010). *Finishing the First Lap: The Cost of First-Year Student Attrition in America's Four-Year Colleges and Universities*. American Institutes for Research. http://www.air.org/files/AIR_Schneider_Finishing_the_First_Lap_Oct101.pdf
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- ⁹ DesJardins, S. L., & McCall, B. k. (2010). Simulating the effects of financial aid packages on college student stopout, reenrollment spells, and graduation chances. *Review Of Higher Education*, 33(4), 513-541. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=51687832&site=ehost-live>
- ¹⁰ Baum, S. & Ma, J. (2012). *Trends in College Pricing 2011-2012*. Washington, D.C.: The College Board.

Supporting Best Practices in Student Success: Lessons from the Field

