

Forging Ahead with SUCCESS

Providing Remote Support Services to College Students

by Katie Beal, Colleen Sommo, and Alyssa Ratledge

The COVID-19 crisis is exacerbating existing equity gaps in higher education for traditionally underserved students. As students face difficult decisions about whether to continue on with their studies, evidence-based programs that address financial and academic needs can keep them engaged and support their efforts to return to school in the fall and beyond. One example is MDRC's [Scaling Up Community College Efforts for Student Success \(SUCCESS\)](#), a comprehensive support program designed to improve graduation rates for low-income students and students of color. In the face of the pandemic, SUCCESS colleges remain committed to the program and have successfully adapted its services to continue providing support to students during this challenging time.

- **SUCCESS coaches have quickly transitioned from in-person meetings to remote appointments.** Proactive coaching—in which coaches reach out to students and meet with them frequently—is a key component of the SUCCESS model. Most coaching appointments are now being held via online video platforms or by phone. Students can choose which method they prefer since some people may not have access to reliable internet or a home environment they feel comfortable sharing on video. Some colleges are providing additional flexibility by giving students the option of receiving coaching through extensive text or email interactions or in virtual appointments with the program's dedicated tutor.
- **Coaches are helping students navigate a variety of pandemic-related issues.** Coaches have adapted meeting topics to include tips for remote learning and to address students' anxieties. In addition, coaches are connecting students with local resources that may be available, including food, health care, and emergency financial aid. Programs are also

WHAT IS SUCCESS?

MDRC is partnering with states and colleges across the country to implement large-scale, financially sustainable support programs. SUCCESS combines components that have been proven to help students succeed:

Coaches who actively reach out to students and meet frequently with them

Financial incentives for students to meet with coaches and satisfy other program requirements

Strategies to help students earn at least 24 credits per year (a full-time load) and enroll in summer courses

A robust management information system that provides real-time data for efficient program management and continuous improvement

holding group sessions to foster a sense of community during this time of physical distancing, as well as virtual “drop in” office hours. Coaches report that the strong relationships they’ve built with students prior to campus closures have helped students stay engaged with the program. Initial data suggest that coaches are holding roughly the same number of student appointments as they did before the crisis.

- **Colleges have found workarounds to get students their monthly financial supports.** SUCCESS provides students with financial support of \$50 a month, contingent upon their meeting with their coaches as directed twice a month. To ensure students continue to receive this money, some colleges have switched to electronic gift card platforms, while others are mailing gift cards or checks to students.
- **Colleges have also developed creative solutions to allow SUCCESS staff to work remotely.** Most program coordinators and coaches were able to transition quickly to working with students while at home. At some colleges, though, part-time staff members were not allowed to work remotely under college regulations. Some of these schools were quickly able to reclassify part-time SUCCESS staff members as “essential” workers so they could continue providing services to students from home. Program staff are also checking in with each other regularly to share best practices for supporting students and to review program data.

Importance of Comprehensive Support Programs Going Forward

Students’ lives may be even more challenging in the months and years ahead as they deal with the economic consequences of the pandemic and a new academic environment that will probably include a mix of in-person and online courses. Programs that address multiple barriers to success and include a strong, proactive coaching component can help students navigate these new realities, support students staying in school, and address inequities exacerbated by the crisis. Finally, COVID-19 has put immense pressure on state and college budgets. This new fiscal environment makes it all the more important to align resources with evidence-based practices proven to help students succeed.

Additional Resources

- [Delivering Support Services to Students Amidst the COVID-19 Outbreak](#) — Module from Achieving the Dream
- [Making Advising and Student Supports Accessible for Students During the COVID-19 Crisis](#) — Webinar from New America
- [Providing Student Support Services In Extraordinary Times: A Caring Campus Approach](#) — Guide from the Institute for Evidence-Based Change

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