

A SERIES OF FOUR
BRIEFS EXAMINING THE
SUPPORT NEEDS OF
DIFFERENT COMMUNITY
COLLEGE STUDENT
POPULATIONS.

EQUITY IN DESIGN FOR HOLISTIC STUDENT SUPPORTS



A Gateway to College for High School Students



Achieving
the Dream™

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Nick Mathern,
Achieving the Dream

Mark Toner,
CommunicationWorks

Four Students, Four Experiences, One Reality

For **Devin**, high school was all about being placed into the wrong track. “I’ve never been a dumb guy, but I had to fight hard to be placed in (higher-level) classes,” he says. Even so, absences following a sports injury put the Pennsylvania youth at risk of failing 11th grade.

After failing his classes for two years running at another high school in Pennsylvania, **Kristian** felt “it wasn’t an option to stay for another two years and watch my friends graduate,” he says.

Ali’s grades weren’t a problem, but the 11th grader was referred to an alternative school following a yearlong suspension. “I didn’t think I would fit in very well,” says the 17-year-old.

Miranda also was a solid student in middle school, but the self-described introvert faced extreme verbal bullying, including calls to “go kill yourself,” and demeaning comments from teachers when she got to high school in Pueblo, Colorado. Facing severe anxiety, Miranda was resigned to dropping out after her first year of high school. “School wasn’t for me,” she says.

Every adolescent faces challenges as they navigate their teenage years, but for some these challenges imperil their ability to complete their education. While these four students’ experiences are dramatically different, they have one thing in common: high school didn’t work for them, meaning that each faced long odds of ever attaining a diploma, much less a postsecondary credential with value in the workplace. And while each recognized the challenges they would face without finishing high school, they also didn’t see many options within their existing school settings.

“There are lots of off-ramps, but it’s hard to get back on,” says Kristian.

Creating New On-Ramps

As educators and policymakers have recognized that taking college courses in high school leads to higher postsecondary attendance and success rates,¹ many community colleges have become familiar with educating younger students who have yet to graduate from high school.



Massasoit Community College Gateway to College students Romilla Cardoso, Meagan DeRocha, Jahath Harriott, Joseph Alamo, and Matthew Janes

While “early college” initiatives and dual or concurrent enrollment programs have expanded dramatically to support low-income and first-generation students, they focus primarily on young people who are enrolled and making progress in high school, not those who are struggling—or who have dropped out.

Their numbers are significant. Even as overall high school graduation rates have gradually improved, more than a half-million students left school without obtaining a diploma between October 2015 and October 2016, the most recent year for which federal data is available.² Black, Hispanic, American Indian/Alaskan Native, and low-income students were disproportionately represented among their ranks. And the continuing stream of high school dropouts contribute to

a larger pool of disconnected young adults. In 2017, some 4.9 million youth aged 16 to 24 were not in education, employment, or training.³ While their ranks fell to a 30-year-low in 2018, nearly one in eight people in that age group remain disconnected, and the impact of postponed or abandoned educational attainment has ripple effects that limit the potential of individual students and their communities over a lifetime.⁴

Growing numbers of community colleges are recognizing the importance of serving disconnected youth. “We view helping high school students who have struggled or lost their way or interest in education as a very important pipeline to matriculate into our programs,” says Patricia A. Erjavec, president of Pueblo Community College.

“Attaining a meaningful place in the workforce requires postsecondary education or training. Not helping all students to achieve that outcome—especially the re-engaged—would sell those students short.”

Even so, “a continuing divide exists” at many institutions, says Nick Mathern, vice president of K-12 partnerships at Achieving the Dream. “To date, too few intersections have appeared to create connections between the reengagement movement and the early college movement,” he says.

The Gateway to College program, which became part of Achieving the Dream in April 2019 and now serves 35 communities in more than 20 states, bridges these two interventions in important ways. It also illustrates broader holistic student support strategies that address the challenges faced by many of the nontraditional populations today’s community colleges serve. ATD’s vision of holistic student supports involves the intentional planning and integration of academic and personal supports into a seamless, timely, and personal experience for every student, and Gateway’s implementation of this vision

illustrates how community colleges can put these principles to life to support young people with significant barriers to attaining postsecondary degrees or credentials.

“Attaining a meaningful place in the workforce requires postsecondary education or training,” says Mathern, who has been involved with Gateway to College since 2005. “Not helping all students to achieve that outcome—especially the re-engaged—would sell those students short.”

Jahath Harriott agrees. “Education is providing all those who seek growth and knowledge with a platform to reach their goals, even the hard-headed ones like myself who had to bump into the platform a couple times before thinking to climb it,” says Harriott, who reentered education through a Gateway program at Massasoit Community College in Massachusetts.

MORE ON HOLISTIC STUDENT SUPPORTS

Overview www.achievingthedream.org/resources/initiatives/holistic-student-supports

Holistic Student Supports Redesign: A Toolkit for Redesigning Advising and Student Services to Effectively Support Every Student www.achievingthedream.org/sites/default/files/resources/atd_hss_redesign_toolkit_2018.pdf

Gateway to College National Network www.gatewaytocollege.org

An Alternative Gateway for Youth

Gateway to College started in Oregon in 2000 as a partnership between Portland Community College (PCC) and the city’s public K-12 school system. Like many early college programs, it allows high school students to earn high school and college credits simultaneously. But Gateway, which evolved from programs to support English language learners, is focused specifically on significantly off-track or out-of-school high school students and those who are otherwise unlikely to graduate.

The typical Gateway student is slightly over 17 when he or she enrolls. The average GPA is under 2.0—and most participants have just over half of the credits needed to earn a high school diploma when they enter the program. However, students range from “those who had family issues or problems with drugs and alcohol to those (who get good grades) but didn’t feel challenged in the high school environment,” says Slava Scott, manager of the Gateway program at PCC, which has grown to support more than 300 students a year from five of the region’s K-12 districts. “These students have unique personal life stories, strengths, and needs.”

While younger than the typical community college student, Gateway students resemble the broader student population in most other ways. The majority of students served are low-income, first-generation college students, and students of color. And like their older peers, most report facing multiple barriers that have impeded their success in high school, including academic, economic, and social challenges.

Many Gateway students, regardless of background, have struggled with social anxiety, says Jeanelle Soto-Quintana, director of pre-college programs at Pueblo Community College, which has been a Gateway college for more than a decade. The college now serves between 130 and 160 students from eight K-12 school districts each year, including significant numbers from some of the region’s most affluent schools in the college’s service area, she says.

A holistic student supports approach in its own right, the Gateway model is tailored by each institution to meet the specific needs of the students they serve. The program is high-touch, given the barriers to success the students being served face. Students participate

in small learning communities and are supported by coaches who help them navigate academic, career, and personal challenges. Many Gateway institutions and the students who participate in the program use terms like “family,” “home” and “relentless kindness” to describe the experience.

Districts typically refer students with attendance issues or credit deficiencies to the program, or identify out-of-school youth and encourage them to re-enroll through Gateway. Gateway to College programs are funded through partnerships with local school districts. Typically, colleges and school districts operate with a Memorandum of Understanding that articulates how K-12

per-pupil funding follows the student to the college, which supports the additional services provided to the students until they receive their high school diploma, after which point they pay their own tuition and fees if they continue their studies. Most Gateway programs are a partnership between one college and multiple school districts, with each district referring students according to their local needs.

“You have to deal with the stuff of life first so students can succeed.”

Regardless of the path that brings students to Gateway programs, “you have to deal with the stuff of life first so students can succeed,” says Angela Scott Ferencin, administrative lead for the Gateway program at Montgomery County Community College (Montco) in Pennsylvania, which works with 19 K-12 districts in its service area.

As more community colleges have set up their own Gateway programs over the last two decades, program leaders have learned that addressing these life challenges involves creating a holistic support experience for disconnected youth. The remainder of this brief will explore its components in practice.

Keys to Support

While students are referred into Gateway programs for many reasons, they often find the idea of taking college classes in an environment different from high school compelling. “I would rather take college level courses,” Ali says. “The transition was appealing.”

Even so, Gateway students face many of the same barriers they did in the high school settings in which they were unsuccessful—including the kinds of personal and life challenges that present barriers for their older peers on community college campuses, such as food or housing insecurity. That’s why the emphasis on holistic supports, as orchestrated through a small learning community by a supportive coach who knows each student well, is vital.

A holistic support philosophy has always been central to the Gateway program’s efforts to keep disconnected youth on track to receiving their high school diploma and connected to the opportunities college offers. These supports, including the individual coaching students receive, are far more intensive than the typical services community colleges provide their overall student populations. That’s by design, given the sheer number and size of the life and academic obstacles facing the students these programs serve. Even so, the principles behind supporting disconnected youth offers lessons that can help institutions design and deliver holistic supports for a broader range of student populations facing similar obstacles.

The principles driving the Gateway model for supporting disconnected youth are the same design principles that inform the development of a holistic student supports approach at scale:

- Sustained and personalized support through intensive coaching throughout a student’s enrollment at the college.

- Strategic integrated services, with coaches looking at each student’s needs holistically and making appropriate referrals.
- Proactive services focused largely around tracking attendance and fostering accountability among students.

SUSTAINED AND PERSONALIZED SUPPORT.

Gateway’s approach to introducing high school students to the college experience is designed to increase their sense of belonging, which supports their identity as college students—crucial because “we know identity development is important for students in adolescence,” Mathern says.

That sense of belonging is reinforced in many ways, including the small learning communities, first-semester courses, and dedicated space for the program at many colleges, often with the prospect of snacks or other amenities to make students feel welcome and ready to learn. These elements reframe the Gateway experience as an opportunity instead of a remedial program and help students “become a new learner,” says Keima Sheriff, assistant dean for student programs at Montco.

At Montco, the first-semester Foundation experience is a small-group setting focused on helping students build strong bonds and work together as they develop study strategies and prepare to take what are essentially dual-credit classes in standard college classrooms in subsequent semesters. The Foundations course, says Ali, “really does prepare you for college courses and get you in the mindset.”

“They wear multiple hats—academic advisors, counselors, instructors, friends—students’ most important advocate is the success coach.”



Students at PCC's Gateway Program

This structured opportunity to connect with peers who may have similar experiences can be affirming for these students. Yet the ongoing, intensive coaching is at the heart of the sustained and personalized support Gateway students receive from enrollment through the attainment of their high school diplomas. Research shows that meaningful relationships support student persistence and success, and this is even more true for students who have been disconnected from education as a result of life or academic experiences. Thus, Gateway coaches—commonly referred to as resource specialists or success coaches—focus on a relentlessly proactive approach to engaging students that is typically not possible for regular community college advisors who have high student caseloads.

“They wear multiple hats—academic advisors, counselors, instructors, friends,” says PCC’s Scott. “Students’ most important advocate is the success coach.”

Coaches often lead Gateway’s small learning communities in success courses or academic labs during the first semester of the program. Doing so helps them “get to know students on an academic level” and understand their strengths and improvement areas for individual tutoring, says Amber Bell, a resource specialist at Pueblo Community College. More importantly, they meet regularly with students, provide connections to on- and off-campus resources, and help young people navigate the basics of the college experience, from providing one-on-one tutoring and monitoring attendance to explaining how to seek help from professors. A key focus, according to coaches at several

participating institutions, is “unlearning bad habits” by modeling positive academic behavior within a supportive environment.

Darwin Crabtree, a college success coach at Portland Community College, typically works with 50 to 60 students a quarter, including 20 to 30 new students, starting with one-on-one interviews to identify needs and continuing through weekly study sessions and sustained one-on-one meetings with those struggling academically. At many institutions, coaches monitor early warning systems which track their students’ academic performance and attendance.

What makes coaching work, Crabtree says, is largely being present—at lunch, by hanging out where students meet to get snacks, and through other opportunities that build familiarity and allow students to open up about their academic and nonacademic needs. “Anything to get them into the office is an opportunity to support them,” he says. Developing a deep trusting relationship with their coach is particularly critical for disconnected youth, who have often not experienced personally supportive relationships in their academic life.

Sustained conversations also are the key to ensuring that coaches learn what students really need. At Pueblo Community College, for example, resource specialists learn all kinds of things about their students—for example, who needed glasses and received them through the intervention of the college president, who needed help learning how to ride a bicycle well enough to get to work, and who had to tape his shoes together during snowstorms to get to school.

“Every student is individual, and their needs are so individual,” says Bell. “We get to know them well enough to know their needs because we spend that time having those conversations weekly. Even 15 minutes matters.”

While the K-12 funding that makes this high-touch support possible ends when students receive their high school diploma, many Gateway staff members informally continue these relationships with program alumni who continue at the college. A few, including Shasta College in California and Front Range Community College in Colorado, have allocated funds to provide continued high-touch coaching to complement their traditional academic advising services. Even after leaving the college, many former Gateway students come back to visit their coaches for years. That was the case for Devin, who is now 21. “We met almost four years ago, and even to this day, I’ll call him up, which is a blessing in itself,” he says.

STRATEGIC AND INTEGRATED SERVICES. A key principle of designing holistic student supports is identifying key needs for specific populations and simplifying students’ access to services that address them.

Because the programs are funded through K-12 partnerships, Gateway programs provide participating students with free tuition and books. They also provide access to the learning communities, academic labs, and tutoring sessions, many of which are program-specific, at no cost to students. In some cases, Gateway programs also cover transportation and lunch expenses. While these supports are critical for this student population, they don’t address all obstacles to academic success. The critical role that success coaches play in connecting students to a wide range of additional services, ranging from healthcare and clothing or food pantries to housing, is central to the model. Similar to the approach taken by many community college staff, “we do

warm handoffs all the time,” says PCC’s Crabtree. “We’ll walk over with them to whatever the resource is to remove the fear and barrier right off the bat.”

Recognizing that disconnected youth are typically facing seemingly insurmountable obstacles to academic success, bundling as many services as possible into the program is crucial. “We know that many students will continue to experience significant barriers to their education. When that happens, rather than feeling like they do not have time for education during a period of crisis, we want students to think: ‘there is someone at the college who can help me with this,’” Mathern explains.

As a complement to this high-touch approach, Gateway programs are also designed to build students’ self-efficacy. Onboarding procedures play a role in helping identify out-of-school needs, but they can also help ensure students are willing to do their part to address issues like mental health, which is a growing challenge for Gateway students.

For example, at Montco, students must complete an application and go through an interview process with Gateway staff after being recommended by their K-12 district. While approximately 90 percent of students are accepted, students who are unwilling to be held accountable for their attendance and academic performance are not. Some are admitted with conditions, including requirements to enter counseling or improve attendance at their current school if truancy is an issue.

To address mental health issues, some programs, including those at Saint Paul College in Minnesota, Front Range Community College and Contra Costa College in California, have integrated mental health counseling, while others are developing partnerships with external partners or working with counseling services in students’ K-12 districts. Gateway programs also frequently connect students with resources available

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in their home K-12 districts, including counseling and services for students with disabilities.

The personal relationships fostered by Gateway’s coaches also help identify ongoing needs. At Pueblo Community College, staffers make home visits to students who are chronically absent, says Bell, but to avoid the stigma of the social service welfare checks with which many students are familiar, “We don’t just go when someone’s in trouble. When someone’s sick, we bring them a couple of cups of noodles,” she says. While not punitive, the home visits help reinforce the importance of attendance and identify other challenges students face—such as the visit which revealed that one student was living in a shed.

As students progress through the Gateway program, their coaches emphasize gradually developing their own skills to self-advocate and seek services on and off campus. For example, Pueblo’s Gateway program focuses on connecting students to summer programs and jobs, but coaches work with students to ensure they take the first step themselves. “A lot of times, our kids don’t know how to engage in professional settings,” says Sally Ridley, a resource specialist on Pueblo’s Durango campus. “We go beyond (referrals) and say ‘let’s call them together’.”

PROACTIVE SERVICES. A key emphasis of holistic student supports is ensuring that interventions occur before a situation reaches a crisis point. For Gateway students, that approach often is most visible in the persistence of their coaches.

“The thing that had me shook was how much they were on your back,” says Kristian. “There were times I was really annoyed with the whole thing and didn’t want to go to school any more, even with every resource within the program. But they wouldn’t let me quit. My advisor had my personal phone number and would call me 50 times to make sure I got to class... For me, that was a good thing.”

The intrusive approach is warranted by the fact that students’ very presence in the Gateway program suggests that they are already at risk of missing classes, program officials say. Consistent contact and monitoring represent the structure behind the persistence of coaches—persistence which Kristian calls “annoying, but in a good way.” Along with weekly one-on-one meetings between coaches and students, most Gateway programs hold weekly staff meetings during which success coaches, faculty involved in the Foundations course, support staff, and the program director discuss each student’s progress and needs.



Students at Pueblo Community College’s Gateway Program

Attendance is a key challenge for Gateway students, and many programs keep master schedules of all students’ classes and closely monitor attendance and the timing of major projects or exams. Program staff at Madison Area Technical College in Wisconsin send students prompt messages if they are absent or tardy, for example. Quinsigamond Community College in Massachusetts takes the process a step further, requiring students to complete a Google form confirming their attendance as well as identifying issues and successes in each class before the weekly meeting with their coach. Many programs require students to make up missed class time, in part because of K-12 funding requirements but also because the prospect of doing so has improved attendance significantly.

Montco took accountability to another level after encountering students who “just assumed they were coming back” after the first semester, says Sheriff. Program leaders introduced a “petition to continue,” which requires students to develop a presentation detailing their progress for a meeting with their resource specialist, program lead, K-12 district personnel, and parents. The petition process “gives them a chance to stop and think about who they are as learners,” says Sheriff. “Students hear tough observations and are asked tough questions,” she says, but these meetings are rarely a surprise for students, given their regular meetings with resource specialists and other staff throughout the year.

Several other Gateway programs hold end-of-term or scholarship renewal interviews for similar purposes, including providing students with opportunities to articulate their priorities and commitment to continued studies. Again, the guiding principle driving accountability is rooted in the close personal relationships fostered by Gateway coaches. “Their relationships mean they can push students because they know they love them,” says Pueblo’s Soto-Quintana.

Implications for Other Student Populations

While the intensive nature of the Gateway program is difficult to replicate without the funding that K-12 students bring with them from their districts, the approach is informing broader changes to student supports at some institutions. For example, Portland Community College is exploring case management models for advising to help connect all students with specialists focused on their needs and specific programs of study earlier in their college experience. PCC also is expanding more intensive personalized coaching to first-generation college students through its Future Connect program. “There’s real value in having innovative programs to move larger systems,” says Josh Laurie, manager of Future Connect.



access to dual-enrollment courses, meals on class nights, childcare stipends, paid summer internships, and assistance with FASFA and other local scholarship programs as needed.

Other institutions are looking more broadly at supporting student needs based on their experience with Gateway. At Montco, where Gateway services are funded in part through the broader student services department, the program is informing strategies to provide better campus mental health services for all students.

As with other student populations, personalizing supports starts with authentic relationships, says Pueblo’s Erjavec. A key lesson about the impact of Gateway’s resource specialists that is transferrable to every college department, she says, is that they “are genuine and authentic and treat the students as if they are their own family. That commitment and the relationships they build is what makes the program successful.”

Winston Downing, Jr., of Cheltenham School District; Scott Montague, II, and Deasia Parter, both of Wissahickon School District; and Shanya Ford of Pottsgrove School District successfully completed their high school graduation requirements through the Gateway to College program at Montgomery County Community College.
Photo by David DeBalko

PCC and another Portland-area institution, Mt. Hood Community College, have also developed a new high school-to-college program designed for historically underserved students. Called PDX Bridge, the program is designed for high school juniors and seniors or recent GED completers who are in foster care, involved with the justice system, or homeless. Like Gateway, PDX Bridge features personalized coaching and

Conclusion

At their heart, the relationships fostered through the Gateway program are about giving students options. “The more options our students have, the better our communities will be,” says Soto-Quintana. “When we keep young people connected to their local K-12 districts and community colleges, they recognize they have futures.”

Over the past two decades, thousands of students have found better futures through the program. Miranda received her high school diploma through Pueblo Community College’s Gateway program in 2018. Despite the social anxiety that brought her to the college, she became a student ambassador for the program, speaking to other students about her experiences.

“New challenges can be scary, but you have to go through them to learn,” she says. “Gateway doesn’t treat you like a number on a spreadsheet—they got to know me as a person. Their ability to connect to you as a student and connect us to others is so unique. It inspired us to work hard and graduate.”

Now 18, Miranda is currently enrolled as a full-time student studying web development and design at the college with a 4.0 GPA. After earning her associate degree, she plans to look for an online program to continue her studies.

For Devin and Kristian, Gateway has continued to shape their lives years after they successfully completed the program. “The only thing that kept me going was that at the end of the day, you’re not going to be anything without a high school diploma—there’s no other route,” Devin says. Now 21, he is working full time and recently returned to Montco to get a marketing degree. His first call after deciding to return to school was to his Gateway counselor. “Instead of me guessing, he was the first person I called to ask what I have to do, and he pointed me in the right direction,” he says. Kristian, who is now 20, also is completing his final two classes at Montco and preparing to transfer to Temple University to major in sports management. “Something just clicked,” he says. “I found myself doing things I didn’t do—I hate waking up early, but if I had a

test at 9 a.m., I would go to school at 6 a.m. to study, and that extra work paid off.”

After a successful year in Gateway at Montco, Ali was given the option of returning to his high school last fall. Instead, he opted to remain in the program. “After being in the college atmosphere with a lot more responsibility, I couldn’t go back to teachers holding my hand in high school,” he says. He expects to graduate in May and is applying to four-year universities. Unsure of a major, he plans to take several computer science classes at Montco to decide if it’s the career he wants to pursue.

For Ali, who got As and Bs but wasn’t motivated to take AP courses, high school “was okay. I didn’t know I was dissatisfied with it until I experienced something else,” he says. “In the moment, I was fine with it, but it was slowly wearing me down... The way your boss treats you, the way your college professors treat you doesn’t align with how high school staff teaches you. People expect more of you and give you more freedom and responsibility than they ever would in high school. It mentally prepares you for anything you choose to do.”

That feeling of support and empowerment at the same time is one that can benefit all students. “Who doesn’t want to walk away knowing someone invested time in you?” asks Pueblo’s Bell. “It’s important to build relationships so students know they are important, and not just numbers.”

Other briefs in this series examine how colleges are supporting the success of other student populations that have been historically underserved by higher education, including transitioning and part-time students, and student mothers.

“Gateway doesn’t treat you like a number on a spreadsheet—they got to know me as a person.”

Endnotes

- 1 American Institutes for Research. (2013). *Predictors of Postsecondary Success*. Retrieved from <https://ccrcenter.org/products-resources/predictors-postsecondary-success>
- 2 National Center for Education Statistics. (2017). *Trends in High School Dropout and Completion Rates in the United States*. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/dropout/ind_01.asp
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