

Supporting College Students Remotely

Adapting the Evidence for 2020 and Beyond

Rebekah O'Donoghue and Alyssa Ratledge

JUNE 2020


MDRC has studied a number of proven strategies for helping students stay in college and succeed there, the most effective of which combine advisers or coaches who actively reach out to students, decision-making informed by data, and extra financial support. Lessons from some of these models may be readily adapted to support students and close equity gaps while colleges engage in remote and partly remote learning now and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Here are three lessons taken from MDRC's evaluations, many of which studied programs meant to boost the success of low-income and underprepared college students, in particular [Opening Doors](#), the [City University of New York's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs \(ASAP\)](#), the [ASAP Demonstration in Ohio](#), [Detroit Promise Path](#), the [Men of Color College Achievement](#) project, the [Performance-Based Scholarship Demonstration](#), the [Encouraging Additional Summer Enrollment](#) project, the [Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency](#) project, and the [Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services](#) project.

1. EQUIP COLLEGE STAFF AND FACULTY MEMBERS WITH TOOLS TO FOSTER RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS.

MDRC research suggests that consistent outreach from coaches or advisers is especially effective at helping students succeed. Most colleges have adapted to remote advising during the pandemic, so students may be able to maintain their relationships with advisers. But students also benefit from building relationships with other college staff members, including faculty members, tutors, and others. Ensure that all these staff members are trained and given resources for remote interaction with students.

How can you build relationships across the college, both in person and online?

- **Be creative about helping students develop relationships with staff and faculty members** and reach out to them in [multiple ways](#) (for example, through emails, phone calls, social media, and text messages). Staff members should help students connect with a wide array of mentors to replicate the informal relationships students build on campus outside of traditional advising.
- **Time outreach to students to coincide with important activities and decision points.** Provide staff and faculty members a calendar of important activities or deadlines, along with [message templates](#) they can use. Outreach might be timed to coincide with registration deadlines, deadlines for drop-



mdrc
BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

ISSUE FOCUS

NEW YORK
200 Vesey Street, 23rd Floor
New York, NY 10281
Tel: 212 532 3200

OAKLAND
475 14th Street, Suite 750
Oakland, CA 94612
Tel: 510 663 6372

WASHINGTON, DC
1990 M Street, NW, Suite 340
Washington, DC 20036

LOS ANGELES
11965 Venice Boulevard, Suite 402
Los Angeles, CA 90066

www.mdrc.org

ping and adding courses, and financial aid deadlines, for example.

- **Include both a personal check-in and a tangible action item or activity** in each meeting, so that students leave with a concrete next step and a plan to report back, reinforcing the relationship. Give staff members example check-in questions and guidance on how to connect students with appropriate forms of support in real time, a practice known as a “warm handoff.” Many students are experiencing bereavement, food or housing insecurity, and mental health crises, and may need a lot of support outside the classroom.
- **Encourage relationships among peers** by holding group coaching sessions or affinity groups. See MDRC’s [guide to running effective group meetings](#) for tips on how staff and faculty members can create a sense of motivation and shared purpose.
- **[SIMPLER communication is better](#)**. Poverty, scarcity, and stress — all equity issues compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic — [make planning and decision-making more difficult](#). Make your written communications straightforward, short, and easy to act on using MDRC’s SIMPLER framework.

2. USE DATA IN REAL TIME.

The faster you look at your data, the better you can help students — and catch students before they drop out. These data should cover end goals such as course enrollments and Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) applications, as well as students’ participation rates in support programs. Several of the programs MDRC has found to have the largest positive impacts use these kinds of data continually to help get students the right support for their changing needs. For example, staff members can generate reports that group students by the number of times they responded to outreach in the current month, and then focus more intensive outreach on students who are less responsive.

How can you use data to guide the way you support students with diverse backgrounds and needs in a changing college environment?

- **Establish a system for faculty and staff members to access data they can act on.** Figure out, across all departments, who should receive “early alert” messages and how they can act on them. Make it a routine practice to incorporate staff and faculty members’ perspectives on the information, analyses, and graphing capabilities they need. For example, by monitoring attendance and course enrollment data between the beginning of the semester and the deadline for dropping and adding courses, staff and faculty members can identify “no-show” students and take steps to help them get back on track.
- **Survey students about the challenges they face inside and outside of college.** Many colleges and programs fielded surveys in response to COVID-19. The responses helped colleges and programs identify students’ needs and connect them with the resources they needed to keep going to school. Don’t overwhelm students: Keep surveys under 10 minutes and make the next steps specific, with clear deadlines. To get a better understanding of students’ experiences, disaggregate the data by reviewing response rates among different groups (for example, first-generation or Pell-eligible students), and follow up with groups of students who have responded at lower rates. Often, nonresponsive students face the greatest needs.
- **Use reports and graphs to guide program operations from week to week**, to ensure that interventions are producing the desired effects. For example, a simple bar chart can help a program track overall engagement over the course of a semester. Make sure the college’s tracking system can be updated daily so that the information displayed is current.

- **Focus on the students who need extra support.** Help your staff and faculty create reports to see who is not attending class or not seeing an adviser, so they can [target](#) those students with outreach to get them reengaged. When courses are offered online or are self-paced, students often go slower than they do when faculty members direct them. Faculty members should be able to identify and support students who are slowing down.

3. SIMPLIFY FINANCIAL AID PROCESSES AND PROVIDE NEW WAYS TO GET FINANCIAL SUPPORT.

COVID-19 is compounding the challenges low-income students face as they try to complete their college degrees. These additional challenges may continue for multiple semesters, especially if colleges offer online classes or a mix of in-person and online classes in future years, or if students choose to take such classes, without the skills and support they need to be successful off-campus. Students who lack the right technology or reliable internet access will find it difficult or impossible to complete their courses and stay engaged with faculty and staff. (As described in Box 1, additional federal funds may be available to help them.) Students are understandably concerned about paying for tuition in coming semesters, but the other costs of college are an equal concern: Can your students afford computers? Broadband? Food?

How can you offer better financial support during COVID-19 — or in any setting?

- **Simplify a complex financial aid process** by creating [clear deadlines and delineating manageable steps](#). Colleges should refine their financial aid messages with an eye to students who may never meet with college staff members face-to-face.
- **Make financial aid follow-up more internet-friendly.** Students must be able to talk to financial aid officers and see their aid packages online. Colleges may have to identify new pathways to disburse financial aid to students through paper checks or electronically, by direct deposit.
- **Tie additional financial assistance to activities such as [engaging with support program staff members](#) or [meeting priority benchmarks or milestones](#).** Bonus financial assistance can have additional salience — and create new habits for students — when tied to beneficial activities. Colleges can issue incentive payments remotely by using electronic gift cards or by mailing paper checks.
- **Connect students to additional resources** on top of existing financial aid. Colleges could identify local scholarships, help students apply for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), hold more required textbooks on reserve in the college library, or issue more loaner laptops. Faculty and staff members should be prepared to make these connections; for example, a college food pantry can help students enroll in SNAP or other social service programs.

Box 1

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act

The [CARES Act](#) provides emergency student aid, along with funding that can be used to pay for laptops, hotspots, or other equipment students need to succeed remotely. CARES Act funds may also be available to help train additional staff members for continued remote or partly remote interaction with students.

MDRC's issue focus [Providing Emergency Aid to College Students in a Time of Crisis](#) highlights ways colleges can allocate resources equitably. Be sure to look at the latest U.S. Department of Education guidelines to understand what the CARES Act allows.

The postsecondary education community is innovating quickly in response to COVID-19. Some temporary solutions will be abandoned after the crisis has passed, but the strategies above could also be a foundation for innovations that make higher education more equitable in the long term.