

# Understanding What Works in Postsecondary Education

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A college degree remains critical to unlocking opportunity and to accessing America’s middle class, yet millions of students who pursue higher education never earn degrees. At community colleges, which disproportionately serve low-income students and students of color, [only a third of students](#) earn a two-year degree within three years. At four-year universities, [only half of low-income students](#) graduate within six years. The rising costs of college are one factor. These include not only tuition, but also transportation, textbooks, housing, and food, which together often exceed tuition. Academics are another factor. [Two-thirds of entering freshmen in community colleges](#) are identified as academically underprepared and are required to take remedial courses that do not count toward a degree. Most never graduate. These students face other barriers too, including balancing work and family, lack of information, lack of social and family resources to navigate college, and institutional policies and practices that create obstacles — all of which have been exacerbated by COVID-19.

This memo draws lessons and policy implications from two decades of rigorous research in postsecondary institutions focused on these problems. The students who participated in this research were primarily low-income students and many were students of color. All of the studies referenced here used randomized controlled trials, [the highest standard of evidence](#) recognized by the U.S Department of Education and the scientific research community. Despite the barriers that many students face, the findings discussed here demonstrate the growing and impressive evidence base on what can be done to help low-income students and students of color succeed in college.

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## KEY LESSONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

### **LESSON 1: Frequent, proactive advising tied to financial support is highly effective, improving credit accumulation and persistence, and in some cases driving large improvements in graduation.**

By themselves, short-term interventions like financial awards and enhanced advising have small effects. When these strategies are combined in more comprehensive programs, however, they can drive large improvements in graduation. The City University of New York's (CUNY) [Accelerated Study in Associate Programs](#) (ASAP) is among the most effective and comprehensive programs that have been studied. CUNY ASAP is a three-year program. It requires students to enroll full time and frequently meet with advisors who have small caseloads. Students must also participate in tutoring, enhanced career services, and block-scheduled courses for the first year. They receive a tuition waiver to fill any gap between financial aid and tuition and fees, free MetroCards for public transportation, and free use of textbooks. [ASAP nearly doubled graduation rates](#) in an independent evaluation at CUNY, with consistent results across racial groups. ASAP also doubled graduation rates again when it was [replicated and tested in three Ohio colleges](#).

Other studies reinforce the importance of multiyear programs that combine advising with additional financial aid. Short-term advising and coaching programs can help students make academic progress (e.g., [InsideTrack](#); or [Opening Doors](#), which also included small stipends) but do not always produce measurable gains (e.g., [Monitoring Advising Analytics to Promote Success](#) and [iPASS](#)). Additional financial aid can also improve outcomes, but impacts are smaller than combined programs (see below). Evidence about comprehensive programs that combine frequent advising and additional financial aid, however, is accumulating, especially for studies at early stages and for short-term outcomes. These include rigorous studies on the [Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement](#), [Bottom Line](#), [One Million Degrees](#), and the [Detroit Promise Path](#), which all show positive short-term impacts. Positive findings are also being seen in rigorous studies of programs that provide counseling or advising and additional financial support, with a focus on certain employment sectors, such as [Project Quest](#), [Year Up](#), [I-BEST](#), [Health Careers for All](#), and [Bridge to Employment in Healthcare](#).

Implementing comprehensive, multiyear advising programs, however, can be costly. Most of the evidence cited above comes from programs operating at community colleges, which tend to be resource-constrained and are likely to remain so throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath.

### **LESSON 2: Additional financial aid can help low-income students succeed, but decisions about how the program is designed are important.**

Increased financial aid (on top of Pell Grants and other aid) in the form of scholarships and grants is an important component of the most successful strategies that have been tested so far. Although many studies attempt to determine the causal effects of grant aid independent of other factors, far fewer [use randomized controlled trials](#) (RCT) to provide the most reliable estimates. The strongest research available in the U.S. includes large evaluations in nine states: privately-funded grants to [Nebraska high school students](#) to attend in-state public postsecondary institutions; privately-funded grants to [Pell-eligible Wisconsin residents](#) who were already enrolled at four-year public institutions; performance-based scholarships for low-income parents attending [community colleges in Louisiana](#), in which a portion of each grant was conditioned on the student's performance in the semester; and a large-scale demonstration project to replicate and adapt the [Louisiana](#) performance-based scholarships with a diverse range of low-income students in [Arizona](#), [California](#), [Florida](#), [New Mexico](#), [New York](#), and [Ohio](#). These studies demonstrate that grants of different [designs](#) and [amounts](#) can improve college access and progress towards graduation, and in some cases they can modestly improve completion.

Increasing financial aid, however, does not always work. The Wisconsin program described above included a similar scholarship for students at Wisconsin community colleges, also tested in an RCT. The community college scholarship did not measurably improve student outcomes, a result that [the authors attribute](#) partially to small complexities in implementation that created barriers for students, and partially to negative effects the offer appeared to generate for a subsample of students who turned out to be ineligible for the award. Likewise, the [promise of a scholarship worth up to \\$12,000](#) to students who graduate from Milwaukee public high schools has not produced demonstrably positive impacts on college enrollment, potentially related to program design decisions like high school performance requirements and insufficient attention to school culture and resources to catalyze student interest. When they are well-designed and meet the needs of the target student population, scholarships and grants can be important strategies to help students succeed.

### **LESSON 3: Developmental or remedial education reforms can help more students succeed in college-level courses.**

Millions of college students are required to pass developmental or remedial classes before they can enroll in credit-bearing courses at the college level, but most never graduate. Rigorous research studies conducted at [seven colleges in New York](#) and [five colleges in Minnesota and Wisconsin](#), however, show that simply using better data to determine college readiness, such as students' high school GPA, can help many students skip remedial courses altogether and still succeed in college-level courses. Intensive instruction and support programs can also help students with multiple remedial needs in reading, writing, and math. [CUNY Start](#), for example, substantially increases the proportion of students who complete developmental education. CUNY Start condenses the time students spend preparing for college English and math into one semester, before formal matriculation; integrates content areas like reading and writing using engaging instructional practices; includes student supports like tutoring and skills seminars during classroom time; and provides intensive professional development for faculty.

Other instructional reforms are improving outcomes as well. The Dana Center's Mathematics Pathways (DCMP) [improved the proportion of students who passed](#) developmental and college-level math courses in a study at four community colleges in Texas. DCMP is a major instructional reform of developmental or remedial math. Instead of teaching algebra to all students, the program offers statistics and quantitative pathways that align with students' majors. Instructors also avoid lecturing and focus on more interactive forms of student learning.

Evidence is also growing around corequisite remediation, in which students enroll directly in college-level courses, in addition to courses that provide concurrent support for developmental or remedial needs. A rigorous study of corequisite remediation in English at five Texas community colleges found [large gains in the percentage of students who passed college-level English](#), with consistently positive impacts for traditionally underrepresented groups. In math, CUNY created a program that combined features of math pathways and corequisite remediation: instead of developmental algebra, students took college-level statistics with corequisite remediation. A rigorous study found that the program not only [improved college-level math completion, but also improved graduation](#). Measurable increases in graduation, however, are rare for developmental or remedial education reforms. In general, the reforms discussed here can help more students pass college-level courses and advance towards graduation, but most likely need to be paired with other strategies to substantially improve completion.

### **LESSON 4: Behavioral strategies can increase participation in activities that promote student success.**

Insights from behavioral science can help identify and develop strategies to overcome barriers that may prevent student success. One [prominent study](#) demonstrated that simply providing people with personalized help to fill out the federal Free Application for Financial Student Aid (FAFSA) increased the percentage of low-income families who

submitted the FAFSA, increased the amount of financial aid their students received, and impacted college access and persistence. Strategies that include simple adjustments to present information more clearly or more saliently — or simple reminders to complete required documents — can also boost the number of students who engage in activities associated with college completion. In [one study](#), students who received emails and mailings about summer enrollment took summer classes at higher rates and earned more credits, with results that were even larger when paired with a modest amount of additional financial aid. Research has also found that simply changing default loan offers [from \\$0 to any nonzero amount](#), or [providing information about federal student loans](#), can change student behavior and increase borrowing.

On the other hand, behavioral messages will not achieve their desired effect if they are not appropriately tailored to the target population or do not resonate with students. [Two large-scale studies](#) of messages that were designed to help students apply for financial aid, for example, did not increase FAFSA submission rates. Similarly, although [an initial study](#) found that customized information can help high-achieving, low-income students apply to and enroll in academically stronger institutions, [large-scale follow-up research](#) did not confirm these results. When behavioral messages are [well-designed](#) for the target population, however, they can be compelling approaches for colleges to adopt or pair with other strategies. Moreover, they usually cost very little, so even small effects on enrollment can produce increases in tuition revenue that more than cover the cost of the intervention.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 1 Combine proven strategies like frequent, proactive advising and additional financial support.** Programs that, in isolation, have small short-term effects can still dramatically improve outcomes when combined with other effective programs. Frequent, proactive advising combined with financial support are central to the most effective programs that have been rigorously evaluated. Programs sometimes include other supports like tutoring or career counseling. Sustaining these programs over multiple years is also a key factor contributing to their success, and behavioral strategies can help ensure students participate in important activities. For policymakers, this means encouraging and incentivizing institutions to implement a comprehensive, evidence-based approach to supporting students.
- 2 Prioritize equity in completion efforts.** Low graduation rates are a problem of national urgency, concentrated predominantly among low-income students and students of color. The programs included in this memo were all evaluated in independent, rigorous evaluations and tended to work for diverse student populations. Giving substantially more students of color and low-income students access to the most effective programs could dramatically reduce equity gaps in the U.S.
- 3 Provide additional federal resources to finance proven strategies.** Implementing proven programs costs money. Community colleges, in particular, tend to be resource-constrained and are likely to remain so throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. Few have budgets for resource-intensive programs, even those that have been shown to positively impact student success. Solving the college completion problem will require additional governmental support tied to rigorously tested interventions that are demonstrated to improve outcomes for low-income students and students of color.

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