



STUDENT SUCCESS AND TRANSFORMATION PROJECT



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INTRODUCTION

In December 2020, Complete College America (CCA), in partnership with the Jessie Ball duPont Fund, launched a rigorous 12- to 18-month project designed to increase student success and completion rates at small liberal arts institutions. The focus was on building and enhancing support systems for first-generation and Pell-eligible students, and those from under-resourced communities. The Jessie Ball duPont Fund looked at 40 institutions they work with and identified 12 representing four-year institutions, community and technical colleges, Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

- BRIDGEWATER COLLEGE (VA)**
- EDWARD WATERS UNIVERSITY (FL)**
- FERRUM COLLEGE (VA)**
- FLORIDA SOUTHERN COLLEGE (FL)**
- HOLLINS UNIVERSITY (VA)**
- MARY BALDWIN UNIVERSITY (VA)**
- MCDANIEL COLLEGE (MD)**
- MEREDITH COLLEGE (NC)**
- MISSISSIPPI VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY (MS)**
- RANDOLPH COLLEGE (VA)**
- SAN ANTONIO COLLEGE (TX)**
- STEPHENS COLLEGE (MO)**

CCA led program design and provided consultation; access to professional development, research, and expert content; as well as technical support to assist in the implementation of four game-changing strategies:

15 TO FINISH/STAY ON TRACK

All full-time students are advised to enroll in 15 credits each semester or craft a plan for summer enrollment. Part-time students are encouraged to have a completion plan to Stay on Track, being mindful of their part-time status. Tuition structure and institutional processes and practices should support the standard.

ACADEMIC MAPS

Academic maps are semester-by-semester maps that delineate the path to graduation and highlight significant milestones that contribute to student success in a clear and comprehensive format.

PROACTIVE ADVISING

A structured, intentional first-semester process for students to explore their academic interests and related careers. Advisors, with significant time freed up, track student progress on degree plans, monitor early-alert systems, and reach out to students before they become vulnerable.

POSTSECONDARY DATA PARTNERSHIP

Participating colleges gained membership for two years in the National Student Clearinghouse's Postsecondary Data Partnership (PDP) to expand the depth and breadth of data collected for analysis to identify institutional performance gaps.



METHODOLOGY

CCA adapted its Foundations for Institutional Transformation (FIT) model to facilitate change by working directly with project teams, a combination of administrators, faculty, student services, and academic affairs personnel from participating colleges, to develop and execute strategies. Convening the teams in person to disseminate information and share ideas is optimal. During the pandemic, CCA adapted to virtual sessions. On the first Wednesday of each month, participants could attend online office hours to ask questions and receive feedback on their strategy implementation. CCA developed a series of webinars featuring experts sharing best practices in each of the student success areas. Each institution was assigned a dedicated CCA consultant who provided customized consulting services during individual monthly meetings with strategy directors. In addition, the participants gained access to CCA

consultants who performed deeper dives on retention strategies and mapping, including a graphic designer to develop academic map templates. Overall, CCA supported a learning environment whereby participants were able to share best practices and bond over shared goals and challenges related to COVID-19, such as declining enrollments and a rise in stress-related mental health issues experienced by students.

The office hours and monthly meetings have concluded. However, participants are eligible to receive ongoing support through the Postsecondary Data Partnership and apply for mini grants for technical support, 15 to Finish campaign collaterals, and to offset the costs of bringing on additional personnel.



STRATEGY OVERVIEW

15 TO FINISH

CCA expected 15 to Finish to look different at each campus. Based on how credits are calculated and the varied graduation requirements, it was described as 16 to Finish by two of the participating colleges. Some of the colleges took a more prescriptive approach to 15 to Finish, launching campaigns to create visibility on campus, and at student orientation and registration events, including posters, laptop stickers, and light pole banners. Others were more subtle, embedding 15 to Finish into the culture during one-on-one conversations between advisors and students. The initiative led to more intentional tracking of student metrics in the target groups to identify trends and red flags. For instance, students taking 15 credits per semester were found to perform better academically. However, African American students and athletes disproportionately were not enrolling in 15 credits.

ACADEMIC MAPS

Overwhelmingly, the biggest issue CCA identified with academic maps, also called degree plans, was student access. Many of them were drafted in confusing catalog formats or sitting in file cabinets and not being shared. CCA worked with the project teams to coalesce this information into a format that is student-friendly and always accessible, allowing students the ability to review them at any time to make sure they're on track. In addition to course sequencing semester by semester, including General Education, math and English requirements, and coursework in their major the first two years, CCA encouraged the teams to include co-curriculum pieces, internships, and career-related milestones.

PROACTIVE ADVISING

Because of COVID-19, enrollment was the No. 1 priority for the majority of the institutions taking part in the project. CCA stressed that student success was, in fact, a key driver of enrollment. However, nearly all of the teams reported reluctance from their faculty advisors when asked to increase the number of advising touch points and early warning outreach to students. This was largely due to the increased demands resulting from the COVID crisis. Proactive advising virtually during the pandemic for many faculty advisors was daunting. CCA clarified that whether institutions prefer professional or faculty advising, or a hybrid advising model, it was more about the intentionality around outreach to students. CCA found this to be a major culture shift at some of the colleges.

POSTSECONDARY DATA PARTNERSHIP

Many of the colleges lacked a dedicated data team and the resources to collect and upload information to the PDP. In addition to time constraints, another roadblock CCA identified was a lack of familiarity with the data being sought or why it is important. The duPont Fund is providing additional funding to CCA to support this initiative. At the conclusion of the project, CCA was seeking contractors in the IT space who could write scripts that would allow the institutions to more easily collect and upload data based on the PDP's requirements. Implementation of the PDP on these campuses has allowed the campus teams to identify what data they need to actualize their student success goals. The seven institutions highlighted in this report were able to successfully execute many aspects of the student success strategies while they continued to work on submitting their data and receiving the PDP dashboards.

The project allowed the colleges the flexibility to work with CCA consultants to support any aspect of the project they deemed most appropriate. Some sought a graphic designer to improve their academic maps. Another sought the advice of a CCA consultant to develop a charge to revitalize its retention committee. Institutions lacking funding for professional development forwarded the webinars to academic support staff to supplement learning. Additionally, CCA streamlined the networking and resource sharing processes by developing an online learning management system to house different modules based on the core strategies. The portal launched near the end of the project, so engagement is still being measured.

Each institution was asked to grade their success in each of the four strategy areas at the beginning and again at the conclusion of the project. Some noted improvement, but the number represents a reflection point rather than an evaluation. It's about the narrative and how these institutions can embed these strategies into their culture. College and campus transformation is a process. Culture change takes time.

The case studies on the following pages provide highlights across the project that demonstrate the great work and progress made at the participating colleges and how CCA contributed to this process.



STEPHENS COLLEGE

Stephens is a private college based in Columbia, Missouri, with approximately 400 undergraduate and 200 graduate students. Forty percent of the student body is Pell-eligible.

TARGET POPULATION

Students from under-resourced communities

NOTABLE OUTCOME

Proactive advising

For Stephens, a key takeaway from the Jessie Ball duPont Fund project was the realization that its faculty advising model was neither proactive nor sustainable. Each semester, the college hosts a dedicated Advising Day and students are required to meet once with their faculty advisor. However, availability varies depending on the advisor. As a result, some students were falling through the cracks. For faculty, the overarching barrier to implementing a more proactive advising model is time. So, it was no surprise when the team asked faculty to send out reminders and early academic alerts, and to meet with students more than once, it was not well received. As part of Stephens' evolution, the project team worked with faculty to create academic maps with course sequencing. Mapping is something faculty previously struggled with, but by establishing clear guidelines with CCA support and best practices learned by talking with student success staff at other colleges in the project cohort, Stephens was able to sequence course maps for the next two years for all but one program and gain faculty buy-in. Having clear pathways to completion eliminates confusion over what students need to graduate, and also helps streamline the advising process. With the expectation that students will take 15 credits per semester now embedded in its academic maps,

that pathway to completion is now a conversation between advisors and students and part of the culture. As a small institution, the on-the-ground game gets attention and better reception than a mandate handed down from the administration building, team members said.

Advising continues to be a work in progress, but the team said the duPont project kicked off a conversation that a lot of people have been wanting to have for a long time. That led the project team to coordinate with faculty to develop a hybrid proactive advising model that would include professional advisors who are Stephens employees but not faculty. A proposal that includes a case management component has been submitted to the college president for consideration.

"To do advising right takes a lot of time and care," said Trish Parsons, Director of Student Retention and Success. "Before, I didn't have the language to bring it all together. If I hadn't been a part of this [project], I don't think I would've been able to write that proposal. I'd be banging my head against a wall trying to figure out how to convince faculty to spend time they don't have to be more engaged as advisors."



MISSISSIPPI VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY (MVSU)

MVSU is a HBCU located in Itta Bena, MS, with approximately 2,065 students enrolled in fall 2021.

TARGET POPULATION

Students who do not meet regular admission requirements

NOTABLE OUTCOME

Bolstered support systems for students who need extra help

The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated a historic decline in college enrollment. At MVSU, it also helped complicate the admissions process. The ACT and SAT exams weren't being offered in 2020 because of COVID restrictions. MVSU staff were, therefore, unable to factor test scores into a weighted number they use to assess a student's college readiness. That coincided in the fall with MVSU experiencing an influx of students who did not meet traditional enrollment requirements. The majority of its freshmen class had to be screened into University College, the division that supports student success through tutoring, advising and early monitoring, to make sure they were able to get the help they needed on their college journey.

Hearing other members in the project cohort describe similar challenges helped the duPont team at MVSU brainstorm ways to bolster its tutoring and advising processes. Targeted, early attention, they agreed, was key. So, MVSU began automatically putting screened-in freshmen into its early alert

system from Day One. It uses a software called Grades First to get faculty members more involved with the system and in identifying students who need more attention. Having more students in the early warning pipeline, though, threatened to overburden the college's tutoring network. However, during the process of sequencing courses for its academic maps, the duPont team was able to see areas where they were overstaffed and understaffed. Looking at ways to improve its hybrid advising model forced the team to think critically about faculty advisors who consistently received unfavorable reviews from students. The project team recommended faculty who didn't have a full academic load be reassigned to tutorial services to work with the general student population, resolving two critical issues.

"Everybody isn't meant to be an advisor," said Dr. Kathie Stromile Golden, Provost and Senior Vice President of Academic Affairs. "Now, we have a formula."



BRIDGEWATER COLLEGE

Bridgewater is a private, liberal arts college in Bridgewater, VA, with approximately 1,500 students enrolled in fall 2021. Nearly a third are Pell-eligible.

TARGET POPULATION

Students from under-resourced communities

NOTABLE OUTCOME

Re-energized its Retention Committee

Bridgewater's Retention Committee has put time and intention behind developing strategies to raise its retention rate from 78% to the low 80s. Despite their efforts, retention has steadily declined, even before the pandemic, particularly among its sophomores. In 2017, the committee entered a two-year Retention Performance Management program, working with a nonprofit that specializes in advancing teaching, student learning, retention, and completion. Committee members looked closely at Bridgewater's retention data and led community brainstorming to identify what might be driving the negative trend. After undergoing a rigorous review, the committee came up with a list of recommendations. Foremost, it made changes to the first-year seminar to provide more coordination with academic support services and academic coaching, and instituted student peer advisors. It also made a curriculum change that moved its eight-week inter-term, during which students can take up to three compressed classes, from January to May.

There was also a push to use the college's retention data more effectively and share it more broadly with constituents. The net effect: Retention dropped to the mid-70s, with sophomores in the upper 60s. It was a demoralizing outcome for the Retention Committee and across campus, in general, they said. As participants in the Jessie Ball duPont Fund project, Bridgewater looked to CCA for help with re-energizing

the committee and righting the ship. CCA suggested they examine credit accumulation rates, which the committee had not been tracking. They found that the decline in retention lined up almost perfectly with the inter-term change from January to May. As a result, athletes, in particular, weren't reaching 30 credits a year. And, with spring term ending early, many students took jobs instead of classes in May.

In spring 2021, the duPont project team launched a 15 to Finish campaign. It directed advisors to push the importance of taking 15 credits each semester and handed out laptop stickers and magnets, and printed up posters as reminders to students. However, when the team ran the numbers in fall 2021, the needle hadn't moved and the Retention Committee floundered. CCA consultant Melinda Karp met with the committee and helped develop a life cycle for the group starting with developing a charge to drive priorities that work together to push multiple levers toward student success. Now, the committee has identified four goals and met last fall to complete a logic model that will lead to development of a calendar of activities to drive outputs. In addition, average credits earned by students who withdrew versus those who remained enrolled is now one of the data points Bridgewater collects under the Postsecondary Data Partnership. "We didn't have that level of granularity before but we will now," said Jada E. Blinn, Director, Strategic Analysis and Reporting.



RANDOLPH COLLEGE

Randolph is a private liberal arts and sciences college in Lynchburg, VA, with approximately 540 students. 40% of undergrads and 48% of first-years are Pell-eligible.

TARGET POPULATION

Pell-eligible, students from under-resourced communities, students of color.

NOTABLE OUTCOMES

Restructured curriculum to develop its version of 15 to Finish; academic mapping support

Randolph has a high percentage of students facing multiple barriers to persisting. More than half lived in poverty pre-COVID and, because many students also work, they struggle with time management and college preparedness. Faculty began to notice a pattern. Students taking five courses at a time would get in trouble academically and drop a class or two to focus on their remaining course load. Faculty initiated a restructuring of the curriculum around the same time the Student Success and Academic Affairs departments joined the Jessie Ball duPont Fund project. They spent more than a year developing TAKE 2, Randolph's version of 15 to Finish. Students take two, four-credit courses per seven-week session for a total of 16 credits per semester. Initially, the number of credits increased but numbers fell in the second semester. The team said a key learning during its engagement with CCA was to pay more attention to credits earned versus credits attempted. Credit completion, which hadn't been a focus in previous years, is now viewed as a primary driver. The initial data review completed with the duPont team and CCA clarified goals around measuring persistence and credit progress. The discussion prompted Randolph to consider stronger tracking of data to compare to previous years. That work was progressing in spring 2022.

The project team acknowledged it will take two to three years for TAKE 2 to be fully realized. Students complained about the pace of classes being too fast and difficulty registering for the classes they wanted. Faculty have been responsive to pacing concerns and are examining different ways to cover coursework. Academic mapping for all four-year degree programs, delayed due to TAKE 2 but in progress, will help mitigate issues with registration. The director of Student Success has been collecting information on TAKE 2 majors available to students. That information will be used to develop academic maps along with insights gained from other institutions during CCA convenings. The team said having opportunities to share and gain insights from other colleges in the cohort was invaluable at a time when they were working remotely and needed additional support. A primary outcome of Randolph's engagement with CCA has been increased collaboration between advising and career development areas.

"Academic maps are a priority for advising and the exercises we've done through CCA have been extremely helpful in planning for mapping," said Kim Sheldon, Director of Student Success. "This work with CCA will have the most profound impact on the college."



SAN ANTONIO COLLEGE

San Antonio is a two-year college in San Antonio, Texas, and part of the Alamo College District. Enrollment is approximately 20,000 students, the majority Latinx. 50% are Pell-eligible.

TARGET POPULATION

352 part-time Pell-eligible students

NOTABLE OUTCOMES

Pathways to completion are better communicated

San Antonio College was unique in the project cohort in that it is a two-year college and 80 percent of its students attend part-time. Most of them work and have families, too, which impacts persistence and completion rates, averaging three years and up to five years for those who do not attend continually. The average course load is just above seven hours per semester. San Antonio's charge was to focus on completion and, specifically, equity in completion among its students from under-resourced communities. Implementing a 15 to Finish approach enabled its faculty and professional advisors to better communicate ways students could be successful and complete in two years. However, understanding that many of its students were comfortable taking two courses per semester and that moving them to nine or 12 credits would take some convincing, they set a more attainable goal of six credits per semester among its part-time students. San Antonio's faculty and professional advisors were able to isolate a cohort of 352 Pell-eligible students who had consistently registered for fewer than six hours. Each of those students was contacted by phone ahead of the fall 2021 semester. Their advisors explained how they could successfully register for at least six hours by taking condensed courses during two separate seven-week sessions known as Flex I and Flex II. San Antonio offers a full 16-week term and also a delayed 14-week term during which Flex I and Flex II

run simultaneously from start to midpoint and from midpoint to the end of the semester. Advising's goal was to track the increase in registered hours following their targeted outreach. The call campaign resulted in an uptick in the number of students registering for a minimum of six hours by 5.9% in fall 2021 and by 8.2% in spring 2022. Students who registered for fewer than six hours were again targeted for a call campaign in the spring and invited to attend special advising events and workshops held throughout the year. Postcards purchased with support from CCA promoting the college's version of 15 to Finish are handed out at these events as well as at private advising sessions. The college received advice from its CCA consultant on how to brand its 15 to Finish focus. It adopted the slogan "Finish at SAC" and, at this writing, was developing a dedicated 15 to Finish webpage and monthly newsletter for students with tips and resources.

Though San Antonio was unique in the group, the team was still able to tailor best practices to suit its student population.

"Being able to speak to other colleges gives us a better perspective," said Walid Nader, an academic advisor. "Seeing the way they do things despite big demographic differences, we were able to conclude that we're doing very well."



FLORIDA SOUTHERN COLLEGE

Florida Southern is a private college in Lakeland, FL, with approximately 3,400 students. 40% of first-year students were Pell-eligible.

TARGET POPULATION

First-year and Pell-eligible students.

NOTABLE OUTCOME

More resources and staff in the Student Success Center

You won't find many juniors and seniors hanging around their college advising office, except at Florida Southern, where advisor-student engagement is described as relational versus transactional. Those are the relationships that last. "It's about building a rapport with students, knowing your advisees and helping them think beyond classes to talk about career and life goals," said Thomas Range, Assistant Director of Student Success. "If they need something their advisor is their go to."

Florida Southern prides itself on providing a high-touch experience. Pro advisors provide academic advising through the Student Success Center, and more than 100 faculty advise students in their majors. Advisors must undergo training and are encouraged to practice appreciative advising, which means to lead with the positive whenever possible. Sometimes, the best person to do that isn't an advisor but another student. In partnership with CCA, Southern was able to secure Jessie Ball duPont grant funds to hire Range temporarily in January 2021. He is now credited with successfully launching a peer advising program that turns first-generation and Pell-eligible students into mentors and interns. Range taught them professional development, career readiness and how to navigate resources. By fall, he had curated 15

peer mentors to support a freshmen class of about 300 students. The mentors are paired with students based on academic interests, demographic, and geographic location. Range gives this group of peer mentors a lot of credit for keeping retention rates steady during the pandemic. In addition, he hired two first generation Pell-eligible scholars as interns in the business school. There, they learned to work both collaboratively and independently in an office environment and helped create marketing materials and student correspondents for the college's 16 to Finish campaign. The interns received compensation and earned college credit.

The peer mentor and internship programs helped students realize their value and provided their vulnerable peers with someone to reach out to.

"For Thomas and Shari (Dr. Szabo, dean of Student Success) to say we see you as a mentor flips a switch in their head and imbues some self worth they might not have had," said Chancellor and President Dr. Susan Freeman.

By the grant's conclusion, Southern had committed to hiring Range permanently.



FERRUM COLLEGE

Ferrum is a private college in Ferrum, VA, with approximately 960 students. 28% First Gen and 39% diverse.

TARGET POPULATION

First generation, diverse and students from under-resourced low-income students.

NOTABLE OUTCOMES

15 to Finish and academic maps in progress

Participating in the Jessie Ball duPont Fund Student Success and Transformation Project has been a revelation at Ferrum, the team reported. Given opportunities to meet with CCA consultants and attend webinars on how best practices such as 15 to Finish and academic maps contribute to student success and college completion has enabled the team to build a compelling case for the adoption of each of these strategies. Access to data provided by CCA substantiating students who take 15 credits over-perform academically has been critical to battling the presumption that students who take fewer hours perform better. While there were still some holdovers by the project's conclusion, most prevalent among athletic coaches fearful of overburdening students during their season, 15 to Finish is now emphasized in conversations between advisors and students. After experiencing some resistance to creating academic maps from faculty, concerned about being pigeonholed in course offerings, the team was able to demonstrate how the college's eight-semester plan, which relies on rotation of courses they haven't been faithful to following, was detrimental to advising. Now, faculty are asked to plan course schedules for two years versus one semester to align course rotations and build maps. Ferrum completed course sequencing

for two programs as well as a prototype of a map with support from a graphic designer provided by CCA. Once those are received, they will be able to finish building maps for all degree programs. Deans and division chairs will continue to work with faculty in the future to build course schedules and evaluate maps.

The team concluded that if not for knowledge gained through this project, Ferrum would not have been able to apply for a Jessie Ball duPont Fund grant (in progress) to support other initiatives. They include technical programs; expanding its Gateway Course for first-year students from one to two credits; strengthening its first-generation program; boosting access to emotional support and mental health services with a focus on First Gen, minority male students; and funding a director of advising position.

Kevin Reilly, who during the project was promoted from assistant to vice president of Academic Affairs, said CCA's support was invaluable. "I thought the meetings with Brandon Protas were productive and helped guide us in many ways. We appreciated his energy and enthusiasm for what we were trying to do."

NEXT STEPS

This student success project, supported by the Jessie Ball duPont Fund, created an opportunity to explore how CCA's strategies can support the unique needs of 1) small private institutions, 2) two Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and 3) a two-year institution with a predominately part-time student population. Although, at the outset, their demographics suggest their needs would be vastly different, this project confirmed that many of the barriers to student success are constant across institution types. From these engagements, there were lessons learned that facilitated the campus leaders to adjust practices and delve

deeper by exploring the interconnectedness of focused practice and deliberate, intentional policy to achieve equitable student outcomes. Although policy development was not a focus of this initiative, this outcome is especially critical as college teams across the nation commit time to examine their institutional data to identify where there are equity gaps in their student completion results. The CCA-duPont project provides a roadmap for how institutions can invest resources to design interventions that incorporate strategies to link practice and policy in student attainment efforts to achieve equitable student outcomes.

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**ILLUSTRATION BY
JONATHAN MASSIE OF
COLLABORATIVE LABS.**

During the Jessie Ball duPont Fund project, Jonathan Massie, an artist and Ferrum College alum, earned esteem as our ‘visual notetaker.’ This illustration is a direct representation of CCA’s final meeting with the duPont Fund cohort.

