College Completion Strategies

BY SUNNY DEYE

Too many students start college and don't finish. New data from the National Student Clearinghouse finds the national six-year college completion rate reached 62.2% in 2021. Students of color and those from low-income backgrounds complete college at lower levels than their peers. Among the millions of students who do not receive a degree, many are left with student loan debt without the benefits of higher paying jobs or increased economic security.

Students struggle to complete their higher education pursuits for a variety of reasons, including lack of information and resources, financial challenges,

family responsibilities, and increasing costs. College completion strategies aim to help get students across the finish line and into careers by providing a variety of financial and wraparound services to support increased college graduation rates.

Evidence–Based College Completion Programs

City University of New York's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) is a highly effective initiative that provides individualized counseling and support to students, has doubled graduation rates for its participants, and serves students exclusively from low-income backgrounds at greatest risk of not

Did You Know?

According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center's Completing College National and State Reports:

• The six-year college completion rate for first-time students attending college full- or part-time and earning bachelor and associate degrees is up to 62.2%, a 1.2-point increase over the previous cohort of entering students.

• Completion rates increased for white, Latino and Black students this year, with the largest jump among Black students.

• Adult learners (older than 24 at first entry) showed the largest completion rate increases, particularly at public four-year and community colleges.

completing college. ASAP's program design consists of four interrelated elements: removal of financial barriers to full-time study; provision of comprehensive support services; a structured pathway with clear expectations for students; and creation of a connected community of students and staff.

The U.S. Department of Education found that the factors most important to the success of ASAP include:

■ Remove Barriers to Full-time Attendance

ASAP financial resources remove many of the barriers to full-time attendance. These include waivers that address the gap between financial aid and tuition/fees, monthly transportation cards and free use of textbooks. Students are then able to take at least 12 credits each semester and participate in winter/summer sessions to accelerate degree momentum. Students also benefit from a structured pathway with block scheduling of courses to accommodate busy schedules.

■ Sense of Community

Students develop a strong sense of community through ASAP's cohort approach, which encourages students to support each other and to interact regularly with faculty and staff who can act as supportive institutional agents. The ASAP Seminar and special programs, such as the ASAP leadership program and social events, further develop students' connection to the college and one another.

■ Comprehensive and Coordinated Support Services

ASAP services are structured to address the academic and personal growth needs of students. The program prioritizes staff building rapport with students so they feel comfortable discussing degree attainment challenges and successes with caring adults. Students work with the same advisor the entire time they are in the program. Students also have access to ASAP Career Employment Specialists to address immediate employment needs, take career assessments, develop long-term career goals and plans and receive guidance on scholarship and opportunity programs.

Evaluation and Replication of Programs

Evaluations of CUNY ASAP found that participation increased degree attainment by 18.3 percentage points, and the ASAP replication in Ohio showed similar effectiveness, with a 16 percentage point increase in three-year graduation rates.

The ASAP program has been successfully replicated in three Ohio community colleges and rig-

orously evaluated by MDRC. The study compares the Ohio demonstration of ASAP with regular services and classes at the colleges. Key findings after three years include:

- The Ohio programs boosted enrollment, full-time enrollment and credits earned. By the end of three years, students in the program had earned 8.5 more credits on average than those in the control group.

- The Ohio programs nearly doubled graduation rates after three years. Thirty-five percent of the program group had earned an associate degree, compared with 19% of the control group.

- While the Ohio programs cost more per student than the usual services, they led to a lower cost per degree. The direct cost of the Ohio programs was about an additional $1,840 per year. However, the large increase in degree receipt meant that the cost per degree was 22% lower for program students.

State Action

State legislators have been active in helping to remove financial barriers for students, including non-tuition costs through strategies to provide students with food, housing, childcare and transportation support.

In several states, legislators have included advising/mentoring as a requirement for financial aid.

Tennessee House Bill 6 (2021) creates a pilot program for completion grants for Tennessee Promise students with financial hardships. It requires the Tennessee Higher Education Commission to establish a four-year pilot program that awards grants to Tennessee Promise scholarship students who are eligible for and are receiving services as part of the college coaching initiative delivered by partnering organizations and who have an immediate financial need or who are experiencing financial hardships that may prevent the student from completing a postsecondary degree or credential.

The Arkansas Future Grant Program, enacted in House Bill 1426 in 2017, provides state grant aid to students enrolled in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) or regional high-demand areas of study. Students who receive an Arkansas Future Grant are required to participate in monthly mentoring.

The Virginia Fast Forward Program, enacted in House Bill 66 in 2016, is a short-term workforce credential program that connects students with a program coach who helps them choose their credential program, navigate the paperwork to apply for funding, enroll in courses and transition to new careers.

Additional Resources

- MDRC Report, Increasing Community College Graduation Rates with a Proven Model

- NCSL LegisBrief, Today's Student and the Rising Cost of Higher Education

- NCSL Postsecondary Bill Tracking Database

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