Reducing community college dropout through comprehensive supports

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Providing community college students with a wide range of comprehensive supports, such as counseling, tutoring, and financial assistance, can improve low rates of persistence and graduation. These support programs address many simultaneous barriers that students face, which may be a key driver behind their effectiveness.



Summary

Community colleges are an essential component of the higher education landscape in the United States, enrolling nearly half of all US undergraduates in 2015[1], . These public institutions offer occupational certification and associate degree programs, as well as a pathway to a four-year college degree. Millions of students see community college as an affordable and accessible opportunity to pursue higher education and secure better paying jobs in part because of low tuition rates and open-enrollment policies. A recent study estimates that community college graduates earn 30 percent more than those with only a high school degree[2], . However, a large share of community college students drop out before they earn a credential or degree—in what is commonly referred to as a "completion crisis." According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the three-year graduation rate for students who first enrolled in community college in 2010 was less than 30 percent[3]. One driving factor may be that community college students—who tend to be older, lower-income, and less experienced with higher education—may face an array of academic and non-academic obstacles, such as lack of childcare and transportation costs, that prevent them from completing school.

A review of four randomized evaluations found that comprehensive support programs increased enrollment and improved academic outcomes of community college students. These programs simultaneously address personal, financial, academic, and

professional barriers to degree completion. Increasingly, policymakers at the highest levels of government are exploring solutions to address the completion crisis. In the summer of 2019, the FINISH Act was introduced in the US Congress. If passed, this bi-partisan legislation would "support innovative, evidence-based approaches that improve the effectiveness and efficiency of postsecondary education for all students"[4]. Given the positive results of these evaluations, comprehensive support programs may be an effective, though expensive, solution to the completion crisis. Further work should continue to explore how to deliver similar models in a more cost-effective way.

Supporting evidence

Providing comprehensive support services to community college students has been shown to help students stay enrolled, and in some cases, improved graduation rates. Four comprehensive support programs have recently been evaluated across the United States: Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) operated by the City University of New York (CUNY) and replicated in community colleges in Ohio; Stay the Course (STC) developed by a large non-profit social services provider in Fort Worth, Texas; and One Million Degrees (OMD) developed by a Chicago-based non-profit organization. In New York City, ASAP increased enrollment during the majority of academic sessions and nearly doubled graduation rates as compared to the control group. By the end of the three-year study period, 40 percent of students randomly assigned to participate in ASAP had earned a degree, compared with 22 percent of the control group [7], . Three Ohio community colleges then replicated the ASAP program with similar increases in persistence in school, credit accumulation, and graduation rates [6], . In Chicago, students in the OMD program were about 5 percentage points more likely to be enrolled in the fall of the first year from a baseline of 67 percent enrollment (a 7 percent increase). In the spring, OMD students were about 5 percentage points more likely to be enrolled from a baseline of 60 percent enrollment (a 9 percent increase) [1], . In Fort Worth, students invited to participate in STC were approximately 6 percentage points more likely to be enrolled in school after six semesters, a 13 percent increase from a baseline of 44 percent. Students who actually participated in STC were more than twice as likely to persist in school after six semesters. STC also led to a large increase in graduation rates for women who participated in the program, but had no impact on graduation rates for men [4]. Researchers are continuing to follow-up with OMD and STC participants to measure longer-term impacts on enrollment, graduation rates, and earnings.

These comprehensive support programs share several key components including personalized support from a counselor. As community college students tend to be older, lower-income, and less experienced with higher education, they face a variety of financial, personal, and professional barriers to completing their studies. Each successful program paired students with case managers or counselors that provided personalized support tailored to meet the specific needs of the student. Additionally, the case managers had relatively small caseloads compared to the national median in community colleges of 441 students per advisor[5]. The small caseloads allowed counselors to provide more targeted, individualized support. The programs also offered students some form of financial assistance, academic support, and referrals to other resources when non-academic and personal issues arose. The table below details the specific components of each intervention.

	Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP)	One Million Degrees (OMD)	Stay the Course (STC)

Location	New York, NY *Differences in the Ohio replication model are in italics*	Chicago, IL	Fort Worth, TX
Financial assistance	Financial supports totaling US$1,128 per year in the form of free textbooks, transit cards, and tuition waivers as needed *In the Ohio replication, participants received a $50 monthly gas or grocery gift card instead of transit cards. Financial supports totaled to US$1,635 per year.*	Annual performance-based stipends of up to US$1000	Emergency financial assistance of up to US$500 a semester, capped at US$1,500
Personalized case management	Comprehensive coaching from a dedicated adviser and career information from a dedicated career and employment services staff member	Academic and personal advising from program coordinators; career mentorship from local professionals	Intensive case management, involving, coaching, mentoring, and referrals for all aspects of the student's life; emphasis on in-person meetings

Referrals		Referrals to existing support systems within community college	Referrals to tutors, financial aid, childcare services, government programs and benefits, and other relevant services
Student to counselor ratio	Between 60:1 and 80:1 *Less than 125:1 in Ohio replication*	Between 50:1 and 65:1	34:1
Tutoring	Dedicated tutoring services separate from the usual college tutoring services	Students are provided with tutors and/or referred to existing supports within the college	Referrals to tutoring

Participant requirements	Enroll in school full-time Meet with advisor twice a month Enroll in ASAP seminar which covered topics such as goalsetting, study skills, and academic planning Attend tutoring if enrolled in a developmental (remedial) course(s) or identified by faculty member or advisor as needing additional academic support	Enroll in school full-time Be pursuing first degree or advanced certificate Have at least a year left in program of study Meet with program coordinator on regular basis and attend monthly professional development seminars Attend tutoring if earning less than a C grade in any course or enrolled in a developmental (remedial) course(s)	Enroll in at least nine credits per semester and maintain a 2.0 GPA to be eligible to receive emergency financial assistance

The comprehensive nature of these support programs, which address many barriers at once, appears to be a key driver behind their effectiveness. To date, no single randomized evaluation has tested each individual component in comparison to the full comprehensive program. However, evaluations that tested isolated, light-touch interventions, including those that offer one of the components discussed above, have not been found to be effective in reducing community college dropout rates.

For example, in two contexts, financial assistance alone did not improve outcomes. In Fort Worth, Texas, researchers compared outcomes of students who participated in the Stay the Course (STC) program, which included comprehensive mentoring and emergency financial assistance (EFA), to students who had access to EFA only. EFA did not improve academic outcomes for recipients, suggesting that financial assistance alone may not be sufficient to help low-income students persist in school [5], . Relatedly, a campus-based aid program for low-income students at a highly selective, public university in North Carolina did not improve progress, performance, or school completion when students received financial assistance alone. However, when the program supplemented financial assistance with non-financial supports (e.g., peer and faculty mentoring, tutoring), participating students were more likely to meet credit accumulation benchmarks toward timely graduation and earned higher GPAs than comparable students not participating in the program [3], . Additionally, other interventions explicitly focused on only addressing academic barriers of community college students, such as remedial education programs, have not been found to have long-term effects on degree attainment [1].

That said, there is evidence to suggest that personalized case management could be a key driver of outcomes. A nationwide, randomized evaluation of an individualized student coaching program showed that coached college students at four-year institutions were more likely to continue to attend university than their non-coached peers both throughout the program and one year after coaching ended [2], . In these programs, counselors had relatively small caseloads than what is typical for community college advisors which allowed them to build strong personal relationships with their students and provide targeted, individualized support. Additionally, these professionals were orientated toward social work, as opposed to education and academic counseling. These workers may be better-equipped to support students facing non-academic challenges [4].

Community college students often face challenges outside of school that prevent them from being successful in the classroom. The effectiveness of comprehensive support programs in reducing community college dropout rates highlights the importance of addressing the multiple barriers students face, not just the academic barriers. While the evidence suggests that comprehensive support programs are an effective method of addressing the completion crisis, there is a need for more evidence to determine which components of these programs, or combination of components, are the principle drivers of outcomes. Additionally, further work should continue to explore how to deliver similar models in a more cost-effective way. Nevertheless, comprehensive support programs offer a promising solution to reduce community college dropout.

Sector chair(s) or Academic lead(s)

Karthik Muralidharan Philip Oreopoulos

Insight author(s)

Desmond Amuh

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