

THE WORKING POOR FAMILIES PROJECT

POLICY BRIEF ■ SPRING 2015

STRENGTHENING STUDENT SUCCESS WITH NON-ACADEMIC SUPPORTS: THE ROLE OF STATE POLICY

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THE WORKING POOR FAMILIES PROJECT

Strengthening State Policies for America's Working Poor

Millions of American breadwinners work hard to support their families. But, despite their determination and effort, many are mired in low-wage jobs that provide inadequate benefits and offer few opportunities for advancement. In fact, nearly one in three American working families now earn wages so low that they have difficulty surviving financially.²

Launched in 2002 and currently supported by The Annie E. Casey, Ford, Joyce, and Kresge foundations, the Working Poor Families Project is a national initiative that works to improve these economic conditions. The project partners with state nonprofit organizations and supports their state policy efforts to better prepare America's working families for a more secure economic future.

For more information:
www.workingpoorfamilies.org

INTRODUCTION

There has been a growing effort across the country to increase college completion. With increased scrutiny on college outcomes, many states are struggling to identify ways to promote completion, since by 2020 two-thirds (65 percent) of jobs will require at least some postsecondary education.³ Yet today, only 40.6 percent of adults ages 25-54 have an associate degree or higher and less than half of community college students graduate within six years.⁴

While the response to improving student outcomes often focuses on academic reforms geared toward traditional students, less emphasis has been placed on non-academic support services targeted to low-income adults at community colleges, especially student parents, and first-generation students. Low-income students and student parents at community colleges often face multiple financial, developmental, and social barriers to persisting and completing college.

Low-income students need additional financial resources and supports to be able to afford college. Student parents must have reliable child care to be able to attend classes. And low-income students, especially student parents, may need to work to be able to cover their living expenses and other non-academic costs that often are not covered by standard financial aid packages. These competing priorities push low-income students toward loans to cover the gap between the cost of attendance and available need-based aid, or to attend college part-time as do more than 60 percent of community college students.⁵ As a result, many fail to complete their programs.

Even with increasing state interest in improving college completion, most states lack clear strategies around using non-academic support services to improve persistence and completion at community colleges, especially for low-income adult students.

[The Working Poor Families Project \(WPPF\)](http://www.workingpoorfamilies.org), a national initiative designed to strengthen state policies that influence the well-being of low-income working families, supports the

efforts of states to enhance and expand the design, delivery, and availability of non-academic student supports. WFPF encourages states to include non-academic student support services in their strategies to increase college completion, especially at community colleges where more than half of students are non-traditional adult students and more than a third are first generation students.⁶

WFPF supports state strategies that address a four-part comprehensive framework of non-academic supports and services for low-income adult students:⁷

- 1. Helping students pay for college**, to address the economic barriers students face in covering the cost of college;
- 2. Providing access to family supports**, to assist student parents with family expenses while they attend college;
- 3. Promoting career development**, to provide adult community college students with career guidance and placement to ensure that they are on the right path to gaining the skills and credentials needed to move into a family-supporting career; and
- 4. Strengthening personal competencies**, to develop the emotional and life skills students need to persist in college.

This policy brief outlines the components of non-academic support programs that address the financial, developmental, and life barriers to success. It offers a variety of recommendations for state policy to support the expansion and enhancement of non-academic student support programs.

WHY NON-ACADEMIC SUPPORT SERVICES ARE IMPORTANT

As open enrollment institutions, community colleges open their doors to a diverse student body with a broad range of educational skills and needs. Each year, public two-year institutions contribute to a stronger workforce by awarding associate degrees and postsecondary certificates to more

than a 1.2 million students, including thousands of low-income, first-generation, and adult students.⁸

In recent years, the strengths and contributions of community colleges have been overshadowed by the reality that more than half of students entering community colleges each year require at least one developmental education course to prepare them for college-level coursework. According to the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), only 39 percent of students attending two-year institutions graduate within six years after enrollment.⁹ Although nearly 18 percent of those who have not graduated within six years are still enrolled in postsecondary education institutions, nearly 43 percent are no longer enrolled.¹⁰

National, state, and philanthropic efforts have worked to reduce barriers to student success by using various academic and non-academic support strategies. Significant attention has focused on instructional and curriculum reforms to improve the design and delivery of developmental education for students who arrive at community college underprepared for college-level coursework.

Other notable efforts include guided college and career pathway programs to see students through to completion and ensure their success in the workforce. As a part of these large-scale, multi-year reform efforts, student support strategies have largely focused on providing academic support including intensive advising, degree planning, tutoring, mathematics emporiums for students underprepared in math, and block scheduling or learning communities where students take a common set of courses with a cohort of other students.

While academic supports aid students in developing their academic skills, non-academic supports address a distinct set of skills, knowledge, and resources that students need to be successful in college.¹¹ Non-academic student supports can play a pivotal role in college persistence by addressing the financial, developmental, and other social factors that are often associated with lower college completion.

Community colleges deliver non-academic support services both informally and formally through

student orientation events, student success courses, academic support programs such as learning communities, or as a part of academic advising and counseling.¹² Some colleges include additional student support services within existing student services departments, such as student financial aid offices or student services centers, along with more traditional academic support services such as tutoring and advising. Other colleges provide services in multiple locations or through referrals to external human services organization, while still others have managed to consolidate services under one department or in a single location.

HOW NON-ACADEMIC STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES ARE FINANCED

Historically, non-academic supports have been funded primarily by federal sources such as TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) (formerly Special Services for Disadvantaged Students) and the Carl D. Perkins program. However, because these programs are largely underfunded, they serve only a fraction of eligible students and institutions. Since states have played a minor role in promoting access to student support services, the availability and quality of programs has been uneven.

Created as a part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty, the federal TRIO programs—Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services—are among the first college access and persistence programs to focus on providing both academic and non-academic supports to low-income students, first-generation students, and students with disabilities.¹³ The TRIO SSS program, funded by Title IV of the federal Higher Education Act of 1964, provides resources directly to colleges for a variety of support services targeted to low-income students, student parents, first generation students, students with disabilities and other disadvantaged students at both two- and four-year public institutions. Supports include a range of services such as academic tutoring, personal counseling,

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mentoring, and financial guidance to aid students in earning a postsecondary degree.¹⁴

TRIO also includes Education Opportunity Centers (EOC), which serve displaced or underemployed workers from low-income families. The program helps aspiring college students with the application process, including requests for financial aid.¹⁵

The TRIO SSS program serves just over 202,000 students at approximately 22 percent of four-year and two-year institutions serving freshmen in the country.¹⁶ In fiscal year 2014, four-year undergraduate institutions received more than half—56 percent or nearly \$160 million— of TRIO SSS funds. Community colleges received about \$128 million or 44 percent. TRIO served 87,000 community college students compared to more than 114,000 students at four-year institutions.¹⁷

Even with limited funds, the TRIO SSS program has contributed to positive academic outcomes, including increases in participants' GPA and the number of students remaining in good academic standing in their college program. Roughly 57 percent of EOC college-ready participants entered college and 56 percent of students who previously dropped out have re-enrolled.¹⁸

CURRENT EFFORTS TO EXPAND NON-ACADEMIC STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

With limited federal and state funding for non-academic student supports, philanthropic organizations have developed programs and launched a variety of demonstration projects to study how well community college-based non-academic student supports improve outcomes such as student persistence, credit accumulation, and degree or certificate completion.

Three of these privately funded initiatives are discussed below. Their principal approach has been to design a framework of services for addressing specific student needs. They have also studied the effectiveness of different approaches to delivering services, including integrating or embedding multiple services within an existing department such as financial services, or by bringing services directly to students through student success courses or as a part of a learning community. Although more research is needed, a modest body of evidence around effective design and delivery mechanisms for non-academic services at community colleges has emerged.

The **Working Families Success Network** (formerly Center for Working Families) is a group of non-profit organizations and community colleges providing services focused on increasing the financial stability of families. The network has developed a model based on three core service areas: employment and career advancement, income enhancement and work supports, and financial and asset building services.¹⁹ Using this model, WFSN programs at a small number of community colleges are making services available to participants in a direct and focused way in both community-based and community college settings. A review of these programs showed that participating institutions have had some success when they weave financial services, including applying for financial aid, with other services such as financial education.²⁰ Overall, asset building and financial education services have been most commonly associated with achievement of major outcomes in the WFSN programs.²¹

Based on this initial success, the WFSN has recently launched a community college expansion initiative (WFSNCC), in collaboration with Achieving the Dream, to integrate program strategies within the institutions' existing student-success and workforce development efforts.²² Starting in 2015, this initiative will support 19 institutions in four states—Arkansas, California, Virginia and Washington—to incorporate and expand the WFSN model with the intent to demonstrate the benefit of these services to student persistence and completion as well as employment and earnings.

MDRC, a non-profit education and social policy research organization, initiated several Opening Doors demonstrations at six community colleges in several states to test a range of services and interventions to improve college outcomes for low-income students. Although primarily focused on academic services, the project evaluated interventions that also included non-academic services.

One notable study examined the effectiveness of performance-based scholarships paired with counseling, targeted to low-income parents attending community college.²³ In addition to providing \$2,000 scholarships annually, recipients received individual counseling as a part of the program. To remain eligible for the scholarship, students were required to attend part-time and maintain a 2.0 grade point average.²⁴ Overall, the performance-based scholarship resulted in students earning more credits and showing more persistence compared to students in the control group who did not receive an award or similar supports. Participants also reported increased engagement on campus and positive feelings about their long-term goals.²⁵

The **Benefits Access for College Completion (BACC)** demonstration studied how access to public human services programs on community college campuses, including enrollment assistance for TANF, SNAP, Medicaid, housing, and other public benefit programs, might promote better student outcomes.²⁶ The BACC demonstration found that embedding access to these benefits

within a central hub where students are already engaged, such as in financial aid offices or academic advising, has contributed to institutionalizing and sustaining services on their campuses.²⁷ Staff and faculty at participating BACC colleges also report that these integrated services in a central location allowed designated staff to develop specialized knowledge of benefits programs and raised awareness of available services.²⁸

Students in BACC colleges receiving multiple public benefits are demonstrating higher persistence and completion rates compared to students who receive only one public benefit and those who do not receive any public benefit. For example, the BACC demonstration also notes that students who received a combination of SNAP, TANF cash assistance, and/or child care subsidies enrolled in more college semesters, accumulated more credits, and earned a college credential at a higher rate compared to those receiving one or no public benefits.²⁹

A FRAMEWORK FOR ENHANCING AND EXPANDING NON-ACADEMIC STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

To address the non-academic barriers to success, states and community colleges have used various tools and strategies to enhance adult student college completion.

These tools and strategies can be organized into a four-part comprehensive framework of non-academic supports and services: 1) helping students pay for college, 2) providing access to family supports, 3) promoting career development, and 4) strengthening personal competencies. Following is detailed discussion of the content of this framework, highlighting the opportunities states have to develop policy to boost student success.

1. Helping Students Pay for College

A robust financial aid system is one of the most important tools states can use to promote success, especially for low-income adult students. Financial aid, including need-based grants and work-study,

and strong financial aid advising can alleviate some of the economic hardships confronting students juggling multiple responsibilities.

Unfortunately, inadequate levels of financial aid leave many low-income students with unmet financial need, which leads many to either forgo enrollment, enroll less than full-time, work long hours to pay for school, or depend heavily on student loans to fill the gap. These factors can lower persistence and completion rates for students.

In a Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 49 percent of the students surveyed reported that finances were critical to staying enrolled in college.³⁰ About 38 percent of respondents reported that working full-time would likely or very likely contribute to their need to withdraw from school.³¹ Overall, students heavily dependent on student loans are less likely to persist and complete their program of study.³²

Need-Based Grant Aid

Despite being more affordable than four-year public and private colleges and universities, tuition at public community colleges has increased 18 percent over the past five years.³³ Although need-based financial aid has been essential to help low-income community college students pay for college, not all programs cover the full cost of attendance, leaving students dependent on loans and work to cover the gap. State need-based grant programs are insufficiently funded to cover all students with need, and often restrict eligibility to students attending full-time and recent high school graduates.

While some states provide significant need-based aid, funding for merit-based aid—programs requiring students to demonstrate personal or academic achievement—is on the rise compared to need-based aid. The increased funding for merit-based aid leaves community college students at a disadvantage as states shift awards to more students at four-year selective institutions regardless of their financial need. Overall, less than half (48 percent) of state-based financial aid investments are strictly need-based, while more

than half of financial aid awards require some merit component to qualify for aid.³⁴

States can refocus their efforts to promote access and completion by offering well-targeted and flexible need-based grant programs for low-income adult community college students. State policy can structure awards to cover the full cost of attendance, including the cost of tuition, fees, books, and living expenses, thus lessening the student loan burden and the time students must devote to work. State policy can extend eligibility to part-time students, thus reducing the barriers low-income students, especially those with children, face due to family and work obligations. Extending aid to cover summer enrollment can also reduce the time to degree completion. Finally, states can reform the administration of their awards by allocating funds via installments during semesters—sometimes referred to as the Aid Like a Paycheck model—to ensure that students have a steady source of funds to cover expenses as they come due.³⁵

Work Study

Enhancing or creating new work-study programs that address financial needs without hurting academic performance is another strategy states can employ to help students pay for college.

Many student parents need to support themselves and their families while attending college. The National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey (NPSAS) analysis found that on average, low-income adult students log more hours per week on the job than younger students.³⁶ Yet when students spend too many hours at work or work schedules conflict with class schedules, employment can negatively affect college attendance. Studies have shown that work on campus in a position related to one's academic interests can positively affect persistence and degree completion.

State work-study policy should prioritize students who need to work (i.e., low-income adults), leverage private sector resources by requiring a 50 percent employer match for student wages, require students be paid at a livable wage for a restricted number of hours so as not to hurt study and class

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performance, promote student career exploration and development by connecting work to study area, and maximize TANF resources to enable cash recipients to participate while attending school.³⁷ If well-designed, work-study programs create a form of financial aid that is well-suited to adult students, but thus far they have been significantly underutilized for this purpose.

Financial Counseling

Financial education is important in helping low-income adult students effectively address the costs of going to college. Many students lack information on the availability of need-based grant aid and may be unaware of their eligibility as well. Students also struggle with filling out complex financial aid forms and may bypass applying for aid due to the confusion and uncertainty around whether they qualify for aid.

To ensure that students can access all available need-based aid and understand their rights and responsibilities as borrowers, state policy can promote and even support comprehensive financial coaching and other types of financial education and counseling on community college campuses. Financial coaching programs can assist students in applying for financial aid and managing their funds effectively. Financial counseling can be linked to state need-based aid programs to improve a student's knowledge of state and federal grant and loan programs. States can establish policy requiring student borrowers to take additional

counseling to make sure they understand the terms of their loans, including loan repayment, delinquency, and default. As loan program features change frequently, many borrowers may be unaware of their options, such as income-based repayment, adjustment in interest rates, or consolidation of loans.

2. Providing Access to Family Supports

Low-income parents attending community college often must work to cover family expenses while attending school. The additional costs of caring for a family can price low-income adults out of college or can negatively affect their persistence and delay completion due to work and family obligations. A comprehensive set of family supports helps increase low-income adults' college success. Important non-academic family supports include enrollment in public benefits and access to affordable child care as well as on-campus services and emergency grants. Ensuring access to public benefits and subsidized child care for low-income student parents can enable them to meet their families' needs and devote more time to their academic studies.

Public Benefits Enrollment

On-campus public benefits enrollment assistance can ensure that students and their families have access to health care, food assistance, cash assistance, housing, child care, and other public supports that can alleviate the financial strains associated with forgoing work to be able to attend class.

To access public benefits, potentially eligible adults must navigate a complex system of government websites and agency offices. Students are often unaware of services and benefits for which they qualify due to their immigration status or the potential consequences for immigrants who are in the process of becoming a U.S. citizen. Eligible adults may forgo applying for public benefits due to the stigma attached to government assistance.

State policy can support student benefit access by increasing agency outreach to college students, providing application locations on college

campuses, and creating systems to allow students to apply on-line for multiple benefits.³⁸ In addition, states and community colleges can promote access to public benefit programs by requiring on-campus assistance centers to be co-located with financial aid and advising offices.³⁹ State policy can support benefit access centers through a funding formula; for example by incentivizing two- and four-year school partnerships to staff the centers with social work interns, and by providing resources for multi-benefit on-line screening and application systems at student centers. Institutions can increase information about benefits in student and faculty orientations, and train faculty to identify and refer at-risk students.

Strengthening State Benefit Policies

Increasing enrollment assistance alone is not enough to ensure that most student parents will have the resources they need to be able to devote time to their postsecondary education. To maximize student access to public benefits, states should review their policies to ensure that students are eligible for benefits, resources are sufficient to meet demand, and programs give priority to parent-students if services are limited.

If needed, states should adjust their TANF and SNAP Education and Training (SNAP E&T) policies to allow recipients to attend college as an allowable work activity. States have flexibility to use their TANF block grant and SNAP E&T funds to develop innovative student support service programs across community college campuses. States and community colleges can design TANF programs to meet the individual needs of students through a comprehensive system of student support services, including case management, affordable child care, emergency aid, counseling, referrals for social services, and other supports.

Amending state policies to provide affordable child care to more low-income student parents for class, work, and study time is another action states can take to ensure that students can devote more time to postsecondary education. In addition to providing child care subsidies to TANF-eligible student parents, state policy can specify that other non-TANF eligible student parents living

below 200 percent of the federal poverty level have access to affordable child care. In addition, state policy can direct more funding for professional development and resources for child care providers to ensure quality and safety in their state's child care program.

On-Campus Access to Family Supports and Services

Adult students would benefit from a broad range of on-campus services such as tax preparation assistance, food pantries, and child care. States can consider enhancing and expanding the availability of various supports and services on campus to promote the financial stability of low-income students and enable them to attend school.

Unfortunately, affordable campus-based child care has been declining over the past decade even though enrollment of student parents has grown.⁴⁰ In 2011 there were more than 2.1 million student parents enrolled at public two-year institutions, representing more than 44.5 percent of all student parents.⁴¹ In 2003 over half (53 percent) of public two-year institutions provided campus-based child care; by 2013 that figure had declined to 46 percent.⁴²

States and community colleges can reverse this trend by expanding or developing new on-campus child care facilities. Colleges should also consider providing flexible options for child care, including drop-in care to address the often-unpredictable schedules student parents encounter when balancing school, work, and family obligations.

Other on-campus supports can include Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) sites to ensure that students receive available education and family tax credits such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Tax refunds can provide students with much needed financial relief to cover living expenses or education costs, or set aside for unexpected emergencies.

Emergency Grants

Often students who already are struggling financially face a crisis when confronted with a rent increase, medical emergency, or unexpected car repair. Adult students with children can also

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incur unanticipated child care expenses when their work schedule changes or their child care provider is sick. Such emergencies, no matter how minor, can set a student back and result in missed classes, loss of study time, or dropping out due to a lack of resources. Emergency grants can be important to cover such one-time financial needs.

Colleges participating in the Dreamkeepers and Angel Fund Emergency Financial Aid programs report that students most frequently request emergency assistance grants for housing, followed by transportation, and books.⁴³ Students also often request assistance with child care, utilities, and to a lesser extent meals and medical expenses.⁴⁴

State-sponsored emergency financial aid such as vouchers to cover gas, transportation, or housing and utility costs is one relatively low cost way for states to help students through a financial emergency. State policy can promote the creation and funding of emergency grant programs by enabling student fees, public grants and charitable donations to be accessed for this purpose.

3. Promoting Career Development

In addition to financial help, low-income adult students attending community college can benefit from enhanced career development services. Such students often need information about career options and guidance to determine what it will take to successfully move through college, build the skills they need, prepare to enter the job market,

and ultimately find employment related to their field of study and career path.

State policy can provide incentive funding to public community colleges to train staff in career planning and employment preparation and placement for student parents, first generation students, and students receiving financial aid. State policy can require that all students receiving state financial aid have career plans and are informed of and prioritized for internship programs. A comprehensive career development system would allow students to explore career opportunities and access academic advisors to ensure smooth transitions between different academic programs, including adult basic education, developmental education, and college-level programs leading to a degree or credential.

Career Planning

Career planning programs provide counseling and guidance for students to explore options in high-demand occupations that provide a family-supporting income. Counseling and mentoring services also give students the information they need to build the appropriate occupational skills, and choose a program of study that will put them on a path to fulfill their career aspirations. States can support new or enhanced career services programs on campuses by ensuring that every campus has a career planning coordinator and support staff to help students, particularly first generation and parent students.

Employment Preparation and Placement

State support for career development coordinators can also ensure access to additional services connecting adult students with employment preparation and placement. In addition, states can consider placing staff from state workforce agencies or departments of labor on community college campuses to inform students about available state employment resources.

Employment preparation includes developing interview skills, understanding job responsibilities, and writing résumés. Job placement services support students in job search, applying for jobs,

and developing knowledge of the job market, including identifying potential employers and industries that match their occupational skills and education.

4. Strengthening Personal Competencies

Ways to improve personal competency can include coaching, making referrals to social services, and creating early alert systems to identify students who need services. Such services can increase student retention and lessen the burden faced by students who are attending school, working, and caring for dependents.

Unlike traditional-age students from higher income families, low-income students often are the first in their family to attend college and therefore lack information and guidance from their parents or other family members in navigating higher education. Such students have additional challenges, as recent research has shown that the stress of growing up in poverty can negatively impair decision-making processes involved in problem-solving, goal-setting, and goal attainment, all of which are critical personal skills needed to persist and complete college.⁴⁵

State policy can support community colleges in addressing this need by incentivizing partnerships with non-profit service providers, or providing resources to colleges for these services.

Coaching Services

Adult community college students struggle to meet their personal needs due to the time constraints they face in balancing work, school, and family. Coaching services such as mentoring, counseling, and peer networks can give students personal support to guide them through the challenges they face during college. While many community college campuses provide counseling and mentoring programs, and some states provide targeted support for these services, not all programs are well known or sufficient to serve all students who could benefit from them.

Institutions should design and deliver convenient and flexible coaching and mentoring services in

locations where students are already engaged; for example co-locating services within various student services departments. State-supported coaching programs can ensure that colleges create networking programs that connect adult students with peers who are trained as mentors to provide encouragement, support, and information about on- and off-campus social service resources.

Referrals

In addition to coaching services, states and community college campuses can ensure that counselors, mentors and other student services' staff and faculty are well supported with training and knowledge of local social services that can benefit their students, especially those facing challenges to persisting and completing college. For example, public social service agencies can be required to provide cross-training for faculty and staff at the beginning of each semester.

Referrals and partnerships with off-campus community-based organizations can connect students with services they may need, including disability, mental health, domestic violence, shelter, food pantry, and substance abuse. State policy can require providers of such services to have a frequent and regular (e.g., weekly) presence on college campuses.

Early Alert Systems

Early alert systems are designed to ensure that students receive timely support services so they can continue their studies. These systems use data from college staff and faculty to identify students at the first sign they are at risk of dropping out. Poor attendance is often the result of non-academic issues such as a lack of reliable child care, unpredictable work schedules, or financial challenges. Aiming to keep students enrolled, an early alert system connects them with internal and external services to address the difficulties they face.

Early alert systems can be automated through the use of technology and software designed to monitor and alert student services departments when a student misses several classes or is doing

poorly in class. Colleges have a range of options for developing an early response system using their own data systems and internal communications to identify students in need and efficiently refer them to the appropriate support services.

State policy can support such early alert systems by funding software integration between faculty and student advisers. Another approach is to require early alert system plans in all public community colleges.

STATES THAT SUPPORT AND PROMOTE NON-ACADEMIC SUPPORTS

While most states have devoted modest attention to non-academic student supports, some have raised awareness of the non-academic barriers to success and are providing support services to promote student persistence and completion. Below are examples from four states that have developed policies and dedicated resources to services within one or more areas of the WFPF non-academic supports framework.

Texas: Focusing Attention on Non-Academic Student Supports

Over the past 15 years, Texas has developed strategies to address the non-academic barriers to college success. In 2000, recognizing the need to stay competitive among states, Texas launched a long-range plan for higher education— *Closing the Gaps by 2015 (CtG)*. The 15-year plan set goals and other higher education milestones to close the gaps in participation, success, excellence, and research. The plan included increasing the number of degrees and certificates by 50 percent and setting specific participation and success goals by race.⁴⁶ The CtG plan also outlined various strategies to achieve its major participation and success goals, including providing need-based grant aid for students with financial need, developing uniform recruitment and retention strategies, and providing comprehensive student supports.⁴⁷

Since 2003, the state has promoted college participation and success by increasing

investments in the TEXAS Grant program—the state’s largest need-based grant program—from \$267 million in 2002-03 to nearly \$725 million in 2014-15.⁴⁸ In addition to increasing investments in state need-based grant aid, the CtG plan has been instrumental in promoting other non-academic support services for low-income students, including the development of the Work Study Mentorship program, financial aid awareness outreach, and FAFSA preparation assistance.⁴⁹

As a part of CtG, the state tracks and reviews progress on the major goals of the plan each year. As of 2013, Texas has met or exceeded most of its participation and success goals set out in the CtG plan, including meeting targets for the number of Hispanic and African-American students obtaining a college certificate or degree. Although the state is not on target to reach its goals for Hispanic participation, Hispanic enrollment grew by 118 percent between 2000 and 2013.⁵⁰ Among all three major race/ethnic groups, (African-American, Hispanic, and white) male participation is lagging behind female participation.⁵¹

Texas is now developing its next long-range plan for higher education. Early proposals renew the state’s commitment to providing need-based financial aid, while emphasizing new strategies and goals to reduce student loan debt. The overarching goals of the new plan include increasing the proportion of Texans with a postsecondary degree or credential to 60 percent by 2030 (60X30), improving college completion and marketable skills, and lowering student debt.⁵²

While the proposed plan emphasizes strategies aimed at promoting success for all students, several strategies are particularly well-suited to supporting adult students, including financial aid outreach and education, career advising, and paid internships within a student’s field of study. In addition, the plan includes a strategy to increase the number of Adult Basic Education students entering and completing college certificate and degree programs.

Washington: Targeting Resources to Pay for College, Connecting Students to Family Supports, and Promoting Career Development

Washington created the Washington Opportunity Grant to provide low-income adult students with financial aid and additional student support services. The state-funded grant program assists students in paying for college by covering tuition, fees, and up to \$1,000 per year for books and supplies.⁵³ Colleges also receive a subsidy of \$1,500 per student to offer additional individual support services such as tutoring, career advising, college success classes, emergency child care, and emergency transportation.⁵⁴ The program extends eligibility to both Pell and non-Pell eligible low-income students with incomes up to 200 percent of the federal poverty. In the fall of 2013-14, the program served 3,649 full-time equivalent students with 83 percent either retained or completing their studies in the spring.⁵⁵

In addition to state financial aid, the Washington legislature created the Opportunity Center for Employment and Education at the North Seattle Community College campus, a one-stop center co-locating the Employment Security Department (ESD) and the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS). The center provides a range of services geared to assist working-age adults enrolled in college. Services include employment placement, counseling, and public benefits access. Benefits access includes assisting with enrollment in TANF, SNAP, Medicaid, housing, and Washington’s health care exchange. Other services include financial aid advising, personal counseling, job coaching and career exploration.⁵⁶

Kentucky: Providing Career Counseling and Supports for Low-Skill Students

In response to welfare reform, Kentucky developed a strong state policy to improve the financial stability of low-income working families. State legislation passed in 1998 allows TANF recipients to attend college full-time for up to two years or up to one year without additional work activity. One of the state’s most notable efforts, the Ready to Work (RTW) initiative, applies TANF funds to

extend career development and student supports for low-income adult students. The program funds coordinators at every community college to provide guidance and various supports to TANF recipients enrolled in college.⁵⁷ Services include case management, mentoring, advising and career counseling, and connecting students to other campus and community-based services.⁵⁸ Students also have access to TANF-funded support services, including transportation and child care.

In addition, RTW participants have the opportunity to work in the public or private sector in their field of study. Through this work-study program, students can work up to 30 hours per week at the minimum wage without reducing their TANF cash benefit.⁵⁹

The RTW program is showing positive results as TANF recipients engaged in the program are more likely to be enrolled in college compared to the adult population in the state. Overall, RTW participants have a higher college persistence rate compared to the rest of the state community college system and their GPAs have been higher or on par with their peers across the state.⁶⁰

Participants are more likely to earn associate degrees compared to the overall community college population where certificates are more common.⁶¹ A 2004 study also found that participants engaged in education and training programs, including Kentucky's RTW, have a higher rate of employment, a higher employment retention rate after one year of leaving the program, and higher earnings compared to TANF participants engaged in other TANF work-related activities.⁶²

In addition to Kentucky's RTW initiative, California's Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CALWORKS) program and Arkansas' Career Pathways program offer examples of how states are amending their state TANF plans to allow recipients to attend college and extend additional non-academic supports such as career development, access to family supports and improving students' personal competencies.

California: Strengthening Students' Personal Competencies

The California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office operates the Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) and Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education (CARE) programs in 112 public community colleges.⁶³ The state-funded program provides personal counseling and other student supports to low-income and other disadvantaged students attending public community college. Support counseling is a key feature of the EOPS program, designed to encourage enrollment, persistence, and transfer opportunities for economically disadvantaged students.⁶⁴ The program also offers financial aid, academic counseling, and other support services to participating students.

The CARE program supplements EOPS, targeted to single parents receiving TANF. Student parents participating in the CARE program receive support services to address a host of issues they may face during college. Supports and services include additional cash grant assistance for education-related expenses, child care assistance, counseling, meal vouchers, and referrals to community-based organizations.

Students participating in EOPS have a higher rate of persistence and degree completion compared to non-EOPS participants.⁶⁵ EOPS participants are more likely to complete their core transfer courses, but are less likely to transfer to a four-year institution compared to non-EOPS participants. However, EOPS participants who successfully transfer are more likely to transfer to the University of California or California State systems.⁶⁶

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATES TO INCREASE NON-ACADEMIC SUPPORTS

The Working Poor Families Project recommends that state partners take action to promote non-academic student support services for low-income adults attending community college. The four-part framework described above includes the kinds of non-academic supports and services that can increase adult student college completion. WFPF offers its state partners the following recommendations as policy levers to help ensure that non-academic supports are integrated into community colleges.

These policy levers include:

- setting state and institutional goals for increased non-academic student support;
- targeting public resources to build institutional capacity to deliver non-academic supports;
- creating state policies that support student parents' college completion; and
- enhancing college infrastructure to support the success of adult students.

Many issues compete for state resources. If states hope to increase the number of low-income adults completing a postsecondary credential or degree, they need leadership and commitment to reduce the non-academic barriers that so often cause adult students to drop out of school. WFPF state partners can champion the needs of adult students to increase their college success, using the recommendations below as guidance.

1. Set state goals that prioritize non-academic supports for adult student success.

- a. Develop state-level community and technical college student success goals for adult students and identify non-academic support strategies to achieve those goals.** States should develop a state higher education master plan or set system-wide student success goals for adult community college students. State plans

should identify student support strategies outlined in WFPF's four-part framework for non-academic services: helping students pay for college, providing access to family supports, promoting career development, and strengthening personal competencies.

- b. Require public community colleges to develop a student services plan targeted to low-income adult students.** Plans should address the barriers identified in the four-part framework for non-academic supports and services and outline specific goals and strategies designed to help low-income adult students achieve college success.

2. Target state resources to enhance community colleges' ability to provide non-academic supports.

- a. States can direct formula, performance, or incentive funding to support the development and delivery of non-academic support services at community colleges.** States should ensure that institutions have the resources needed for non-academic supports.
- b. Identify funding for career development staff, student resource centers, and on-campus child care facilities.** States can align affiliated program resources to develop one-stop resource centers and benefit access programs on campuses. States should require colleges to train staff in career planning, employment preparation, and job placement for student parents, first generation students, and students receiving financial aid. States should target capital funds to create or expand on-campus child care opportunities.
- c. Make financial aid, TANF, WIOA and mental health resources available to support campus-based non-academic supports.** States should promote community college partnerships with other agencies and prioritize use of various

funding streams to provide non-academic student supports at public community colleges. States should consider using TANF funds to develop innovative student support service programs. States can safeguard public aid investments by providing community colleges with resources for student financial education and loan counseling. Other options include using state TANF and SNAP resources to conduct outreach and help students apply for benefits.

3. Create state policies to provide deeper supports for students by expanding eligibility and increasing resources.

a. Adjust need-based aid policies to ensure that low-income adults are eligible and receive support to pay for college.

Extend state need-based grant aid to students attending part-time. Ensure that financial aid is available for summer enrollment. Allocate grant awards via installments to give students a steady source of funding to cover expenses as they become due.

b. Revise or design community college work-study programs that align with career goals and support student schedules.

To further support students in paying for college, states should provide opportunities for career exploration and development by connecting work-study employment to a student's area of study. Require participating employers to provide flexible scheduling to accommodate a recipient's class schedule.

c. Strengthen state public benefits policies to ensure student eligibility.

Amend state TANF and SNAP E&T policies so benefit recipients can attend college as an allowable work activity. States can model their TANF block grant policies and programs after states like Kentucky, California, and Arkansas that have successfully moved TANF recipients into postsecondary education.

d. Prioritize funding for subsidized child care for students. Adjust state policies to define education and training, including study time, as eligible activities for federal Child Care and Development Funds and minimize co-payments based on a parent's ability to pay. Develop a state funding stream to extend subsidized child care to low-income students earning up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level who are not eligible for TANF.⁶⁷ Provide resources for professional development and resources for child care providers.

e. Prioritize WIOA resources to provide non-academic supports.

Adjust WIOA state plans to allow flexibility in providing a broad range of non-academic support services on community college campuses, including tuition assistance, financial coaching, emergency grants, access to public benefits, and counseling.

4. Enhance college infrastructure systems to better support non-academic supports for low-income adult students.

a. Create a structure within community colleges to provide information and help students enroll in public benefits.

State policy should extend public benefits enrollment assistance to community college campuses, and create systems to allow students to apply for multiple benefits online. Provide resources for infrastructure for multi-benefit on-line screening and application systems at student centers.

b. Create early warning systems.

To improve personal competencies, states should consider requiring community colleges to adopt a plan to identify students at risk of dropping out and provide referrals and supports aimed to keep students in school.⁶⁸

c. Strengthen college referral and support structures for at-risk students. Provide support for training community college staff and faculty on how to identify and refer

at-risk students. Promote strong partnerships with community-based organizations and human services agencies to ensure that students have access to a comprehensive support services network.

d. Analyze performance and outcomes of students who access non-academic supports. Develop evaluation metrics for state-funded programs and services at community colleges. Require institutions to collect and report on student participation and outcomes to determine the quality and effectiveness of the design and delivery of non-academic student support services.

CONCLUSION

States have a vested and moral interest in increasing the completion rates for low-income adult students. Increased educational attainment helps low-income parents become economically independent, positively impacts the educational and economic attainment of their children, and increases the skilled-labor pool available for businesses. While public attention is being drawn to the academic needs of low-income adult students, more state policy attention and greater state investments are needed to design and develop non-academic supports to ensure that adult students attain the degrees and credentials needed for family-supporting jobs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Set state goals that prioritize non-academic supports for adult student success.
2. Target state resources to enhance community colleges' ability to provide non-academic supports.
3. Create state policies to provide deeper supports for students by expanding eligibility and increasing resources.
4. Enhance college infrastructure systems to better support non-academic supports for low-income adult students.

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ENDNOTES

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