

Expanding Evidence-Based Supports for Under-Represented Learners

Massachusetts Uses State Funding to Implement the SUCCESS Program in Community Colleges



MIDDLESEX COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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INTRODUCTION

Results for America profiles promising, evidence-based state postsecondary programs to provide models and lessons for states and institutions seeking to do similar work and to encourage increased federal and state support for evidence-based interventions. This case study, as well as one of the Finish What You Started program in Colorado, are part of those efforts.

State and Federal Support for Evidence-Based Student Success Strategies

In 2022, the federal government created a new [Postsecondary Student Success Grant Program](#) to equitably improve student postsecondary outcomes. This new program will need considerably greater resources to address national needs. Even with expanded federal support, however, states play a primary role in funding student success through their funding of public colleges and universities, financial aid programs, and programs such as Finish What You Started that provide wrap-around support services.

The programs profiled in these case studies are new, so they do not yet have a long track record, but they build on other evidence-based programs such as [CUNY ASAP](#), include evidence-building efforts, and illustrate how states and institutions have scaled up effective strategies to improve student outcomes during the difficult years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This case study features the Supporting Urgent Community College Equity Through Student Services (SUCCESS) program in Massachusetts. SUCCESS enables the 15 Massachusetts community colleges to scale up proven wrap-around support services, with the aim of improving persistence and degree completion.

KEY ELEMENTS OF THE SUCCESS PROGRAM:

Purpose: Increase success of under-served and under-represented community college students

Design: Scale-up of student support services offered through the federal Trio Student Support Services program

Evidence Base: Evaluations of the impact of Trio and similar support service programs on student outcomes

Funding: State appropriations

Implementation: Began in 2021-22, full implementation in 2022-23

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

SUCCESS was spearheaded by Northern Essex Community College president Dr. Lane Glenn. In 2019, President Glenn observed that students served by his institution's [TRIO Student Support Services](#) program had rates of persistence and completion that were 20 to 30 percentage points higher than similar students who had not participated in the TRIO program. TRIO Student Support Services, which began in 1968, is a federal grant program that funds support services for eligible low-income students. Through this program, colleges and universities provide tutoring, academic advising, financial aid counseling, career guidance and other support services. Although highly rigorous randomized controlled trial (RCT) studies have not

been conducted, a national independent [evaluation](#) did find that participation in this collection of services is associated with positive, statistically significant increases in retention and degree completion. In addition, President Glenn noted the documented success of CUNY ASAP, which features similar wrap-around student supports.

Because the number of students that TRIO programs can serve is limited by the federal funding available, President Glenn [argued](#)

that the state should support the expansion of proven Trio strategies to serve a broader cross-section of students who are historically under-represented and under-served in higher education, including:

1. Students experiencing poverty
2. Students from minoritized communities
3. First-generation students
4. Students with disabilities
5. LGBTQIA+ students

President Glenn proposed the SUCCESS program to enable community colleges to offer proven support services to this broader student population. Working with the Massachusetts Association of Community Colleges (MACC), Dr. Glenn and fellow community college presidents were able to secure \$7.5 million in initial funding in fiscal 2021 from the Massachusetts legislature, followed by \$10 million in fiscal 2022 and \$14 million in fiscal 2023. The goal is to eventually secure \$56 million, which MACC estimates is the amount needed to provide services to at least half of all community college students in Massachusetts, with campuses spending \$1,500 to \$2,000 per student annually, which is what they spend in the Trio program.

Since the SUCCESS program began during the COVID-19 pandemic, it could have received American Rescue Plan funding. However, according to President Glenn, because the primary program expense is personnel, the presidents did not want to rely on temporary funding. Their goal was to establish SUCCESS as a core element of ongoing state funding for community colleges.

WRAP-AROUND STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES:

Case management and coaching

Academic, career, transfer, and scholarship advising

Peer mentoring

Tutoring and academic skills workshops

Summer programs

Affinity groups

Field trips to four-year universities



A student receives support from an academic advisor as part of the SUCCESS program.

PROGRAM DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

SUCCESS funding is distributed to all Massachusetts community colleges according to a formula that allocates an equal amount to each college, with additional funds determined by the proportion of each institution's students who are African American, Hispanic, or economically disadvantaged. This formula was negotiated among the community college leaders and the state's Department of Higher Education, which took some time and contributed (along with a delayed state budget due to the pandemic and the need to align to other state initiatives) to a delay in the program getting underway. Funds were allocated in early 2021 and programs began in the 2021-22 academic year, but most colleges did not fully implement their new programs until the 2022-23 academic year.

Within the five target populations identified for the program, colleges have latitude to select the student groups that are most appropriate given their community and enrollment. They also may choose the support services they offer, but those services must have a documented association with increased rates of student success. To ensure that the provision of services to students is the primary focus, 80% of program funds must be devoted to employing personnel who will deliver support services. The remaining funds can be spent on overhead, technology, and program expenses.

While each college has considerable flexibility in terms of program design, there is also extensive coordination and collaboration across institutions. MACC regularly convenes groups composed of campus and program leaders and staff to address challenges that arise and share promising practices.

For example, the program includes LGBTQIA+ students as a target population, but most institutions did not collect that information about students. The institutions identified a voluntary means for students to self-identify, and they can now conduct outreach to encourage LGBTQIA+ student participation. They also share program information with each other. For example, when one of the institutions sponsored a LGBTQIA+ summit, several of the other institutions brought their students to attend.

“

This [program] is not for experimenting. Tell us what's working at your college that you plan to grow or tell us what's working somewhere else that you plan to adopt.”

— Dr. Lane Glenn

President, Northern Essex Community College

With collaboration, the colleges have been able to overcome the “growing pains” that are typical with any new program. However, hiring staff amidst a pervasive labor shortage in higher education has made it a challenge to grow the program as fast as hoped. As a result, while the program did double the number of students served between fall 2021 and fall 2022, it did not completely spend down its fiscal 2023 appropriation.

SUCCESS PROGRAM EXAMPLES

[Male Initiative for Leadership and Education](#) summer bridge program (Springfield Technical Community College)

[ALANA Men in Motion](#) and [Student Ambassador Mentor Program](#) (Holyoke Community College)

[4Cs4U](#) math placement and remediation (Cape Cod Community College)

[Seize Opportunities, Aspire to Rise](#) (Northern Essex Community College)

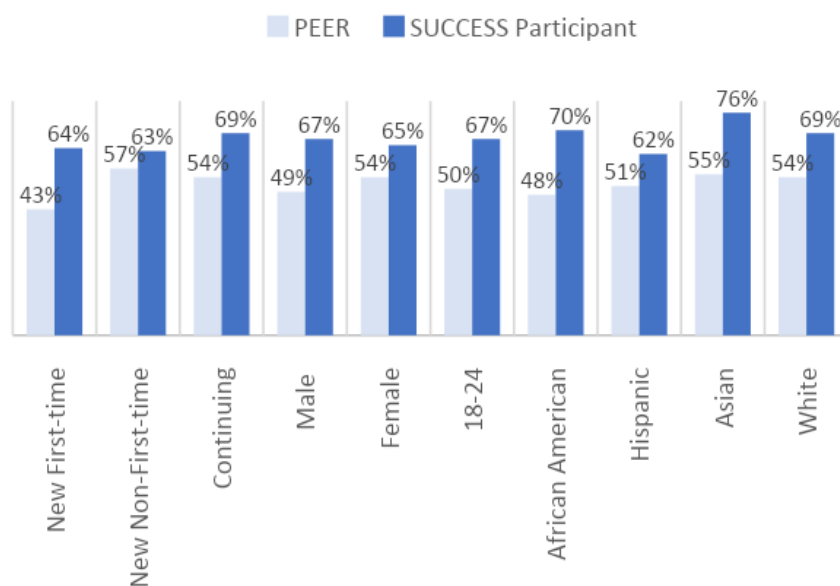
Additional information on campus programs is available in [SUCCESS Fund Initiative Final Report: 2021-22 Program Year](#).

PROGRAM EVALUATION

Measuring the program's impact has been a major area of focus even as the colleges work to get their programs fully established. At the program's outset, the colleges worked with MACC and the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education to develop reporting requirements and a set of common performance metrics related to year-to-year persistence (at any postsecondary institution), retention (at the original college), and degree completion/transfer. MACC has begun to issue a detailed [annual report](#) on the program, which includes information on program participation, the types of activities offered, the program's finances, and early outcomes indicators.

The first outcome measure studied was year-to-year persistence. Students who participated in SUCCESS programs at seven community colleges during fall 2021 were matched to students from the same colleges who were comparable in demographic characteristics but did not participate in SUCCESS programs. The resulting dataset included 1,986 matched pairs of students. Overall, 67% of matched SUCCESS participants persisted to the following fall, compared with 51% of their peers who did not engage with SUCCESS. Although the size of the gap varied by student sub-group, in each case, SUCCESS participants were more likely to

Persistence Rates of SUCCESS Participants and Comparable Peers, Fall 2021 to Fall 2022



Massachusetts Association of Community Colleges. 2023.
SUCCESS fund Initiative Final Report: 2021-22 Program Year.

have persisted than their matched peers. Further research is needed to determine whether there are other factors that may explain these differentials. For example, the students who chose to participate in a SUCCESS program may be more motivated than their peers who did not. Nonetheless, the difference in persistence rates is similar to what President Glenn observed between TRIO program participants and other students, suggesting that the model of scaling existing interventions is working as intended.

The first annual report on the program also includes detailed information that can be used in subsequent evaluations, including the types of activities colleges offered, the percentage of participating students who engaged in each type of activity, and financial information on program expenditures. Ideally, subsequent evaluations will take advantage of the flexible nature of the program and the detailed reporting to measure the relative effectiveness of different program designs and interventions. For example, colleges could set up their programs as either “opt-in” or “opt-out” for students. Programs also set different expectations for the number of advising sessions or other touchpoints that staff would have with students during the year. It will be important to understand whether and how these kinds of program design choices impact student outcomes. MACC and its member institutions also plan to survey students to hear directly about their experiences and the interventions that they have found most helpful. These types of evaluation studies will enable the colleges to fine-tune their program designs.

LESSONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR STATES

There is a lot about the Massachusetts experience that is instructive for other states. SUCCESS has been well received by the colleges and the legislature and is showing early signs of success because it:

- Scales up evidence-based student support strategies
- Focuses on a few key outcome metrics (persistence, retention, completion)
- Emphasizes the impact that can be achieved with a comparatively modest per-student investment
- Builds in evidence collection from the beginning by defining outcome metrics and establishing a reporting infrastructure
- Allows considerable flexibility to accommodate local needs and conditions
- Establishes structures and norms that encourage collaboration and mutual problem-solving

Once the program is ready to conduct an evaluation that encompasses all 15 colleges and includes longer-term outcomes, such as degree completion, the field will gain valuable insights about the success of this approach. Depending on the evaluation's design, it may also produce useful information on the relative impact of various support services for student sub-populations.

The primary challenge that the program has encountered—and that has also been a concern for the Finish What You Started program in Colorado—is being able to hire enough staff to scale up at the rate envisioned. States seeking to create their own postsecondary success programs should anticipate that establishing new initiatives will take longer than one might prefer or assume until the [hiring crisis](#) abates.