

Two Approaches for Re-Engaging Adults in Higher Education

Colorado's Finish What You Started Program Tests Community-Based and Institution-Based Interventions



GRADUATE TRAVIS BROXTON

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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 implement similar programs and to encourage increased federal and state support for evidence-based interventions. This case study, as well as one on the SUCCESS program in Massachusetts, 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](#) and include evidence-building activities, 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 Finish What You Started program in Colorado. As its name implies, Finish What You Started is primarily aimed at supporting individuals who dropped out of postsecondary education to return and complete a degree. In addition to financial aid, it includes outreach and wrap-around support services that have proved successful in other programs, both in Colorado and around the country.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

In 2013, Colorado established the ambitious goal that 66% of residents would have a postsecondary degree or certificate by 2025. Colorado has made [progress](#) toward that goal and has one of the highest postsecondary attainment rates in the country, but continues to experience significant equity gaps. Governor Jared Polis has made eliminating these gaps one of his [three goals](#) for higher education. As in [most states](#), Colorado's postsecondary attainment goal cannot be met without re-engaging the more than 600,000 adult residents who have attended college but not earned a degree.

KEY ELEMENTS OF FINISH WHAT YOU STARTED:

Purpose: Re-engage and support adult learners who left college without completing a degree to return and complete it

Design: Outreach, financial assistance, and wrap-around support services offered through community-based organizations and public colleges and universities

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

Funding: State funding, private philanthropic donations and federal COVID-19 relief funding

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



Natasha Gutierrez is back on the path of earning an associate's degree in science at Otero College.

To re-engage and support these adults, the Advisory Board for the [Colorado Opportunity Scholarship Initiative \(COSI\)](#), the state agency that oversees student financial aid and support programs, authorized the launch of Finish What You Started—a two-year pilot project to extend financial aid and support services to re-engage and support adult learners who left postsecondary education without earning a degree. Using its extensive state data system on postsecondary students, the Colorado Department of Higher Education conducted research to identify academic, financial, and personal supports that help students succeed. This information informed the design of the pilot project.

Adams County, an economically and racially diverse community of more than 500,000 residents in metropolitan Denver, was selected as the site for the Finish What You Started pilot. Several state and local organizations partnered on the project, with outreach and support services managed by a national non-profit organization. The target population is Adams County residents

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

aged 25 or older who demonstrate financial need, are not currently enrolled in postsecondary education, and have some college but no degree. The pilot explicitly seeks to help African American, Hispanic, and Native American Adams County residents identify and enroll in public postsecondary programs.



While state leaders planned to study the impact of the pilot program and seek legislative approval for a statewide initiative if it proved successful, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the creation of a statewide program. To address declining postsecondary enrollment and high unemployment during the pandemic, in June 2021, the Colorado legislature [authorized](#) the statewide Finish What You Started program and allocated \$49 million in federal funds to it from the American Rescue Plan. In order to rapidly deploy these funds and re-engage adult learners during the pandemic, the state decided to fund its public colleges and universities, which already had infrastructure in place to conduct outreach and to support students' re-enrollment. The legislature established formula grants to all of the state's public colleges and universities for services targeting two populations:

- Colorado residents with some college but no degree who had not been enrolled for two or more consecutive semesters.
- Residents who were admitted as first-time students to a Colorado public institution of higher education between 2019 and 2021 but did not enroll in 2020-21.

PROGRAM DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

Because the state established the statewide program shortly after the Adams County pilot began, and took a different approach in the statewide program, Finish What You Started consists of two parallel programs with the same aims but distinct designs:

1. The community-based Adams County pilot project that seeks to help qualifying residents re-enroll at any postsecondary institution.

2. The institution-based statewide program that supports former students at each public college and university to re-enroll at their original institution.

As such, Finish What You Started provides a unique window into the advantages and disadvantages of community-and institution-based interventions for adult learners. Both programs are instructive to states seeking to re-enroll adults who left college without earning a degree.

KEY PROGRAM ELEMENTS:

Community-based, Pay for Success Contract

ADAMS COUNTY PROJECT

The Adams County project is a partnership consisting of the state’s Department of Higher Education; the national non-profit organization [One Million Degrees](#); Metropolitan State University of Denver; the [Rocky Mountain Partnership](#), a coalition of public and private sector stakeholders in Adams County and the surrounding region; and the Adams County Workforce and Business Center. With support from local organizations in the Rocky Mountain Partnership, One Million Degrees provides outreach and wrap-around support services to qualifying Adams County residents. One Million Degrees was selected because of its record of success in helping underserved students succeed in postsecondary education. Through [randomized controlled trials](#) conducted in Chicago, independent evaluators found that the One Million Degrees suite of services significantly increases community college students’ chances of completing an associate’s degree within three years.

One Million Degrees is funded through an [outcomes-based contract](#), with upfront funding from the state to deliver services and bonus payments tied to meeting re-enrollment, persistence, and completion outcomes that are agreed upon with the state but funded through a private donation. The initial contract was for \$312,500 and One Million Degree was eligible to qualify for up to \$200,000 in additional funds as outcomes were met. Those funds must be reinvested into the program. One Million Degrees reports annually to the state regarding its progress toward the agreed-upon goals, and the state uses that information to determine whether and how much additional funding the program has earned. To date, One Million Degrees has not received any bonus funding, but it may do so before the program sunsets in 2024. State officials reported that the outcomes-based contract has been difficult to administer because of the level of evidence required and because student outcomes are influenced by factors, such as employment or health problems, that are outside the grantee’s control.

When the program was introduced, local officials were concerned about how well a national organization based outside Colorado would serve community residents. By working closely with One Million Degrees and encouraging them to establish a team based in Adams County, local partners have been able to integrate the national organization into the community. In addition, local partners have supplemented the work of One Million Degrees through their own outreach and support for local residents. For example, the Rocky Mountain Partnership trains key individuals who regularly interact with the target population to act as ambassadors for Finish What You Started and connect interested residents to the program.

“

There also needs to be a significant grassroots effort. Our community has ... untapped community members that this program is trying to engage. They're under the surface. They're not the ones already connected.”

— Adams County Community Leader

As the pilot draws to a close, and One Million Degrees winds down its presence in Adams County, Rocky Mountain Partnership is making plans and seeking support to continue providing navigation and other wrap-around supports to community members, applying lessons learned during the pilot.

STATEWIDE PROGRAM

The statute authorizing the statewide program allocates \$46.6 million in American Rescue Plan funding to public institutions of higher education using a formula based on each institution's enrollment of low- and moderate-income students, as well as other factors. Institutional grants range from \$195,000 to Technical College of the Rockies, a rural training program enrolling 200 students, to \$5.7 million to Metropolitan State University of Denver (MSU Denver), a broad-access urban university enrolling 16,500 undergraduates. To receive funding, each institution must submit an annual work plan describing how it intends to use the funding. Based on the research conducted for the Adams County pilot, state officials require that expenditures support evidence-based practices that address five priority areas:

1. Closing educational equity gaps
2. Student outreach, recruitment, and onboarding

3. Student financial support (including financial aid counseling and direct grant assistance)
4. Student success services
5. Completion and transition to workforce services

KEY PROGRAM ELEMENTS:

Institution-Based, Formula Grants to All Public Colleges & Universities

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University of Northern Colorado Criminal Justice graduate Cynthia Duarte.

“

The goal of each institution’s student assistance plan must be to increase eligible student enrollment, persistence, and completion and, for institutions other than area technical colleges, reduce student debt.”

— Colorado House Bill 21-1330

After the program was authorized in June 2021, COSI moved quickly to begin implementation. Institutions of higher education submitted plans in September indicating which of the program’s two target populations they would serve — former students who did not complete a degree or students who were admitted during the pandemic but did not enroll — and how they would re-engage and support those students in the five priority areas. Funds were first disbursed in fall 2021. According to state officials, it took most institutions time to hire staff and put their programs in place, so implementation did not fully hit its stride until the 2022-23 academic year.

Within the program’s parameters, institutions can design interventions to suit documented local needs. For example, MSU Denver chose to focus on its large population of returning adult students who, as one informant described, have “zig zaggy lives” that cause them to come in and out of the institution. MSU Denver used part of its funds to hire “re-engagement navigators” who conduct outreach to prior students, assist those students with re-enrollment, and provide wraparound support services to help them persist toward a degree. The grant enables MSU Denver to keep caseloads manageable (up to 200 students per navigator) and to fund a \$1,000 per semester scholarship.



[The navigators] are really their advocate, their mentor, their go-to whenever they hit a roadblock.”

— **Meghan Scherzberg, Ph.D.**

Executive Director, Orientation, Transfer, and Reengagement, MSU Denver

The grants allow participating institutions considerable flexibility, but COSI takes several actions to maintain cohesion and accountability. With facilitation from One Million Degrees, all grantees participate in a learning community to receive professional development and to share insights and experiences. In addition to meeting federal reporting requirements, each grantee must also set and report on their performance towards annual goals, such as the number of students they will serve and the number of students who will complete a degree. COSI monitors the amount of student loan debt that participants incur since decreasing student debt is also a program goal.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

Because Finish What You Started is only a few years old, COSI has not yet conducted a comprehensive evaluation. However, through the quarterly and annual reports that it collects, it is building a rich database of information that it can use to determine the relative success of grantees with respect to student participation, graduation, and student debt, and to identify interventions associated with exemplary results. It also has an independent evaluator under contract to conduct an evaluation.

Evaluation will be especially important since institutions have considerable latitude in program design and variable results are inevitable. In addition, when the federal funds expire, the state will have to determine how best to allocate its own funding which is likely to be more limited. It may also seek to apply for federal funds through the Postsecondary Student Success Grant program, which will require clearly defined program parameters.

Given that the state will be unlikely to provide the same level of funding that Finish What You Started has received from the American Rescue Plan, it will need to answer funding and logistics questions such as:

- How much is needed on a per-student basis to achieve the program’s goals?
- How many students can be served?
- Can institutions supplement state funding?
- Is the “Pay for Success” outcomes-based contracting method worthy of replicating or should the state continue to use a more conventional formula-based approach?

LESSONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR STATES

Finish What You Started provides useful lessons for states about both community- and institution-based outreach and support programs. There are advantages and disadvantages associated with both approaches and they are suited to different target populations. Community groups – and even national non-profit organizations operating within a community – lack the breadth of resources and expertise that colleges and universities possess, but these organizations are much smaller and may be nimbler. They also can be creative in how they engage and deploy community resources. A community-based program can serve a broad cross-section of individuals and connect them to an array of postsecondary options, while institutions are more likely to focus on former students and will, of course, concentrate primarily on encouraging them to re-enroll. Institution-based programs have the advantage of being part of the campus community when students need to resolve problems or gain access to campus resources.



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UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO DENVER

Characteristics of Community- and Institution-Based Programs

	Community-Based	Institution-Based
Target population	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community residents with some college/no degree, regardless of prior institution, are a broad population but are hard to identify and engage. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prior students who left without completing a degree are a known population that is easier to reach, but narrower in scope than any resident with some college but no degree. Institutions can also recruit other eligible community members, but they are more difficult to identify and engage. If students left an institution because of a negative experience, it may be difficult to convince them to return.
Lead organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local organizations have deep community connections but may lack prior experience with this type of work. National organizations have expertise but lack local knowledge and relationships. Both types of organizations tend to be nimble and able to act quickly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Institutions have deep expertise, but may need more time to hire and train staff and to develop program infrastructure.

An option for program sponsors to consider would be a “best of both worlds” approach that teams university-based navigators or advisors from a national organization with members of the local community who know the target population. Other key program design considerations include:

- The target population (e.g., all adults, adults with some college but no degree, adults in certain demographic groups such as persons of color)
- The number of advisors and the ratio of students to advisors (MSU Denver found that maintaining a ratio of no more than 200 to 1 was important)
- The types of wrap-around supports to offer (e.g., navigation, academic advising, career services, financial aid counseling)
- The type of financial aid to include (e.g., a dedicated grant program, emergency aid to supplement existing resources)
- Whether and how to integrate community resources (e.g., volunteers and staff from related organizations such as local non-profits, unions, and employment agencies)

The amount of available funding may dictate the answers to many of these questions, but there is also a significant need for rigorous evaluation data. The program design questions raised by the dual Finish What You Started program models will be easier to answer when the program has amassed several years of student outcome data. A well-crafted evaluation should help Colorado identify the most effective practices to help adults successfully re-engage in higher education. In the meantime, interviews conducted for this case study suggest a few keys to success for community- and institution-based programs:

- Creating an infrastructure (data reporting and outcomes metrics) to support rigorous evaluation that identifies program design and implementation factors associated with student success.
- Enlisting community leaders as partners in program design and execution, and engaging the community in outreach to the target population.
- Providing adequate time for program design, staffing, and build-out.
- Establishing an active professional learning community to ensure that lessons learned are shared among grantees.