

Evidence to Practice

Expanding New Services Based on What Works

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Many organizations are committed to evidence-based approaches — ones that research has shown make a difference for the populations they serve — but they often face the challenge of actually implementing them or bringing them to a larger scale. MDRC has extensive experience helping partners navigate this challenge, build their capabilities, and take new services or models to a large scale. This spotlight describes one example of how MDRC partnered with the Maryland Higher Education Commission and Dallas College (a community college system in Dallas, Texas) to expand a comprehensive student support program rooted in evidence.

The Opportunity

A common challenge in postsecondary education, especially in community colleges and broad-access universities (those that have open or minimally selective admissions policies), is how best to help students persist in and complete their education. MDRC has spent the last 15-plus years studying



approaches to this challenge, building a robust evidence base about what works for college students, particularly community college students from low-income backgrounds. Colleges can help students persist in their education by adopting and expanding these approaches, delivering benefits for students in a variety of settings across the country. The way MDRC helps them replicate and expand these evidence-backed approaches offers a model for growth that is relevant for other public-sector programs.

MDRC's Solution: Innovating and Expanding

Expanding SUCCESS aims to extend the reach of the SUCCESS model by shifting from working with individual colleges directly to collaborating with state and district entities so they can lead implementation on a larger scale.

To make this shift, MDRC has taken a “train-the-trainer” approach, providing technical assistance to a state system and a community college district, which then provide training and support at individual colleges and campuses. Understanding that some program model components will not work the same way in every context, MDRC has created short, user-friendly discussion guides that

Making The Difference: The Expanding Success Initiative

MDRC helps partners to adapt and expand evidence-backed programs and services. One example is MDRC's [Expanding SUCCESS](#) initiative, which builds on [Scaling Up College Completion Efforts for Student Success \(SUCCESS\)](#). SUCCESS harnesses the power of evidence to improve graduation rates for college students, particularly students from low-income backgrounds who attend community college. The components of the SUCCESS model are **coaches** engaged in active outreach to students, **financial incentives** tied to service use, strategies focused on increasing **academic momentum** (such as requiring full-time enrollment or encouraging summer/winter enrollment), and the use of **real-time data** to support student progress. The Expanding SUCCESS Initiative draws on MDRC's experience:

- **Evaluating and providing technical assistance** to the existing SUCCESS program
- **Partnering with states and community college districts** to expand the SUCCESS program sustainably and broadly across their networks
- **Supporting partners in developing and implementing** service components

The first two of these partners in Expanding SUCCESS are the Maryland Higher Education Commission and Dallas College.

outline ways colleges can adapt the different components of the SUCCESS model. The guides cover a variety of topics, sharing MDRC's knowledge about implementation from past projects, options for flexibility, and questions to ask when making decisions. By equipping trainers with the knowledge and skills to lead others, MDRC is empowering the state system and district to continue a consistent and lasting effort.

MDRC has also helped Dallas College and Maryland use data both to review how faithfully colleges are implementing the model and for the continual improvement of their programs. MDRC has helped them create monthly data reports that track enrollment, engagement, and other program goals, and has joined with them to engage college staff members in discussions on opportunities to build on successes and address challenges. Districts and states can adapt and use these data reports in the future, along with the guides mentioned above, as they expand their student-success programs to more campuses and address the needs of student populations at each campus.

Another element of MDRC's work in Expanding SUCCESS is a rapid-cycle testing model that has allowed colleges to pilot test new techniques, obtain results, and figure out where a change in approach is needed, all within a few weeks. MDRC's work with Dallas College on rapid-cycle testing has resulted in improvements to its recruitment, student engagement, and communication efforts. For example, Dallas College found that increasing the frequency of its communications to students to at least weekly resulted in more coaching appointments and greater student engagement.

MDRC has also worked with the state agency and college district on building their project-management capabilities, a critical element of long-term success that often goes overlooked. One MDRC team member describes this undertaking as "rolling up our sleeves and doing the work with them [colleges]." This assistance includes creating meeting agendas, navigating deadlines, and setting follow-up appointments. In Maryland, MDRC provided significant support to the state agency overseeing higher education on how to structure memoranda of understanding (agreements that document each collaborator's expectations or intentions) for philanthropically funded initiatives.

Implications for the Field

By collaborating with state and district-level entities, MDRC hopes to reach a significantly larger number of students and institutions. The ultimate goal is to create a sustainable network of Expanding SUCCESS states and districts, serving hundreds of thousands of students and influencing broader higher education policies.

"Our partners at MDRC have been a critical part of the implementation of the SUCCESS model at Dallas College. With their guidance and support in establishing processes, providing research based best practices and data-integrated solutions, we have been able to impact a population on campus that otherwise would have escaped through the back door."

– Jonathan Lowe, program director, Coaching for SUCCESS, Dallas College

Beyond the specific goals of Expanding SUCCESS, the technical assistance approaches that the program employs can be beneficial to a wide range of student support programs and public-sector agencies interested in expanding evidence-informed approaches to improve their services and outcomes. MDRC knows from its work in Expanding SUCCESS that the train-the-trainer approach empowers organizations to develop their own ability to plan for implementation at a larger scale and successfully implement new service approaches across multiple departments, agencies, or localities. Like the participating Expanding SUCCESS entities, organizations working with MDRC can expect to receive tailored guidance on how to adapt evidence-backed services for their specific contexts and learn techniques to support successful implementation that have worked elsewhere.

Additional Resources

[Varying Levels of SUCCESS | MDRC](#)

[Setting Students Up for Success | MDRC](#)

This spotlight is a part of a series that highlights [MDRC's Evidence to Practice: Creating Change Together](#).

MDRC's technical assistance draws on rigorous evidence, deep programmatic expertise, and creative collaboration. We can work with you to build new evidence, use existing evidence, and harness data to advance your goals—all of which will maximize the difference your services are making and lead to improved outcomes for the people and communities you serve.

Interested in partnering with MDRC to assess, expand, and improve your organization's work? Reach out at E2P@mdrc.org.

Thank you to Liz Saiz, Michelle Ware, Elena Serna-Wallender, and Kelsey Brown for their substantive contributions to this spotlight.

"In many ways this is new territory for our agency. We are the state agency that coordinates and regulates postsecondary education in Maryland, and we hadn't really done this work around advising with the campuses.... [MDRC] has been great to talk with about what other states and colleges are doing to implement similar programs and what the research tells on what works and what doesn't work. It really has been a collaborative effort."

– Emily Dow, assistant secretary of academic affairs, Maryland Higher Education Commission