

COLLABORATING FOR CHANGE

Early Lessons in Redesigning First-Year Students' College Experience

EMILY MARANO AND CAITLIN ANZELONE

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MDRC's Center for Applied Behavioral Science (CABS) is an initiative that combines MDRC's expertise in social and education programs with insights from behavioral science. CABS develops innovative, low-cost interventions, tests their impact through experimentation, and provides technical assistance to programs incorporating behavioral insights.

Colleges are a vital gateway to job opportunities and economic advancement, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds and other marginalized communities. To succeed academically and persist through graduation, these students must navigate a series of high-stakes administrative processes, such as enrolling in college, registering for courses, applying for and renewing financial aid, and meeting satisfactory academic progress requirements to remain eligible for financial aid. Yet these processes are often complex, time sensitive, and burdensome. Research shows that even small challenges—like confusing paperwork or missed deadlines—can lead students to delay enrollment, reduce their course load, or drop out altogether, which in turn lowers their chances of earning a degree and limits their long-term earnings and job prospects.¹ Students benefit when these processes are clear, streamlined, and supported with timely guidance.²

MDRC's On the Path to a Degree (OnPath) initiative partners with colleges to address persistent challenges students face with enrolling in college, securing financial aid, and meeting academic benchmarks, with the goal of increasing student persistence so that college can be a launchpad to good jobs and upward economic mobility for more students. In June 2025, OnPath 2.0 (the second OnPath project) introduced a suite of financial aid tools, enrollment guides, and exercises—the “interventions”—at Central Washington University in Washington and Hudson County Community College in New Jersey. Designed to streamline the enrollment, registration, and financial aid processes; clarify the connection between academic performance and financial aid eligibility; and promote the use of campus support services, these interventions are being implemented throughout the 2025-2026 academic year.

To ensure that students would find the interventions relevant and usable, the MDRC team worked with college staff members and students to codesign and launch intervention materials. This brief describes early lessons and insights the MDRC team gleaned while developing and testing prototypes of student-facing resources, pilot testing these materials to quickly identify

the most promising approaches, elevating student voices to inform improvements, and building cross-functional implementation teams—comprising college staff members from different departments—to work together to coordinate and sustain new ways to support students.

BACKGROUND

A predecessor project—OnPath 1.0—launched during the COVID-19 pandemic to help colleges respond quickly to emerging student needs.³ OnPath 1.0 developed student outreach messaging campaigns for colleges and shared student-centered strategies that could be implemented rapidly to address challenges such as the shift to virtual learning and ongoing health concerns. As the pandemic continued, the project evolved from providing immediate solutions to addressing longer-term challenges. By the close of OnPath 1.0 in 2023, colleges had not only implemented new messaging approaches to better address student needs but had also identified three areas for deeper, longer-term focus: enrollment and registration, financial aid, and satisfactory academic progress—that is, the academic performance standards students must meet to remain eligible for financial aid.

With support from Ascendium Education Group and ECMC Foundation, MDRC designed OnPath 2.0 to build on the earlier project by embedding student-centered design more systematically into college operations. Student-centered design is an approach in which students and staff members work with researchers to diagnose challenges and create solutions so that college policies, messages, and services address students' real needs and experiences. This approach emphasizes empathy, usability testing, and iterative improvements that are informed by students' lived experiences, helping colleges create systems that meet students where they are and increase their likelihood of enrolling and persisting in college and completing their degrees.⁴

While the first OnPath project emphasized broad outreach campaigns and large-scale technical assistance, OnPath 2.0 expands how students, staff members, and MDRC researchers work together in several ways. Researchers coordinated with multiple departments at the OnPath 2.0 partner colleges to develop a more comprehensive set of interventions that offered students clear and consistent guidance on the enrollment, registration, and financial aid processes over the course of the whole academic year. To develop the OnPath 2.0 interventions, the MDRC team collected more detailed comments on the usability of intervention drafts from a wider range of students and staff members in prototype feedback sessions. Input from students and staff members informed the interventions' design so that OnPath 2.0 could go further than its predecessor project in making sure the interventions met the needs of students.

Additionally, a central feature of OnPath is its use of cross-functional implementation teams. These groups comprise staff members from departments that traditionally work separately—such as the enrollment, financial aid, and advising departments—to coordinate how the OnPath 2.0 resources, tools, and guides are distributed so that students have a more seamless experience as they work with different school departments. The goal of engaging these teams is to facilitate a more student-centered institution where siloed operations are replaced by a culture of collaboration in which staff members strategically communicate with and holistically support students as they progress toward their degrees. OnPath 1.0 formed cross-functional implementation teams to collaborate on discrete messaging campaigns and identify areas in their college process where there were roadblocks, and OnPath 2.0 expanded the use of these teams by collaborating more deeply on improving processes for students over the course of their first year of college.

To further include student voices, the MDRC team also convened college student advisory panels for OnPath 2.0: groups of students at the participating colleges who meet with the MDRC team throughout the project. In meetings, student advisory panel members provide input into project activities based on their firsthand experiences navigating institutional processes. (See Box 1.) The student advisory

Box 1. Centering Student Voices: College Student Advisory Panels

A component of OnPath 2.0 is the MDRC team's partnership with college student advisory panels: students from participating colleges who have firsthand knowledge about navigating their institution's enrollment steps, financial aid processes, and academic requirements. MDRC recruited about four college advisory panel members per college by working with its college partners to circulate a job description to students. Student advisory panel members are paid partners who ensure that the new interventions reflect the realities of student life. For example, the student advisory panel members played a substantive role in codesigning a social belonging activity with the MDRC team that was integrated into the orientation for incoming first-year students. Incoming students were asked to reflect on a series of narratives, which were intended to help them feel more connected to their peers and their campus. Student advisory panel members contributed their personal experiences with starting college—including how they handled obstacles, built connections, and found support on campus—to the narratives that were included in the activity. Their contributions shaped the activity's tone, language, and format so that it would resonate with incoming students.

By formalizing agreements with students to participate in college student advisory panels, OnPath 2.0 created a structured way for students to influence institutional practices, complementing the perspectives of administrators and researchers. This approach demonstrates how lived expertise can enhance the relevance, usability, and long-term sustainability of student-facing interventions.

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panel members offer practical information that helps the MDRC team understand how students experience policies and processes.⁵

By pairing the voices of staff members with those of students, OnPath bridges administrative, lived-experience, and research perspectives. This approach may lead to more relevant, usable, and sustainable interventions.⁶

OVERVIEW OF THE ONPATH 2.0 DESIGN PHASE

In summer 2023, OnPath 2.0 started developing new ways to address challenges that first-year college students experience with completing administrative processes and staying enrolled—the project’s “design phase.” The project has moved to an implementation phase for the 2025-2026 academic year, in which new tools, materials, and communications are shared with students. It will conclude with an analysis phase in the 2026-2027 school year: MDRC will identify and share lessons learned from the project.

To better understand their administrative processes and the challenges their students faced, at the start of OnPath 2.0, the MDRC team partnered with leaders and staff members at three colleges: Central Washington University, Hudson County Community College, and UCNJ Union College of Union County, New Jersey (which participated in designing interventions but chose not to implement them due to competing priorities and capacity constraints). Through discussions with staff members, reviews of student-facing materials, and detailed mapping of the steps students need to take to complete administrative processes, the team identified behavioral challenges that hindered student progress. The MDRC team then drew on behavioral science to design prototypes of tools that had the potential to improve students’ experiences with the enrollment, registration, and financial aid processes. (See Box 2 for more information about how the team used an approach informed by behavioral science throughout the design process.) In 2024, the MDRC team developed roughly 20 prototypes of tools, communications, and guides that focused on strengthening students’ understanding of their required action steps; providing more clarity about applying for, using, and remaining eligible for financial aid; and helping students make a registration plan. The prototypes were also intended to foster a sense of social belonging at the college and encourage greater use of campus resources.

As described in Table 1, the MDRC team met with students and staff members to get feedback on these prototypes. In prototype feedback sessions, the MDRC team presented draft materials and asked whether the information was presented clearly, how the messages made students feel, and whether the materials would work as intended (for example, by helping students make advising appointments or register for classes). Simultaneously, the team met with the college student advisory panels to discuss in greater depth how the team could strengthen the prototype designs to solve real challenges that college students experience.

Box 2. Behavioral Science Approach to Diagnosis and Design

The behavioral science field incorporates psychology, economics, and other social sciences to provide insight into how people process information, make decisions, and take action. The MDRC team uses an approach called behavioral diagnosis and design to identify factors—called behavioral barriers—that may make it difficult for students to complete desired actions like registering for classes, applying for financial aid, and maintaining satisfactory academic progress. The team then designs interventions to address those behavioral barriers. During the OnPath 2.0 project, the team identified several behavioral barriers that have been identified through prior research—such as the “ostrich effect,” a pattern of behavior where people avoid potentially unpleasant or anxiety-inducing information. This behavior prevents people from dealing with issues that require that they take action, which demonstrates the importance of minimizing messages that evoke those feelings. Students also experienced “cognitive overload,” which occurs when a person is presented with too much information at once and is therefore unable to process it all, demonstrating the importance of simplifying information and breaking it down into steps.

**Table 1. Activities to Gather Feedback on
Prototypes of Student Resources**

Activity	Description
Cross-functional implementation team meetings	Cross-functional implementation teams met with the MDRC team weekly to discuss what would best meet the needs of their students. Team members also suggested ways to better align the interventions with other college communications and resources and ensure they could be integrated into existing college workflows.
Small-scale pilot tests	At the two New Jersey community colleges, the MDRC team pilot tested 15 tools and communications under real-world conditions by sharing them with students who were completing enrollment steps in fall 2024. College staff members tracked whether students took actions like registering for classes and applying for financial aid, and shared feedback to inform how to strengthen implementation.

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Activity	Description
College student advisory panel meetings	In ad hoc meetings facilitated by MDRC staff members, student advisory panel members drew on their own experiences as students to give in-depth comments on prototypes and suggest which ones to make a priority.
Prototype feedback sessions with students and staff members	The MDRC team met with roughly 30 students and 10 staff members (who were not members of the college student advisory panels or the cross-functional implementation teams) to gather additional comments on prototypes of communications and materials.

In winter and spring 2025, the MDRC team determined which prototypes would be used during the implementation phase and refined them based on the comments from students and staff members. The team's goal was to use the input from students and staff members to increase the impact and usability of the interventions, which included working with student advisory panel members and cross-functional implementation team members to tailor the interventions to each college. The team also worked with the cross-functional implementation teams to ensure the messages that were shared with students were consistent with other communications and resources provided by the colleges and to develop processes for distributing the materials to students in ways that could be sustained beyond the project period. See Box 3 for staff members' reflections on this work.

PRELIMINARY LESSONS FROM ONPATH 2.0

By exploring the colleges' processes and systems and conducting research activities to get feedback on prototypes, the MDRC team identified three themes about the challenges students face when navigating the enrollment, registration, and financial aid processes.

1. Students can feel overwhelmed or intimidated by college communications and processes.

In prototype feedback sessions, students said that drafts of messages that were long, urgent, or referenced the consequences of inaction made them feel stressed and anxious. For example, one student said that receiving a message that there would be a hold on her account until she met with an academic adviser “[would make] you feel like you were in trouble; like, did you do something wrong.” A student at another school said that the urgency in one message evoked a “gut-wrenching feeling.” Minor shifts in wording could affect a student's reaction: One student who

**Box 3. Reflections from Cross-Functional
Implementation Team Members**

MDRC guided reflection sessions with college staff members on the cross-functional implementation teams to discuss their successes and the challenges they faced when planning for the implementation of the OnPath 2.0 interventions. Staff members said that bringing together staff members from different departments to talk about the student onboarding process enabled them to work more collaboratively to improve students' experiences. One staff member said that using a student-centered lens "can ensure a better experience for our students and avoid much of the confusion and frustration that they have experienced in the past." Other staff members said that OnPath is "pushing us...to systematize our work" and build "greater intentionality around the cadence of our messaging." However, staff members said it was challenging to balance their work on OnPath with their daily operational tasks, secure buy-in from staff members outside the cross-functional implementation team who were needed to implement the interventions successfully, and navigate technology and resource constraints. They also said that it was challenging to implement interventions in institutions that had a culture of innovation and frequently made changes—that requires a lot from staff members, and in some cases the work they had already been doing to address problems did not align with their work on OnPath. Staff members were committed to finding ways to build staff buy-in and improve processes; one person said that "having the connection through [cross-functional implementation team meetings] spills over into other dimensions of work in positive ways."

said that a prototype of a flyer about satisfactory academic progress was overwhelming preferred an alternative that provided the information in fewer words.

OnPath 2.0's student advisory panel members provided additional insight into these types of reactions from students. They said that many students like them experience anxiety and other mental health challenges while in school, which are intensified by the stressors of unfamiliar processes and college costs. Some college staff members' observations supported this assertion. An admissions staff member who has been in the field for decades reported a noticeable shift in personal statements on student applications since the COVID-19 pandemic: They now frequently discuss challenges with anxiety and depression.

2. Some students said that they did not feel supported by the staff, which made them feel confused and isolated. At the same time, many staff members do not have the capacity to provide more personalized assistance.

One of the biggest challenges identified by the OnPath college student advisory panels is that first-year students have insufficient guidance from the college staff

as they navigate a large volume of new enrollment, registration, and financial aid information. Several student advisory panel members had sought help and were unable to get it. They also said that they felt like one mistake could lead to a cascading series of challenges, exacerbating their stress and their need for help. In prototype feedback sessions, other students echoed these sentiments. Several students reported that the process to secure financial aid was time-consuming, and they needed more help from a person. One student said that without staff members guiding them more closely, students are “in limbo” and “it is terrifying.” Students also reported having inconsistent experiences with academic advisers. Some students had received little to no degree-planning assistance; others had a plan mapped out to graduation. One dissatisfied student said that it felt like “navigating alone.”

The MDRC team designed several prototypes of resources that would provide information in a more structured way with the goal of making students feel more supported. One was a guide for students to use with their academic advisers in meetings about course registration. This guide contained sections to review the student’s choice of major and degree requirements, build a schedule, and identify next steps. The guide received positive comments from many students. One said that it “would help me build a better connection with the adviser.” The prototype was also pilot tested at two schools. Students reported that filling in the guide with an adviser provided clarity about their degree requirements and progress, and it prompted important conversations and action items about financial aid. After using the guide with an adviser to plan a schedule for the upcoming semester, one student felt equipped to register without help in the future. Similarly, the advisers who had used the guide in group sessions with incoming students thought it encouraged student autonomy.

However, some staff members resisted using the tool during advising sessions. Some academic advisers felt that it would take more time than they had available to implement the tool well, and several suggested that student-facing tools would be preferable to tools that an adviser would need to implement. These comments indicate a mismatch between the amount of help students want and the amount of help staff members are able to provide.

3. Students perceive college administrative processes as complex and would like clearer and more accessible information.

The student advisory panel members emphasized the complexity of college administrative processes. For example, one student advisory panel member expressed frustration with the lack of clarity about how financial aid is processed and what costs are covered; the lack of clear communication and guidance was stressful and increased feelings of uncertainty. Other student advisory panel members said that processes are perceived to be even more complex because students must navigate

a variety of technology resources—like different applications, portals, and websites—to find information and complete actions. In prototype feedback sessions, students said the number of emails they receive that are automated or irrelevant is a challenge. Needing to evaluate whether emails are relevant or not may lead to students skipping information that could be helpful. One student felt that learning about any resource was a matter of luck.

Student advisory panel members felt that it was important for students to easily access the information they need and—despite wanting more personal support—suggested that there should be ways for students to access information outside their academic adviser. For example, student advisory panel members suggested that schools reinforce particularly important communications with text messages. They also felt messages should have clearer instructions and be available in multiple languages. Additionally, in prototype feedback sessions, students said that they preferred messages that were short and to the point but that maintained a supportive tone that did not feel robotic.

THE INTERVENTIONS

These three themes—that students wanted simplified processes, clearer information, and more personal support—were consistent across colleges, and therefore the MDRC team prioritized interventions that addressed these themes over others. The team also focused on interventions that could be used at both the New Jersey community college and the public four-year college in Washington. Figure 1 shows the final set of interventions, which comprise the following:

- 1. Student journey maps for the enrollment process and for each academic term.⁷** These one-page guides give students the information they need to complete key tasks associated with the enrollment, registration, and financial aid processes in one place to make it more accessible to students. Each journey map groups tasks based on when they need to be completed. The goal is to make the full process less overwhelming. The team tailored the journey maps to each school's needs: For example, the enrollment journey maps present information differently depending on whether the school had an ongoing rolling admissions process or a structured onboarding process. They also link to appropriate places on the schools' websites and include contact information for the relevant college offices so students can easily access more information, if needed.
- 2. Financial aid guides to increase transparency and student self-service.⁸** These tools comprise annotated versions of the colleges' financial aid offer letters and a guide on how to reapply for financial aid. The financial aid tools are intended to help students feel more supported by offering clearer explanations so that more students can get the information they need on their own,

Figure 1. OnPath 2.0 Resources for First-Year Students

01 Journey Maps
One-page guides to student tasks for enrollment and each academic term

02 Financial Aid Guides
Annotated offer letter and guide to reapplying for aid

03 Social Belonging Exercise
Reflection activity to make a personal success plan

04 Academic Planning Guide
Guide to plan for working with an adviser to register for classes

05 Satisfactory Academic Progress Notices
Flyer with requirements and updated warning and suspension notices

freeing staff members to focus on more complex cases. In response to student feedback, the guides—as well as the communications used to distribute them to students—aim to have a welcoming and supportive tone.

- 3. An exercise that prompts incoming students to reflect on authentic student stories that promote social belonging and the use of campus resources.** This activity for incoming students contains narratives that were crafted by OnPath's student advisory panel members and are about how they handled common challenges and built connections on campus. The themes in the narratives are framed differently for each college, based on which topics seemed the most relevant to students at each school. In an online form, students are asked to reflect on the stories and build on what they learned from them to make a personal plan for success in their first year of college. Grounded in prior research, the activity is intended to reframe how new students interpret and respond to setbacks by normalizing worries that students have about whether they belong in college and emphasizing that, when students take active steps to build networks and connect with campus resources, challenges subside over time.⁹
- 4. A guide to provide structure to students' registration appointments with academic advisers.**¹⁰ To address the mismatch between the amount of support that students expect from advisers and the amount that staff members can provide, this worksheet guides students through the steps to prepare for a registration advising meeting. It is intended to encourage students to reflect on areas where they need help so that advising meetings can be more focused, personalized, and efficient. It was also designed to provide a more structured, consistent experience and to break the registration process down into manageable steps, reduce anxiety, and help students build confidence in their ability to construct a course schedule that aligns with their academic and personal goals. The guide contains different worksheet sections for the two schools that were determined based on input from the schools' advising teams. Both versions ask students to fill out information prior to meeting with their adviser; at one school, the guide also contains worksheet sections to complete during advising meetings that are intended to set a standard for a minimum level of support.
- 5. Notices that use a supportive tone to give students information about satisfactory academic progress requirements.**¹¹ Because messages about academic requirements to keep financial aid and notifications about not meeting those requirements can be particularly alarming for students, the updated notices are intended to communicate the academic requirements in a less intimidating way. They comprise a one-page flyer that conveys satisfactory academic progress requirements to students early in the academic term and updated warning and suspension notices that are sent to students who have not met the requirements.

CONCLUSION

In June 2025, the colleges started implementing the set of guides, activities, and messages to help first-year students complete fall 2025 enrollment steps and to support them throughout the 2025-2026 academic year. By implementing interventions at important points throughout the academic year—such as when students need to make registration and financial aid choices—OnPath 2.0 provides ongoing guidance that is intended to help students manage common challenges with enrollment, persistence, and success.

The interventions are being implemented with a strong focus on evidence building. A qualitative evaluation is underway to assess both the student experience and institutional implementation; findings are expected in 2027. The results will influence how colleges can refine the tools for future use and offer broader lessons about designing interventions that address the structural and behavioral challenges college students face.

Structural change rarely happens all at once. Institutions evolve through incremental shifts that require the right teams, cross-departmental collaboration, and meaningful student input (such as the involvement of college student advisory panels). The activities that were completed to launch OnPath 2.0—aligning diverse stakeholders through cross-functional implementation teams and adapting processes to create feasible implementation plans—demonstrate the institutional effort that is required to move from vision to practice. These foundational shifts set the stage for continued growth and adaptation.

As implementation progresses over the course of the academic year, the same institutional capabilities that enabled the launch will be tested and strengthened. Ongoing cycles of reflection and improvement will guide both the refinement of OnPath and broader institutional practices, offering a model for embedding student voices in decision-making and driving systemic change.

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