

# Encouraging Academic Momentum and Providing Incentives for Engagement

**NOTE:** This document is designed to accompany the resources and tools presented in [MDRC's Tools for Postsecondary Schools Toolkit](#). It builds on information and concepts presented in the “Academic Momentum and Financial Aid Incentives” video. **Before reviewing this document, please use the link above to visit the web-based toolkit and watch that video.**

## ENCOURAGING ACADEMIC MOMENTUM

### Full-Time Enrollment

- Help students get to the finish line faster: Encourage them to enroll as close to full time (24 to 30 credits per year) as possible. Tie incentives to full-time enrollment status.
- Use process mapping and interviews to identify students' gaps in knowledge and obstacles to full-time enrollment.
- Equip staff members who provide “degree mapping” and financial aid advising so they can consistently discuss the benefits and accessibility of full-time enrollment.
- Use holistic advising to support students in addressing obstacles to enrolling full time.
- Ensure that campus policies and programs provide incentives for full-time enrollment.

### Continuous Enrollment

- Encourage students to take advantage of winter and summer terms. Doing so can help students accumulate credits more quickly and may improve spring-to-fall persistence by keeping students engaged over the summer, a period when many students drop off.
- Use process mapping and interviews to identify students' gaps in knowledge and obstacles to continuous enrollment.

- Equip staff members who provide “degree mapping” and financial aid advising so they can consistently discuss the benefits and accessibility of continuous enrollment.
- Use holistic advising to support students in addressing obstacles to continuous enrollment.
- Educate students about available financial resources. Many may be able to cover summer tuition through year-round Pell Grant funds or promise scholarship funding and may not realize it. Help students take full advantage of these and other already-available funding streams.
- If possible, offer last-dollar scholarships or other financial assistance to students whose summer or winter course costs are not fully covered by Pell Grants or other funding sources.
- Launch communications campaigns to inform students about the financial aid and scholarship dollars available to them, with clear steps to take to register for summer and winter terms. (Detailed examples are available in MDRC’s [EASE College Handbook](#).)

## **PROVIDING INCENTIVES FOR ENGAGEMENT IN SERVICES**

- Tie incentives to actions students need to take to achieve better outcomes, not to achieving the better outcomes themselves. (For example, provide incentives for meeting with a coach/adviser, enrolling in a certain number of credits, staying enrolled in a certain number of credits, attending tutoring sessions, etc.)
- Ask students what would motivate them and design incentives with their answers in mind.
- Frame incentives around mutual responsibility and incorporate loss aversion into reminder communications to students.<sup>1</sup>
- As much as possible, provide incentives directly to students, rather than applying them behind the scenes.
- Make a priority of providing incentives for students to build relationships with college staff members or make use of on-campus resources. Students may come back without incentives after some initial exposure.

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<sup>1</sup> Loss aversion refers to the preference for avoiding losses over acquiring gains. For example, the message “don’t miss out on earning a gift card” can be more effective than the message “you could earn a gift card.”

- Explore opportunities to engage philanthropic donors. Explain that incentives help in two powerful ways: connecting students to on-campus resources and support and helping meet students' basic needs.
- When procuring and distributing financial incentives, bring the financial aid and business administration departments into the process early and often.