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# BOLSTERING STUDENT SUCCESS PROGRAMS IN TEXAS

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## Lessons from the Field

Increasingly, obtaining a job that pays family-sustaining wages [means getting a college degree or other postsecondary credential](#). However, according to the [2021 U.S. Census](#), only 31.5 percent of Texans ages 25 and older have a bachelor's degree or higher. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB)—the highest authority in the state regarding public higher education—has therefore set out a strategic plan to increase that percentage. Specifically, the plan calls for 60 percent of Texans ages 25 to 64 to have a postsecondary credential “of value” by 2030.<sup>1</sup> THECB seeks to improve student outcomes by promoting a variety of student success interventions, particularly [corequisite models](#), discussed in more detail below.

To meet this goal, THECB is giving grants to colleges across the state to fund student success programs: programs designed to help more students stay in college and earn degrees, particularly students of color, students from lower-income backgrounds, and students who need additional assistance to make satisfactory academic progress (that is, to earn enough credits to keep their federal financial aid). MDRC (an education and social policy research institute) is partnering with THECB to provide additional information about evidence-based programs backed by past research to the Student Success Program Inventory, an inventory of existing student success programs in Texas.

This brief summarizes some of the information THECB and its partners will use in that effort. It describes best practices and programs with proven effectiveness—the information that policymakers and practitioners need to consider in designing and promoting student success

programs. The findings are based on MDRC’s 20-year history conducting rigorous evaluations in post-secondary education as well as research and evaluations by other researchers.

**LESSON 1: The most effective programs are comprehensive ones that include frequent, “proactive” advising (that is, a type where advisers take the initiative to reach out to students) tied to additional financial aid.**

Different students may have difficulties in paying for college, meeting their basic needs, overcoming academic challenges, maintaining a work-life-school balance, navigating complex bureaucratic systems, etc.—or the same students may encounter these difficulties at different times. By themselves, short-term interventions such as financial awards and enhanced advising that aim to deal with any one of these issues have small effects. When these strategies are combined in more comprehensive programs, they can address many more of students’ barriers to graduation and lead to large improvements. In fact, a [recent synthesis of studies in postsecondary education](#) found that the programs that lead to the greatest improvements in credits earned are those that are more comprehensive.

For example, the City University of New York’s Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (CUNY ASAP) is among the most [effective and comprehensive programs](#) that have been studied, and its results have been [replicated in Ohio](#). In Texas, the comprehensive [Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement](#) and [Project QUEST](#) have also succeeded in increasing credential completion and credit accumulation, even though they are programs largely focused on workforce development.

**LESSON 2: Additional financial aid helps students and provides a foundation on which to build other forms of support.**

Increased financial aid in the form of scholarships and grants (on top of Pell Grants) is an important component of the most successful strategies that have been tested so far. In some studies, increased financial aid alone has been shown to increase graduation rates.<sup>2</sup> In other studies, it has not produced those effects.<sup>3</sup> A promising approach may be to combine a scholarship with additional coaching and support, as has been tried in the Detroit Promise Path, a program that has [helped more Detroit students stay enrolled](#), though it has not produced an effect on graduation.

**LESSON 3: Reforming developmental (remedial) education helps more students make progress toward degrees.**

Many college students are required to pass developmental or remedial classes before they can enroll in credit-bearing courses at the college level. [Most never graduate. Some research](#) has shown that using more comprehensive data can identify many students who do not actually need to take developmental classes and can move directly to college-level work. A reform at four community colleges in Texas took the tack of offering different developmental math pathways that better aligned with students’ intended majors, and that change [increased the proportion of students who passed developmental and college-level math](#).

## BOX 1

### ADDITIONAL PROGRAMS IN TEXAS

In addition to those studied in the rigorous research cited in the body of this document, many other student success programs in Texas aim to support students from lower-income backgrounds, students of color, and students not making satisfactory academic progress.

- Multifaceted programs such as [Building Bridges to Success](#) (BBS, at Galveston College) and [Child Care Scholarships](#) (at Austin Community College) support students from lower-income backgrounds through financial aid, personal advising, and degree planning. Preliminary data show that 89 percent of students in BBS stayed enrolled throughout the 2019-2020 academic year, and 97 percent of students in BBS were considered to be in good academic standing.
- Four-year mentorship and success planning initiatives such as [Undergraduate Success Scholars](#) (at the University of Texas at Dallas) serve underrepresented minority students in hopes of fostering personal development and academic achievement. At McLennan Community College, [First Year Focus](#) serves Hispanic students and students from low-income backgrounds through components such as Spanish-language services and compelling student engagement.
- Angelina College has a program for students not making satisfactory academic progress called [Probation and Suspension Outreach](#); Sam Houston State University has a similar program called [Academic Recovery](#). The programs alert students and provide academic counseling, emergency aid, and noncredit courses that allow students to recover good academic standing.

Evidence is also growing for corequisite remediation, in which students enroll directly in college-level courses and receive support at the same time for their remedial needs. A [rigorous study](#) of corequisite remediation in English at five Texas community colleges has found large gains in the percentage of students who passed college-level English, with consistently positive impacts for traditionally underrepresented groups. In math, corequisite remediation [has been found](#) to increase not only college-level course completion, but also graduation.

**LESSON 4: The most effective programs often encourage full-time enrollment, enrollment in summer/winter terms, or both.**

Enrolling full time (that is, attempting 12 or more credits) and enrolling during the summer [are associated with improved student outcomes](#). Yet a third or fewer of community college students enroll in college full time or in the summer.<sup>4</sup> The same [synthesis of studies in college interventions mentioned above](#) found a strong relationship between encouraging full-time or summer enrollment and increases in credits earned. These efforts to encourage full-time or summer enrollment can take many forms, from strict or nominal requirements to financial incentives to informational campaigns.

**LESSON 5: To close achievement gaps, it will be necessary to make a priority of equity.**

[Nationwide](#) and in [Texas](#), college graduation rates for Black and Hispanic students are significantly lower than those for White and Asian students, and graduation rates for [students from low-income backgrounds are lower than those for students from higher-income backgrounds](#). Accordingly, as

mentioned above, THECB is directing grants to student success programs that serve students of color and students from lower-income backgrounds. Giving such students more access to programs with proven records of success could reduce these graduation gaps and boost the overall graduation rate for Texas students.

#### **LESSON 6: Costs are one of the major barriers to implementing programs on a large scale.**

Implementing proven programs costs money. Community colleges, in particular, [tend to be constrained](#) by limited resources. Few have budgets for resource-intensive programs, even those that have been shown to improve graduation rates. Additional resources such as those being provided by THECB could therefore broaden students' access to programs supported by evidence. MDRC's [Return on Investment \(ROI\) tool](#) can help colleges and other policymakers assess more accurately the net costs of various interventions, taking into account not only the costs of an intervention (based on regional prices and college expenditures), but also the revenue it can generate for a college (based on tuition prices and state funding models).

#### **WHAT'S NEXT?**

MDRC is undertaking an implementation study of the THECB grantee programs to provide much-needed information on the types of programs provided, their costs, and their ability to achieve their stated goals and outcomes. Furthermore, MDRC will provide coaching and technical assistance to colleges on using its ROI tool, using data to promote continual program improvement, evaluating program success, and monitoring best practices.

MDRC will use findings from this study in combination with existing research on program-related and theoretical factors that contribute to student success to highlight programs with promise. MDRC will flag grantee student-success programs that use evidence-based models and meet certain implementation criteria. This information will be made available online in a THECB Student Success Program Inventory.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 See Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, “Building a Talent Strong Texas” (website: <https://www.highered.texas.gov/our-work/talent-strong-texas/>, 2022). The plan defines a credential of value as follows: “Credentials from Texas institutions of higher education must propel graduates into lasting, successful careers. These careers must equip them for continued learning and greater earning potential, with low or manageable debt.”
- 2 Joshua Angrist, David Autor, and Amanda Pallais, “Marginal Effects of Merit Aid for Low-Income Students,” NBER Working Paper 27834 (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2020); Brock, Thomas, and Lashawn Richburg-Hayes, *Paying for Persistence: Early Results of a Louisiana Scholarship Program for Low-Income Parents Attending Community College* (New York: MDRC, 2006); Reshma Patel and Iriri Valenzuela, *Moving Forward: Early Findings from the Performance-Based Scholarship Demonstration in Arizona* (New York: MDRC, 2011); Melissa Binder, Kate Krause, Cynthia Miller, and Oscar Cerna, “Providing Incentives for Timely Progress Toward Earning a College Degree: Results from a Performance-Based Scholarship Experiment” (New York: MDRC, 2015); Colleen Sommo, Melissa Boynton, Herbert Collado, John Diamond, Alissa Gardenhire, Alyssa Ratledge, Timothy Rudd, and Michael J. Weiss, *Mapping Success: Performance-Based Scholarships, Student Services, and Developmental Math at Hillsborough Community College* (New York: MDRC, 2014); Alexander K. Mayer, Reshma Patel, and Melvin Gutierrez, “Four-Year Degree and Employment Findings From a Randomized Controlled Trial of a One-Year Performance-Based Scholarship Program in Ohio,” *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness* 9, 3 (2016): 283–306.
- 3 Drew M. Anderson and Sara Goldrick-Rab, “Aid After Enrollment: Impacts of a Statewide Grant Program at Public Two-Year Colleges,” *Economics of Education Review* 67 (2018): 148–157; Douglas N. Harris, Raquel Farmer-Hinton, Debbie Kim, John Diamond, Tangelia Blakely Reavis, Kelly Krupa Rifelj, Hilary Lustick, and Bradley Carl, *The Promise of Free College (and Its Potential Pitfalls): Evidence on the Design, Implementation, and Effects of a Performance-Based College Aid Program from a Randomized Control Trial* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2018).
- 4 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Trend Generator, “Number of Students Enrolled in Postsecondary Institutions in the Fall, by Attendance Status (Full-Time/Part-Time) and Control of Institution: 2021” (website: <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/TrendGenerator/app/build-table/2/3?f=1%3D4&rid=16&cid=4>, 2020).

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