EVIDENCE TO PRACTICE

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Scaling Up Postsecondary Student Success Strategies

College completion rates are low—nearly 40 percent of students do not complete a degree within six years of enrolling in college. Community college students face the highest hurdles—about 60 percent are without a degree six years after matriculating.[1] Higher education research has identified strategies that institutions can use to improve student success and degree attainment, particularly among students from families with low incomes and others who have been underserved by current higher education policies and practices.[2]

Programs that show significant results must be implemented widely—and with fidelity to the proven practice—to meaningfully change student outcomes. Seemingly insignificant modifications to effective strategies that colleges implement may diminish the success of those initiatives. Research reports often share high-level program descriptions and the statistical impact of programs and policies but may not provide enough information on their implementation. To support strong implementation of evidence-based strategies, MDRC studies and reports on program implementation and provides technical assistance to higher education systems and colleges interested in adopting proven practices.

In 2019, the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System (Minnesota State), a large public higher education system with 30 community colleges and 7 universities that collectively enroll more than 200,000 students annually,[3] partnered with MDRC to widely disseminate and help expand evidence-based student success strategies across the system. As part of the two-year partnership, leaders from Minnesota State and MDRC

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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

provided technical assistance with a range of activities, including holding systemwide workshops, small-group coaching sessions, facilitating of cross-campus discussions, and creating materials and tools for implementation. The series focused on three areas critical to student success: (1) multiple measures for course placement, (2) satisfactory academic progress (SAP) communications and policies, and (3) comprehensive student support programs.

For higher education systems interested in supporting implementation of evidence-based strategies across their campuses, this brief highlights lessons from the partnership between Minnesota State and MDRC. Leaders of individual campuses may also find value in these examples. The brief begins with overarching lessons for implementing evidence-based strategies, followed by case studies describing specific activities and lessons for the three student success strategies covered during the partnership.

LESSONS FOR IMPLEMENTING AND SCALING UP PROVEN PRACTICES

Based on the technical assistance experience and numerous structured conversations with administrators from several Minnesota State campuses, this section describes broad lessons in program implementation and expansion.

- **Start by selecting strategies that align with existing priorities.**

Deciding which evidence-based strategies to pursue can be difficult, as colleges are often managing multiple initiatives. Minnesota State selected three strategies based on the collective interests of campus leaders and existing priorities, as shown in Figure 1. Selecting approaches that align with existing priorities can increase support for these strategies among faculty and staff and help ensure efforts are viewed as a way to achieve existing goals rather than "just another initiative." Early alignment with state, system, and/or institutional priorities can also make it easier to secure ongoing funding and increases the likelihood that the selected strategies are sustained beyond the initial pilot, study, or grant investment. For these reasons, leaders are encouraged to identify their top student success priorities and goals and to focus resources on implementing and scaling up complimentary strategies.

- **Create space for collaboration.**

Systemwide change includes multiple players: teams from various campuses within the system, stakeholders from various levels and departments, and external technical assistance providers, among others. Communication can be difficult.

To tackle this challenge, MDRC and the Minnesota State leaders set up regular meetings and activities with different stakeholder groups to collaborate on technical assistance content and share relevant updates and ideas. The partners also used a collaborative document-sharing platform to disseminate resources and materials.

FIGURE 1

**THREE EVIDENCED-BASED STUDENT SUCCESS STRATEGIES ALIGNED
WITH SYSTEM PRIORITIES**

Accurately Placing Students Through Multiple Measures Assessment	Supporting Student Belonging with Improved SAP Communications and Policies	Addressing Equity Gaps Through Comprehensive Student Support Programs
Evidence Using multiple measures to place students improves placement accuracy and allows more students to take and succeed in college-level courses.[a]	**Evidence** Incorporating *psychologically attuned* principles and action-oriented steps can improve student response to being placed on warning and suspension.[b]	**Evidence** Comprehensive student support programs increase persistence and graduation rates among traditionally underserved populations.[c]
Minnesota State Priority Scale up multiple measures assessment, using a common systemwide framework.	**Minnesota State Priority** Improve SAP communications and review system SAP policy.	**Minnesota State Priority** Reduce systemwide equity and opportunity gaps; scale up holistic student support.

SOURCES: [a]Dan Cullinan, Elisabeth Barnett, Elizabeth Kopko, Andrea Lopez, and Tiffany Morton, *Expanding Access to College-Level Courses: Early Findings from an Experimental Study of Multiple Measures Assessment and Placement* (New York: MDRC, 2019).

[b]Shannon T. Brady, Gregory M. Walton, Omid Futohi, Eric M. Gomez, Geoffrey L. Cohen, and Robert Urstein, "A Scarlet Letter? Revising Institutional Messages About Academic Probation Can Mitigate Students' Feelings of Shame and Stigma," master's thesis, Stanford University (2019).

[c]MDRC (2020).

College-to-college interaction proved particularly important as the project progressed. Throughout the engagement, campus administrators commonly expressed appreciation for time to work with staff from their own colleges and to collaborate with their peers at other campuses in the system. One important recommendation from the Minnesota project is that leaders planning to implement evidence-based strategies should provide both structured and unstructured opportunities for intra- and inter-campus interactions and sharing knowledge.

- **Tailor resources to reflect specific institutional contexts.**

Many campus leaders said each of their institutions is unique, which prompted requests for more tailored support. This suggests that leaders should consider ways to provide tailored guidance to subgroups, such as rural or urban campuses, and small or large institutions. For example, to implement multiple measures to determine students' academic placements, it is especially important to coordinate between college departments responsible for testing, advising, and registration. For Minnesota State, this meant coordinating teams from several different departments at larger schools. At smaller colleges, these responsibilities often rested with one individual. Providing specific guidance for various institutional contexts can address concerns about the generalizability of evidence-based initiatives and support successful implementation across an entire college and university system. To maximize effectiveness, the guidance offered to each subgroup should remain consistent with available evidence.

- **Identify early adopters and pilot colleges.**

There is often an initial debate about how best to launch a new strategy, especially when resources are limited. Some leaders favor starting something new with a small group, while others advocate starting with everyone all at once. With the goal of systemwide change in mind, the workshop series for this partnership was open to all colleges. However, throughout the project, Minnesota State and MDRC often found tremendous value from featuring colleges that had led or piloted work on the success strategies and previewing new implementation resources with small workgroups to solicit input and feedback before releasing systemwide changes. The project reinforced the generally accepted best practice that pilot campuses or workgroup participants should represent the full spectrum of institutions and students that will be served participate in the new strategy so that the effort produces information that is useful across the system.

- **Be bold.**

In order to maximize impact, it is important that evidence-based strategies are implemented with fidelity and thoroughness. "I would encourage others to be bold and to think big from the beginning," said Greg Rathert, the Minnesota State System Director of College Readiness. "There is a growing sentiment that we were too conservative in our approach, prioritizing students' college readiness over access." His call for a robust approach highlights the importance and the potential benefits of rigorous implementation from a practitioner's perspective:

> *We reached a point where people were not only comfortable with the framework but wanted to go further to be more closely aligned with the research. There was an opportunity to be a little bolder and more ambitious… Moving forward, we will take that into account.*

CASE STUDIES: THREE EVIDENCE-BASED STUDENT SUCCESS STRATEGIES

The remainder of the brief is organized as case studies, describing the research evidence, implementation steps to apply the evidence, and specific lessons for each of the three student success strategies: multiple measures for course placement, SAP communications and policies, and comprehensive student support policies.

Case Study 1: Using Multiple Measures for Accurate Course Placement

The Evidence

Colleges have a long history of using standardized tests to determine students' readiness for college level courses, but research shows these exams are poor predictors of college performance. Up to one-third of students put into developmental education through a single placement exam could be successful in college-level courses without developmental education.[4] These students are investing time and money on courses that do not earn them credits toward a degree and are associated with lower levels of persistence and graduation.[5] The practice of using multiple measures, or measures

that reflect performance over an extended period of time, such as high school GPA, are [much more accurate](#) at determining the likelihood of a student's success in college.[6] Previous publications from [MDRC](#) and the [Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness](#), as well as [an earlier brief](#), offer more information on using this approach for course placement.[7]

Applying Evidence to Practice

The Minnesota Legislature called for the reform of developmental education and student placement in 2017, resulting in a systemwide multiple measures framework.[8] The framework relies on a decision band, which uses high school GPA for students whose placement test scores fall within a predetermined range. All Minnesota State colleges and universities were charged with implementing the framework by the fall 2020 semester, but prior research indicates that implementing multiple measures can be challenging. Colleges often struggle to effectively implement the new measures and make changes to placement procedures across departments. Other challenges include developing strong student processes and communications about multiple measures.[9] At the time the project launched, disparate placement practices were used across the system—adding a layer of complexity to the typical challenges of implementing multiple measures. Anticipating these issues, the partners drew on implementation lessons from other systems and colleges to support Minnesota State campuses with the implementation of the system's new multiple measures framework.

Collaborative Steps Toward Implementation. Using a mix of large-group workshops, small-group regional meetings, and planning tools, MDRC drew on findings and implementation lessons from prior multiple measures evaluations to help participants define their roles in the placement process and identify the changes required in order to use the new framework. The partners also helped participants develop reasonable implementation timelines, shared implementation tips, flagged common implementation challenges, addressed participant questions, and helped clarify and reform practices from various stakeholder perspectives—including the students' perspective.

Lessons for Using Multiple Measures in Academic Placement

In response to challenges presented by the global COVID-19 pandemic, Minnesota State postponed the launch of the systemwide multiple measure framework until fall 2021 and developed interim placement guidance for campuses within the system. The interim guidance allows campuses to select from a range of placement options, including the sole use of high school GPA, which is strongly supported by previous research on college placement.[10] A subset of Minnesota State campuses may use the interim placement guidance beyond fall 2021 to inform future iterations of the systemwide placement policy. The overall implementation effort yielded these lessons for college systems adopting multiple measures.[11]

- **Develop a single multiple measures placement model for the system.**

Minnesota State broadly implemented multiple measures by creating a systemwide decision-band placement framework that listed acceptable placement measures and included discipline specific cut scores for placement into college-level courses.[12] Representatives from colleges and universities across the system reviewed and contributed to the framework as it was developed. According to Minnesota

State system leaders, a standard, systemwide multiple measures framework offers several benefits: First, it advances equity by ensuring students receive similar placements regardless of the institution in which they first enroll. Second, it reduces hassles and streamlines placement by providing consistency for students who transfer between campuses within the system, a common occurrence. Importantly, the Minnesota State framework set high-level guidance, but still allowed for some college-level decisions. Placement guidelines were ceilings—colleges could utilize new or existing placement guidelines that were more generous than those outlined in the systemwide framework. Colleges were also charged with outlining guidelines for placement in developmental education courses, as the developmental pathways differed by institution.

- **Facilitate development of an automated placement system.**

Prior research on implementing multiple measures placement policies identifies information technology (IT) capability as an important consideration, as automating placement can facilitate implementation.[13] This consideration is even more critical for implementing multiple measures across a college system. System leaders must determine whether to create a systemwide tool to automate placement or encourage their campuses to develop their own. Minnesota State developed a systemwide tool to automate placement rather than asking individual schools to develop their own. Initially, the system experienced delays in creating its tool to automate placement, causing delays in implementation at some colleges. However, the system office was ultimately able to create a tool available to all campuses. Minnesota State's experience demonstrated that a systemwide automated student placement tool can reduce the burden on campuses, increase the likelihood that students across the system have similar placement experiences, and speed up implementation.

- **Use peer experiences to build support.**

As the system adopted the multiple measures framework, some faculty and college leaders remained hesitant, despite the availability of rigorous research results. Consistent dissemination of research findings on the efficacy of multiple measures and opportunities for peer exchange both within and outside of the system led to a notable increase in campus faculty and administrators accepting multiple measures assessment, especially the incorporation of high school GPA, as a reliable tool for course placement. There were two particularly powerful presentations—one from a campus within the system that piloted multiple measures and one from the California Community Colleges Chancellor's office. These sessions highlighted that consistently sharing evidence and examples from peers can help develop acceptance and support evidence-based initiatives, even among the most apprehensive stakeholders.

Case Study 2: Supporting Student Belonging with Improved SAP Communications and Policies

The Evidence
For students from families with low incomes who need financial aid to attend college, meeting their colleges' SAP requirements is critical to persistence, as federal policy stipulates students must

meet SAP to remain eligible for aid.[14] Yet, nationally, about 40 percent of first-year Pell Grant recipients at public institutions are at risk of failing to meet these requirements.[15] Not meeting SAP can diminish students' sense of belonging in college, causing them to continue to underperform or drop out altogether.

Research shows a college's SAP communications, such as letters warning students who do not meet SAP requirements, can impact student response. The punitive tone of traditional SAP warning letters often leaves students feeling ashamed, discouraged, and unclear about their next steps. Revising letters to be more empathetic by incorporating psychological principles, including the acknowledgment of the numerous personal and structural reasons students struggle academically and testimonials from students who regained good academic standing, can improve students' emotional response to letters and, in turn, increase their likelihood of persisting.[16]

Applying Evidence to Practice

In 2017, as part of the [Finish Line: Graduation by Design](#) project, MDRC worked with three Minnesota State colleges to identify institutional and student barriers to meeting SAP. The project found that about one-third of students did not meet SAP requirements and received a warning at the end of their first semester—only half of these students re-enrolled for their second semester.[17] Finish Line highlighted that variation in the tone of letters notifying students of their SAP status (for example, warning or suspension) affected how students responded when they were not meeting SAP standards. Some campuses used more positive letters that emphasized steps the students could take to recover. At these schools, students had more favorable reactions and were more likely to act on the notices, by filing appeals to continue their education, for example. To help disseminate these findings across the system, Minnesota State and MDRC focused one strand of the technical assistance series on SAP communications and policies.

Collaborative Steps Toward Implementation. Drawing on national and local research, the partners organized activities to help campuses in the system redesign and streamline their academic and financial aid warning and suspension letters and identified areas where adjustments to SAP policies might help students meet SAP or return to good academic standing if they failed to meet the requirements. The partners first organized two workgroups—one focused on communications and one focused on policy—to pilot ideas and help them create resources for the entire system. The workgroups comprised representatives from a subset of campuses representative of the system (urban and rural, and large and small campuses), system office financial aid leaders, researchers from MDRC, and student leaders to ensure resulting materials represented a wide range of perspectives. As shown in Box 1, the workgroups created space for larger conversations about the overall SAP process. Additionally, MDRC and the system office collaborated with the College Transition Collaborative (CTC), a nonprofit organization that bridges research and practice to foster equitable student outcomes in higher education, to conduct workshops to share strategies across the system. Through the sessions, the partners disseminated findings and implementation lessons from research on SAP, helped campuses apply evidence-based communication strategies to their warning and suspension notifications, raised awareness of the system's SAP policy, and identified practice adjustments, within the federal and system policy, that might improve students' academic outcomes.

AN EQUITY CONSIDERATION: SINGLE OR DUAL STANDARDS FOR ACADEMIC AND FINANCIAL AID REQUIREMENTS?

The Minnesota State policy workgroup tackled an important equity consideration in SAP policy: Should colleges use the same or different standards to assess SAP for academic and financial aid purposes? Although system policy requires a single standard, some campus leaders argued that a two-standard policy is more student-friendly for those who can afford to pay their tuition and fees out-of-pocket. Proponents of a single standard argued that different requirements create the perception that students who rely on financial aid have a higher hurdle to overcome than students who can pay out-of-pocket and remain enrolled. Though there are benefits to both policies, a single standard may contribute to a more equitable environment where all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status, are held to the same academic standards. When seeking to improve SAP policy and procedures, it is worthwhile to consider how guidelines, as well as the tone and content of SAP communications, might affect students in varying circumstances.

Lessons for Redesigning SAP Communications and Reviewing Policy

Building on the efforts of the policy workgroup, Minnesota State is currently moving through formal procedures to amend its system SAP policy. In particular, the system seeks to exclude developmental education credits from SAP calculations, as allowed by federal guidelines. Several campuses across the system have also revised their SAP warning and suspension notifications, using the templates or guidance from the workshop series. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic illuminated even further the importance of reviewing SAP policies and communications, as students face unprecedented challenges to persistence. As such, Minnesota State is continuing to review and revise SAP practices to meet students' evolving needs. The overall effort yielded the following lessons for other systems or colleges seeking to improve SAP communications and policies.

- **Provide template materials to facilitate action.**

At Minnesota State, the SAP communications workgroup allowed a representative group of administrators, researchers, and students to review research on SAP communications and develop revised warning and suspension notice templates, which were shared with all campuses in the system during the systemwide workshop. The templates incorporated "psychologically attuned" principles developed and tested by CTC, and action-oriented language from the existing SAP letters from one of the colleges in the system. This approach of collaborating with a small, diverse workgroup helped facilitate wider redesign and implementation of the system's SAP status notifications. The workgroup helped ensure the communications templates resonated with students and campus leaders and that the materials could be easily used systemwide. For example, the workgroup determined that in addition to an academic warning template, creating a combined academic and financial aid warning template for campuses that linked the two together would be beneficial. This seemingly small change likely helped make implementation of the redesigned communications easier at some campuses.

- **Align written and verbal communication about SAP.**

As campuses across the system began to revise their SAP communications, they addressed the importance of rethinking how advisors and other staff verbally communicate with students on SAP warning or suspension. It is vital to include advising representatives in the redesign of communications and provide them with information, training, and materials to support in-person student interactions.

Case Study 3: Addressing Equity Gaps in Completion Through Comprehensive Student Support Programs

The Evidence

Comprehensive student support programs that combine academic, personal, and financial support into a single program are one of the most effective strategies for increasing persistence and degree completion among students from families with low incomes and traditionally underrepresented students of color, according to research.[18] At their core, these programs use a proactive, case management approach to advising or coaching, combined with additional support, which may include financial incentives that help students cover daily expenses, such as food or transportation, and enrollment strategies to promote timely graduation. Programs for community college students typically last at least three years to support them throughout the duration of their academic careers. Program staff members use data to monitor student participation and outcomes and drive continuous improvement.[19]

Applying Evidence to Practice

When MDRC began working with Minnesota State, the system focused on reducing large educational opportunity gaps in degree completion by race and socioeconomic status. Campus leaders chose comprehensive student support programs as a strategy that they wished to explore and adopt to address this priority.

While there was wide interest among campus leaders, adopting and implementing comprehensive programs can be complex, and this was the case at Minnesota State. These programs require up-front capital to hire and train program directors and coaches and provide financial support to students. They also require significant planning and coordination between departments, including academic affairs, student services, and business functions.

Collaborative Steps Toward Implementation. To facilitate the adoption of comprehensive student support programs, Minnesota State worked with MDRC to project program costs and return on investment and to identify seed funding for campuses. The partners developed and conducted a workshop to build knowledge on the efficacy and implementation of comprehensive support programs and reviewed important program design and development decisions and considerations such as the program model, staffing plan, target student population, launch timeline, alignment with strategic initiatives, avenues for sustainability, and evaluation planning.

Minnesota State elected to join [MDRC's Scaling Up College Completion Efforts for Student Success (SUCCESS) initiative](), due to its affordability and focus on financial sustainability and scaling up.

Four Minnesota State campuses are leading the way, piloting comprehensive student support programs for the system, using the SUCCESS program model. At Minnesota State, SUCCESS aligns with the system's Equity 2030 goal to reduce stark opportunity gaps by race and socioeconomic status.[20] Programs are being designed to serve students from underrepresented populations, including students from families with low incomes, students of color, and first-generation students. The system office appointed its Director of Student Development to lead SUCCESS and coordinate between campuses, and MDRC is currently providing campuses with technical assistance to design and implement their programs according to the SUCCESS model.

Lessons for Launching Comprehensive Support Programs

Minnesota State is in the early phases of launching SUCCESS. The four pilot campuses will begin serving students in fall 2021. Program design with the Minnesota State pilot campuses revealed several considerations for college or university systems looking to implement and scale up comprehensive student support programs.

- **Identify seed funding to launch pilots.**

One of the biggest barriers to the implementation of comprehensive support programs is cost. While the programs have been shown to be cost-effective, colleges must still identify up-front funding for the program.[21] Minnesota State is funding its SUCCESS pilots through a dedicated pool of funding to support cross-campus collaboration and enterprise-wide initiatives created by a 1 percent holdback of the system's state allocation. This funding largely covers program costs in the first year of the program, but colleges will increasingly contribute their own institutional funds. This type of innovative funding structure could be a model for other college systems interested in piloting comprehensive supports. Identifying funding is a critical role that a system office might play to implement comprehensive supports across the system. Box 2 suggests additional roles that system leaders might play.

BOX 2

HOW SYSTEM LEADERS CAN HELP IMPLEMENT COMPREHENSIVE STUDENT SUPPORT PROGRAMS

- Identify partnership and technical assistance opportunities.

- With input from campus leaders, select a program model that allows for local adaptations.

- Secure seed funding for campuses to pilot the program.

- Facilitate sharing of resources and implementation supports.

- Develop a plan to expand the program to other campuses.

- **Determine which program features will be systemwide versus institution-specific.**

Higher education systems seeking to adopt and scale up comprehensive student support programs across a system must tackle an important question: which program features will be standard across all campuses, and which will be specific to individual institutions. Standard program features help to create a common experience for students at different campuses, while institution-specific features could reflect campus autonomy. For example, one question that arose while launching SUCCESS with Minnesota State was whether the pilot campuses would adopt one name and brand for the program, or each select its own. Individual program names could reflect local campus identity; however, a single program name might create a more visible brand that students could recognize across campuses and potentially allow students in the program who transfer from a community college to a university in the system to continue receiving support. Ultimately, Minnesota State decided to select one program name and brand. However, other decisions, such as how to operationalize various components of the SUCCESS program model, were left to the individual campuses.

CONCLUSION

The partnership between MDRC and Minnesota State expanded the adoption of the highlighted student success strategies by more campuses across the Minnesota State system. College collaboration, along with coordination and financial support from the system office helped to accelerate change. The work is ongoing, as Minnesota State continues to work together as a system and continuously improve multiple measures for course placement, SAP communications and policies, and comprehensive student support programs.

Colleges and systems looking to adopt or scale up multiple measures for course placement, redesign SAP communications and policy, or launch comprehensive student support programs can use these lessons as a starting point. While the activities detailed in this brief describe the work completed for this project in Minnesota, MDRC's work with colleges covers a broad span of topics and evidence-based interventions. MDRC collaborates to develop meaningful programs that support student success; facilitate program implementation; evaluate their efficacy through randomized controlled trials; and identify opportunities to disseminate findings through journals, briefs, conferences, and other channels. To learn more about MDRC's work with postsecondary institutions, see https://www.mdrc.org/issue/higher-education.

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