Setting Up SUCCESS

Participating in a College Support Program During the Pandemic and Beyond

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MDRC's Scaling Up College Completion Efforts for Student Success (SUCCESS) project seeks to improve graduation rates for traditionally underserved students at two- and four-year colleges. Since 2019, MDRC has partnered with states and institutions to develop and implement large-scale, financially sustainable, evidence-based support programs. SUCCESS, now operating in 13 colleges across five states nationwide, integrates components from multiple programs that have proved to be effective at helping students accomplish their goals. The components include coaching, full-time enrollment, financial incentives, and data-driven management.

SUCCESS Program Model

COACHING
Coaches actively reach out to students and meet with them at least once a month to help with personal and academic issues.

FULL-TIME ENROLLMENT
Students are required to enroll in at least 24 credits a year and are encouraged to enroll in summer courses.

FINANCIAL INCENTIVES
Monthly $50 financial incentives are provided to students contingent on their meeting with their coaches regularly and satisfying credit enrollment requirements.

DATA-DRIVEN PROGRAM MANAGEMENT
Staff members use management information systems to track program participation and progress. Data are also used to support efficient program management and promote continual improvement.

In January 2022, MDRC published a brief detailing early impact findings from an evaluation of SUCCESS and the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the SUCCESS model and operations. An early look at academic outcomes showed that during the fall 2020 semester, students who had the opportunity to participate in SUCCESS performed similarly to students in the control group who had access to all of their colleges' usual offerings and services (except SUCCESS). This issue focus shares **early program implementation lessons** that highlight **the experiences of participating students**. The lessons, gleaned from interviews with over 100 students and program staff members, reflect experiences that could be relevant to other student support programs, including those that operate in online, in-person, and hybrid environments. Updated impact findings from the evaluation of SUCCESS will be published in late 2023.

1 FINANCIAL INCENTIVES ATTRACT STUDENTS TO THE PROGRAM, BUT CONNECTIONS WITH COACHES KEEP THEM ENGAGED.

While monthly financial incentives helped draw students into the SUCCESS program initially—and for many, alleviated some financial stress—the vast majority of students interviewed said their relationship with their program coach was the most valuable aspect of the program. This finding mirrors research findings from other MDRC studies, including CUNY ASAP, ASAP Ohio, and Detroit Promise Path. As one student remarked,

> My coach, from the very beginning, has been so helpful. She gives me information that helps me...and makes sure I also learn how to do things on my own. [She] motivates me to want to be better and do better.

2 HOLISTIC COACHING HELPS STUDENTS NAVIGATE BOTH ACADEMIC AND PERSONAL CHALLENGES.

Students said their coaches not only guided them through course selection, career questions, and academic planning, but also cheered them on during times of stress. For students who may have been discouraged by uneven experiences in college, having supportive coaches who listened closely to their individual needs felt distinctive and valuable. Students emphasized the importance of having a familiar and available go-to campus resource, saying that without their coaches, they may not have known where to turn. Students described how coaches helped them filter important college communications in times of information overload. Some students said they would have missed class registration or assignment deadlines without their coaches' reminders. Said one student,

> My coach is awesome. She is involved in more than just my academics. She wants to know about anything that could prevent me from getting the A's I normally do…. She helps me with everything I need, and is always one email away.

3 STUDENTS APPRECIATE PROGRAMS THAT ARE FLEXIBLE—BUT THERE ARE TRADE-OFFS.

Throughout the pandemic, especially during campus closures, program staff worked to accommodate students' heightened levels of need and uncertainty regarding caregiving arrangements, work schedules, and family responsibilities. This included shifting meetings to evening and weekend hours when necessary, shortening meeting lengths, offering coaching sessions via video and telephone calls (rather than in person), and counting texts and emails as coaching contacts. While some of these adaptations may be worth sustaining over the long term, such as those accommodating students' work and parenting schedules, others may present unwanted trade-offs. During the pandemic, for example, some colleges allowed students who had shifted to part-time enrollment to continue receiving the SUCCESS program's monthly financial incentive. While students appreciated this flexibility, full-time enrollment correlates strongly with achievement, meaning students may not have been positioned for improved academic outcomes. College staff found it difficult to balance accommodating student preferences and pandemic constraints with maintaining fidelity to a model robust enough to produce impacts.

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PROGRAMS BENEFIT FROM HAVING STAFF DEDICATED SOLELY TO SUCCESS.

SUCCESS sites with dedicated staff experienced higher levels of fidelity to the SUCCESS model and more internal cohesion. Due to resource constraints—in part amplified by the pandemic—colleges differed in their capacity to staff SUCCESS as designed. Some pulled in college employees from other departments to cover various positions, or hired staff to perform multiple roles, forcing them to split their time among many competing streams of work. Additionally, SUCCESS students made up only a small portion of some coaches' overall caseloads, casting SUCCESS as a minor add-on to the coaches' main duties. Programs with dedicated SUCCESS positions, on the other hand, were better able to preserve staff time for proactive student outreach and more frequently meet as a team. One staffer said,

> *SUCCESS is much better when there are dedicated staff for these types of programs and accountability metrics.*

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STUDENTS DESIRE COMMUNITY AND SUPPORT, EVEN IN THE VIRTUAL COLLEGE ENVIRONMENT.

Most students said that developing a sense of belonging in college and in the SUCCESS program was highly important to them. Notably, this was the case for students who preferred online learning as much as it was for those who preferred in-person or hybrid models. But while many students, even those taking online courses, were able to forge strong bonds with their SUCCESS coaches, they said it was harder to develop a sense of community within the broader SUCCESS program and at college overall. Students pointed to a few strategies that program staff used to help them meet other program participants, including interactive student sessions designed to foster peer support and campus connections, group skill-building workshops (which counted toward coaching requirements), and college skills courses that exclusively enrolled SUCCESS students. Said one student,

> *I miss the group sessions we used to have. It was like, 'How is everybody doing?' Everyone could relate to each other.*

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