

A \$62 Billion Revolution in College Completion



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President Biden’s American Families Plan includes a big idea for transforming federal policy around higher education: a \$62 billion College Completion Fund focused on improving retention and graduation rates at colleges serving large numbers of underrepresented students. With current odds of graduating college currently little better than a coin flip, it can’t be overstated how far this funding—the largest proposed investment of its kind—could go in helping students throughout the country make it across the finish line to a valuable postsecondary credential. And it’s not just the size that’s historic—this fund would represent a revolution in the federal approach to higher education, which in the past has focused exclusively on getting students *to* college, with little regard for whether they actually make it *through*.

The good news is that our higher education system is already primed to implement a large-scale investment of this nature. An evidence base of effective practices in student success has been growing for years, fueled by the innovative work of individual institutions, government-funded experimental sites, and philanthropy, and proven through independent evaluations showing what

really helps get students across the finish line. Below are three evidence repositories that Congress and the Department of Education (Department) can rely upon as models to scale through a College Completion Fund that will move the needle on national attainment goals.

The What Works Clearinghouse

The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) is an initiative of the Department’s Institute of Education Sciences that identifies rigorous, high-quality education research and distills findings on programs and policies that have been shown to improve student outcomes. WWC has identified 13 postsecondary interventions that meet its evidence standards for providing “positive or potentially positive” effects on student success.

Near the top of the effectiveness scale is a comprehensive program known as ASAP (Accelerated Study in Associate Programs), which gained traction following its significant success in the City University of New York (CUNY) system. The ASAP model is designed to increase three-year completion rates for associate degree students by equipping them with the academic, financial, and social supports they need to graduate, and to do so more quickly. ASAP is cost-free to the student, and among other services, the program provides intensive academic and career advising, free public transit cards, individualized course schedules to allow students to attend class at convenient times, and financial assistance to eliminate gaps between tuition charges and financial aid packages and lower the cost of textbooks and course materials.

Other notable postsecondary interventions in the WWC include:

- **Dual enrollment programs** through which high school students take college coursework and earn credits, which have been shown to improve college access, persistence, and attainment.
- **First year experience courses** that help entering two- and four-year college students acclimate and prepare for success, which contribute to stronger academic achievement, credit accumulation, and completion rates.
- **Single Stop** initiatives that establish a “one-stop shop” at community colleges where students can receive help connecting to public benefits and other supports like childcare services or tax assistance, which have been shown to enhance progression in college.

Replicating ASAP

CUNY ASAP is widely regarded as a touchstone when it comes to student success initiatives at community colleges. Nationwide, about 30% of students who enroll in community college earn a degree within three years. Evaluations by MDRC, a nonpartisan research organization, have shown that CUNY ASAP doubled community college graduation rates within three years

and increased six-year bachelor's degree attainment among those students by nearly nine percentage points.

The ASAP model has since been replicated at three community colleges in Ohio and at Westchester Community College in New York state. MDRC evaluations of the Ohio replication showed similar results to those at CUNY: the programs roughly doubled three-year graduation rates and also showed large positive impacts on full-time enrollment and cumulative college credits earned. CUNY ASAP replications have continued and expanded nationwide, with ASAP-like programs now in operation at community colleges in Tennessee, California, and West Virginia, and its newer four-year counterpart, ACE (Accelerate, Complete, Engage) has also shown promising early results in improving bachelor's degree attainment. The College Completion Fund could help spread these impactful programs to schools and students from coast to coast.

Comprehensive Approaches to Student Success

CUNY ASAP is also among a set of programs that take what is known in the field as a “comprehensive approach to student success” (CASS). Over the past year and a half, The Institute for College Access and Success (TICAS), MDRC, the Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities (LEO) at the University of Notre Dame, and Results for America have closely examined ASAP and five other CASS programs that have a robust evidence base from randomized control trials (the gold standard in providing reliable proof of an intervention's effectiveness):

- **InsideTrack**, a phone- and text-based coaching program operating on more than 4,500 college campuses that supports students in enrolling, building study and career skills, and persisting to a credential, including through a technology platform that sends automated reminders and allows for access to coaches on an as-needed basis.
- **MAAPS** (Monitoring Advising Analytics to Support Success), a proactive advising intervention that uses analytics on student performance to support success and completion among low-income and first-generation students at 11 large, public four-year research universities across the US.
- **One Million Degrees**, a comprehensive advising, tutoring, professional development, and financial support model implemented at multiple community colleges in Illinois to help students persist through challenges, stay on track to earn an associate degree within three years, and develop core leadership and advocacy skills.

- **Project QUEST**, a workforce development model founded three decades ago in San Antonio, Texas (and since been replicated across the state) that uses case management, intensive coaching strategies, and tuition assistance to help connect adult workers with associate degree programs at community colleges or other training providers to prepare them for higher paying, more highly skilled jobs.
- **Stay the Course**, an initiative managed by Catholic Charities in Fort Worth, Texas that aims to increase community college graduation rates by pairing participating students with a case manager who provides holistic, individualized support and mentorship in navigating academic and nonacademic barriers along the pathway to a degree.

The research teams found that these six successful CASS programs share key design elements. They leverage strong interpersonal relationships through case managers with lower-than-average caseloads, often over multiple years of engagement, and use real-time data analytics to identify students who would benefit from intervention and monitor progress. And they maintain a clear strategic focus on persistence and completion goals, with many incorporating “wraparound” financial, personal, and academic supports that address a fuller range of student needs. These programs are now in various phases of implementation and replication in states all across the US.

Reaching for One Million Degrees

It’s right there in the name: One Million Degrees, founded in 2006, is dedicated to helping low-income Chicago-area community college students attain associate degrees and transform their lives. The program is now in the fourth year of an independent evaluation by the University of Chicago Poverty Lab, with results from the first two cohorts of their study showing a 35% increase in full-time enrollment and a 47% increase in full-time persistence for students who accepted the offer of a spot in the One Million Degrees program. In 2019-2020, the program served over 750 students at ten community colleges, with a 62% cumulative graduation rate and a 91% retention rate.

In April 2021, in partnership with the Colorado Opportunity Scholarship Initiative, One Million Degrees launched a two-year pilot program called “Finish What You Started.” This new program will target low-income adult workers in Adams County, Colorado who have some college experience but no degree by offering holistic support services to help them reenroll and pursue a postsecondary credential, with the goal of ultimately expanding the model statewide. With the support of the College Completion Fund, students across the country could benefit from these kinds of innovative and strikingly successful programs.

Powered by Publics: Scaling Student Success

While many of the interventions highlighted above focus on improving graduation rates at community colleges, the College Completion Fund would also support retention and completion initiatives at four-year institutions that enroll above average numbers of historically underserved students. The [Association of Public and Land-grant Universities \(APLU\)](#), which represents more than 200 public universities collectively serving five million undergraduate students, has been a leader in working to scale these types of student success efforts being undertaken across its member campuses.

[APLU's Powered by Publics initiative](#) has convened 125 institutions that participate in one of 16 “transformation clusters,” each dedicated to collaboratively addressing an aspect of equitable access and completion and eliminating barriers to success. The [clusters' focus areas](#) cover a wide range of factors that contribute to positive student experiences and outcomes, including faculty and teaching development, academic program improvement, data infrastructure expansion, and strategies for meeting financial need, closing equity gaps, reducing students' time to degree, and streamlining transfer pathways. In addition to this cluster work, APLU member institutions collaborate on a variety of completion-centered research initiatives—among them a pilot program currently underway to evaluate completion grant practices.

Granting a Path to Completion

One of the worst-case scenarios in higher education is when a student who was making progress toward a degree drops out close to their graduation due to unmet financial need. Often, what keeps them from making it across the finish line is a small sum they are unable to pay—and “completion grants” of as little as \$500 to \$1,500 can make a real difference in giving students the boost they need to finish their degrees. Such grants are often applied to clear student balances at the institution, provide funds to offset living expenses so they can remain enrolled and focused on their studies, or both.

APLU and the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities (USU) have led a [pilot program](#) to evaluate and scale the implementation of completion grant programs targeting students with unmet need who are 30 credit hours (one year) or less from graduation. The nine universities that participated in the initial pilot [distributed 1,213 completion grants, and 93% of grantees either completed their degrees or were retained](#). Eleven public universities are currently participating in a randomized control evaluation of completion grant practices to further ascertain best practices. Investing in the College Completion Fund could unlock access to meaningful resources for students at public universities in every state.

Conclusion

The bottom line for policymakers? While these are not the only programs and initiatives that are effective in promoting student success, the array of well-proven and successfully replicated interventions described here shows that when it comes to retention and completion, we *know* what works, we know how it can be scaled—and we know that a federal College Completion Fund would truly transform higher education outcomes for students, institutions, and communities across the country.

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