

The Making of a College Completion Fund



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The national six-year college completion rate is 62.2%. At many schools, that would constitute a failing GPA—and even worse, the figure has barely budged in decades. But with the *Build Back Better Act*, the Biden Administration broke ground by proposing to tackle stagnant graduation rates through federal policy for the first time and create a competitive grant program for college retention and completion initiatives. Through *Build Back Better*, subsequent legislation, and the appropriations processes for Fiscal Years 2022 and 2023, the Biden Administration can continue to lead in this area by dedicating meaningful grant funding to expand evidence-based, equity-driven student success programs that will move the needle on outcomes across the higher education system.

Here are five priorities Congress and the Department of Education should consider in establishing and implementing a high-quality, high-impact College Completion Fund:

1. Build on What We Know Works.

Years of research have created a robust body of evidence on what works in keeping students enrolled in college and helping them make it across the finish line to a degree. As in *Build Back Better*, new federal initiatives can build on this research base by earmarking a significant portion of available funding for practices meeting the highest tiers of evidence for effectiveness through rigorous evaluation. Successful grant applications should include a well-developed plan to scale or implement proven programs and high-impact practices.

Evidence-based interventions that could be prioritized for grant funding include:

- **High frequency, personalized advising** in which trained counselors deliver proactive student counseling, building on strong interpersonal relationships to support student success.
- **Real-time data analytics systems** that provide key information needed to monitor student progress, track trends and early warning signs, and help connect students to resources and interventions when needed.
- **Comprehensive support structures** that address students' academic, financial, and personal needs through a combination of services like tutoring programs, career advising, emergency financial aid, transportation stipends, and connections to childcare, food, and housing assistance.
- **Multi-year designs** that engage students throughout their time in school, offering a stable source of support along the pathway from enrollment through college graduation.

In awarding grants, the Department of Education (Department) could also explicitly prioritize proposals to scale well-tested programs with these building blocks in their design—like CUNY ASAP, Bottom Line, InsideTrack, One Million Degrees, and MAAAPS.

2. Center Equity Goals.

Build Back Better is clear in its intent to prioritize plans that would dedicate a large share of grant funding to boosting enrollment, retention, transfer, and completion outcomes for underserved student populations—especially students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, first-generation college students, students with disabilities, and student parents. Any federal completion funding effort must preserve this focus. The data are clear that the nation's most under-resourced institutions disproportionately serve under-resourced students, compounding persistent inequities in higher education. Community colleges, for example, enroll more than half of all Native American and Hispanic undergraduates and over 40% of Black undergraduates, yet face a revenue gap of \$78 billion compared to public four-year institutions. Driving this new funding source to the schools and students with the greatest need for additional resources has the potential to both help thousands of students reach their educational goals and narrow national equity gaps in degree attainment.

To keep equity at the center of the grant application process, the Department should give preference to proposals that would fund retention and completion initiatives aimed at underrepresented students within institutions that *also* serve above-average populations of those groups and consider granting higher priority to institutions that exceed enrollment benchmarks for Pell-eligible students, students of color, or other target student populations.

3. Pursue Quality Over Quantity.

Start-up costs to establish or replicate the most effective student success programs can be steep. In its early stages, CUNY ASAP cost as much as \$16,000 per student over three years, though its costs dropped down to \$3,900 per student per year over time and the program now saves about \$6,500 per degree as a result of nearly doubling graduation rates among participants. Yet such high start-up costs should prove instructive in any major federal investment in retention and completion. The Department should target grants to maximize the reach of available funds by investing in a smaller number of high-quality proposals that will each have significant impact on under-resourced students and schools, as opposed to a larger quantity of grants that would only scratch the surface and likely yield less meaningful or sustainable results. For any proportion of grant funding that may be earmarked for programs meeting higher evidence tiers, this should mean driving those dollars to proposals to replicate proven programs, particularly those that have already been replicated successfully and lowered the per-student cost of the intervention. And given the complex, multi-stage planning these efforts require, the Department should consider a flexible funding distribution model that would allow states to draw down their funding in non-equal amounts over the course of their grant.

Maximizing quality will also require considering grantee capacity and expertise, both of which are needed to implement programs with staff-intensive elements and solid track records like those listed above. States and institutions that are best equipped to execute their plans and advance attainment goals will likely not only demonstrate strong in-house capacity, but also seek to partner with researchers and non-profit technical assistance (TA) providers. Having an experienced TA provider on board, particularly for proposals aiming to replicate existing models like CUNY ASAP, will help ensure that these programs are scaled with fidelity. Accordingly, the Department should recommend or give preference to applications that include a TA provider and should also be thoughtful about providing grants of sufficient size to allow states to cover the cost of that partnership.

4. Ensure Strong Buy-In from States.

Strong strategic commitment at the state level will be central to seeing a powerful return on federal investment in student success, and state applications should be the vehicle for distributing retention and completion grant awards. To that end, governors could be given the first right of refusal to apply for a grant or designate a role for their state higher education agencies or governing

boards given those offices' deep understanding of postsecondary institutions in the state and the student populations they serve. Grant application guidance should also be designed with the intent of identifying states that are best suited to implement their proposals.

Focusing on state level buy-in will also help ensure that grants do not end up flowing *only* to institutions that already have the significant resources and capacity needed to support an application on their own. By carving out a clear role for states and state agencies in its call for applications, the Department can promote more equitable opportunity for lower-resourced schools that disproportionately serve underrepresented students, like community colleges, minority-serving institutions (MSIs), and regional public universities—broadening the reach of the grant program and its capacity to boost graduation rates and close attainment gaps.

5. Emphasize Evaluation.

A dedicated evaluation component will help grow the evidence base of powerful student success practices and strengthen understanding of what it looks like to effectively scale them on the ground. *Build Back Better* would allocate \$10 million to evaluate the interventions carried out through its competitive grant program, a set-aside that would be poised to have an outsized impact in making the case for future federal completion funding by demonstrating improvement in student outcomes.

Since federal allocations alone may not allow for a national evaluation, the Department will need to identify external partners it will engage in any large-scale evaluation efforts of its own and should likewise give priority to state applications that include a well-developed evaluation plan. Successful applications should outline the grant resources that will be dedicated to evaluating the innovative program or practice being funded, including a focus on improving data and human capacity needed to conduct a rigorous assessment. Emphasizing evaluation as a core piece of a retention and completion grant program will help create a powerful body of proof to encourage ongoing funding for student success.

Conclusion

No matter the vehicle, federal funding for retention and completion initiatives will represent a first of its kind intervention to address key attainment and equity gaps in US higher education.

Foregrounding these five priorities will help ensure a clear process for soliciting applications and directing funding toward initiatives that will translate the limited resources available into the greatest possible impact for underrepresented students and under-resourced schools across the country.