

Supporting Student Success: an Overview of Strategies to Help Working Adults through Postsecondary Programs

Prepared by LukeWorks, LLC, for the Minnesota FastTRAC (Training, Resources And Credentialing) Initiative
January 2009

Low-income adults looking to build their skills as a means to better jobs and higher wages face many barriers to postsecondary education and training. The high cost of education, family and work obligations, unmet childcare needs, and limited or unreliable transportation can all be obstacles to pursuing a postsecondary certificate or degree. In addition, many low-income adults are academically under-prepared for and/or intimidated by college-level work. And those who are the first in their families to pursue a college education may feel at sea, with few points of reference as they navigate the higher education system and processes like applying to schools or filing for financial aid.

“Key student characteristics, such as race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, being older and/or having a family, are all predictive of persistence and are often interrelated. Affordability is another key factor in the persistence discussion, which poses difficult research questions. The problem lies in untangling these interrelated factors that affect college persistence. Being low-income is often associated with inadequate academic preparation and attending colleges with fewer resources. Trying to decide which one of the contributing events is most important is to miss the point that they all must be addressed if we want to improve persistence and graduation rates.”

J. Lee. *Ensuring Persistence & Degree Completion*, 2005.

For untold numbers, these obstacles prove daunting enough to dissuade entering a postsecondary program in the first place. For those low-income adults who do enroll in college, these barriers make staying in and successfully completing a program of study a real challenge. At greatest risk for non-completion are students of color, first generation college goers, those with limited English language proficiency, and returning adult students.¹ Persistence rates at the nation’s two-year community colleges – which serve a disproportionate share of students from these backgrounds – are telling. For example, fully 35 percent of students who enrolled in two-year colleges in 2003 had left without completing a degree by 2006, and were not enrolled anywhere else (by contrast, only 13 percent of students who enrolled at four-year institutions in 2003 had left without completing by 2006).²

In Minnesota, statistics are similar. The persistence rate from the first year to the second year for students who attend two-year institutions (57 percent) is substantially lower than the rate for students who attend four-year institutions (82 percent). Further, graduation rates are highly stratified by race: while 52 percent of all students enrolled in the state’s four-year institutions graduate within six years, just 37 percent of black students and 51 percent of Hispanics do so (compared with 63 percent of whites). And only 16 degrees are awarded for every 100 minority students in the state; among white students, 21 degrees are awarded for every 100 students – one of the largest gaps in the country.³

A key to bucking these trends and ensuring that low-income adults succeed in college is the provision of a web of student support services, both academic and personal in nature, and designed to meet the practical as well as psychological needs of a part-time, working community college population. These student support services include the following⁴:

- ▲ Academic guidance and counseling, including course planning and graduation requirements
- ▲ Academic supports, like tutoring, time management, and study skills training (sometimes combined in “student success courses”)
- ▲ Flexible course delivery, including modular, online, and accelerated programming
- ▲ Career counseling, including occupational aptitude and labor market information
- ▲ Personal guidance and counseling, such as mental health counseling or crisis intervention for at-risk students
- ▲ Peer supports, including learning communities and student mentoring, and social integration programs like extended orientation courses and multicultural centers
- ▲ Integrated work and learning opportunities
- ▲ Supplemental services, such as childcare or transportation assistance
- ▲ Financial support

Student Support Services

What follows is a closer look at these approaches – many of which overlap or are utilized in some combination by community colleges – to improving student success:

1. Student Success Courses

Many students, including large numbers of low-income adults, enter a postsecondary program not only lacking basic academic skills, but also lacking the study habits and time-management skills needed to succeed in college. Without adequate preparation, many college-goers fail, or fail to complete, introductory courses in their first year. In fact, four-year universities report drop, fail, or withdraw (DFW) rates of anywhere from 22 percent to 45 percent for these introductory courses, while community colleges often experience DFW rates of over 40 percent to 50 percent.⁵ These failure rates contribute significantly to overall institutional dropout rates between the first and second year and beyond - almost half of first-time students who leave their initial institutions by the end of the first year do not return to higher education.⁶

In response, “student success courses” are gaining popularity on campuses nationwide. These courses are designed to orient students to resources and support services on campus; teach note-taking, test-taking skills, and time management skills; help with academic planning; and may sometimes offer career exploration. Often, the components of a student success course are available through different avenues on a campus; it is the integration of these components into a singular format that helps reinforce their individual benefits and deliver a bigger impact. For example, a number of students in a 2007 study reported that the course information they received through their student success course was more comprehensive and useful than the information they gleaned through general advising services on campus. Further, they reported developing meaningful relationships with their student success professors, whom often went on to serve as their informal advisors.⁷ Indeed, students enrolled in these courses were more likely to earn a credential, persist, or transfer than those not enrolled.⁸

Based on evidence from several of its studies, the Community College Research Center (CCRC) recommends expanding student success courses and customizing them to serve the needs of particular student populations, i.e., low-income adults attending part-time. Part-time students have less time to access support services through multiple avenues and fewer opportunities to participate in the social fabric of the college; as a result, they stand to benefit most from a student success course. In addition, because student success course professors often act as informal advisors to students, colleges could consider formalizing this relationship.⁹

Colleges could also consider **making a student success course mandatory for all students** in their first semester. CCRC found that voluntary support services tend to be utilized by students who have the cultural and social resources to seek and take advantage of them. Students from more disadvantaged backgrounds may be without the “cultural repertoire” needed to approach faculty members for informal advising, or lack social connections that pass along information helpful to navigating the college.¹⁰

2. Learning Communities

Another strategy that has emerged in the last decade or so, and appears to have positive effects, is to place entering students in “learning communities” – a cohort of students that take courses together, sometimes organized around a theme. For academically under-prepared students, learning communities may involve a fair amount of basic skills instruction. (Researchers warn that basic skills courses often unintentionally reinforce students’ doubts that they are not “college material,” making it important to frame a basic skills learning community as a foundation or building block for college rather than a “remedial” experience.¹¹)

Many learning communities bring together faculty with student affairs professionals and learning center staff. Integrating campus services and programs into the learning community experience helps connect students to networks of support available on campus, which in turn increases the likelihood they will stay in school their first year and beyond. Indeed, a recent study tracked the progress of about 1,600 low-income and unprepared freshmen placed in learning communities at 13 community colleges around the nation. Compared with students of similar backgrounds and levels of academic preparation, those in learning communities were more likely to remain in college into their senior year.¹²

Student Success Courses & Learning Communities: A Unified Approach

It is not uncommon for student success courses to be incorporated into learning communities, a natural blending of strategies to improve retention and completion. Learning community programs at **California’s Cerritos College**, for example, offer a credit-bearing new student seminar course called Career and Guidance linked to basic skills math, reading, and writing courses. By connecting students with campus support services and helping them interact with campus offices, like financial aid and registration, the faculty and counselors in the first-year seminars help students learn how to navigate the college and access its supports. The

Success Courses & Learning Communities at Inver Hills Community College

In response to poor retention and graduation rates, in 2006 Minnesota’s Inver Hills Community College (IHCC) began offering a first-year for-credit **college success course**, OnCourse. All OnCourse students complete a two-year course plan, a career development plan, and a financial management plan to help them focus on completing their degree. The Noel-Levitz College Success Inventory (CSI) was given to OnCourse students to assess possible barriers to their college success and to introduce them to strategies for overcoming those barriers.

The same year the college began implementing **learning communities** as another way to improve student retention. In 2008, several learning communities started utilizing OnCourse. Research by the college found that not only do learning communities have higher rates of retention than the general student population, but when they are combined with OnCourse sections, the retention rates were even better. Fully 86% of these students returned for their second year.

College success courses and learning communities are part of a broader initiative at IHCC: **Finish What You Start**, which focuses on strategies to promote college readiness, career development and goal setting, and persistence and completion.

To learn more, visit the IHCC Website at <http://www.inverhills.edu/AboutUs/AQIPActionProjects>

first-year seminars also connect students with resources on campus, such as tutoring, that help them develop better time management and study skills.

3. Accelerated Learning

Ever increasing numbers of adults look to acquire new skills quickly in order to maintain their attachment to the labor market. In response, many colleges serving adult students offer accelerated courses (also called “intensive” courses) that deliver content in less time than the traditional course – for example, 20 hours of class time spent during five weeks, rather than 40 hours over 16 weeks.

At the beginning of the decade, about 13 percent of adult students were enrolled in programs that offer degrees in less than the traditional length, with projections that at least a quarter of all adult students will be enrolled in accelerated programs by 2010.¹³ Note that because most accelerated programs are organized into large blocks of time (weekend classes or three+ hour evening classes), a natural learning community tends to evolve in which students experience themselves as part of a collaborative educational process – contributing to their persistence. In addition, some accelerated learning programs incorporate **Credit for Prior Learning** (CPL) –credit for non-college or experience-based skills and competencies acquired from work and life experiences. Recognizing the prior knowledge and skills working adults bring to a postsecondary program can convey a sense of confidence in their abilities, while speeding along the degree completion process.

Adult Success through Accelerated Programs at Inver Hills Community College

Over the last several years, Inver Hills Community College (IHCC) witnessed a rise in enrollment among adult learners, including growing numbers of dislocated workers wishing to obtain new skills and credentials quickly to minimize their time away from the labor market. In response, IHCC developed Adult Success through Accelerated Programs (ASAP). ASAP has been designated as one of only 27 **Adult Learning Focused Institutions (ALFI)** in the country by the **Council for Adult Experiential Learning**.

ASAP offers accelerated 8-week courses and degree completion at an independent pace. Students can earn college credit by assessments of knowledge and skills gained through work and life experiences (known as **Credit for Prior Learning, or “competencies”**). All ASAP participants are required to take a comprehensive Education and Planning Assessment course in which they identify the life and work experiences that can translate into college credits. Students also take an Advanced Assessment course to further prepare for these competencies by developing narratives describing their background, knowledge, and skills in a particular subject matter. Through this process, all students develop comprehensive personal and professional goals and a four-year degree/transfer plan.

ASAP is part of an overarching “**Adult Learner Retention and Success**” focus at IHCC. Other elements of this initiative include an increased presence for adult students on the IHCC website, including a new “adult students” feature, with a prominent link to the ASAP program website, and a student blog featuring two adult students.

For more information, visit the ASAP Web page at: <http://depts.inverhills.edu/asap/>

The national Center on Law and Social Policy (CLASP) recommends several additional strategies that states and institutions can undertake to accelerate progress along educational pathways for adults (many of which are being explored by Minnesota in areas of the FastTRAC project outside of student support services): creating transitional or “bridge” programs into occupational training, promoting dual enrollment strategies that integrate basic skills learning with vocational training, strengthening transitions from developmental education into occupational coursework, and streamlining the transition of students from non-credit to credit-bearing

occupational programs. In addition, stakeholders can align adult education and ESL content with college-entry criteria and assessments to eliminate redundancies with developmental education.¹⁴

4. Flexible Course & Service Delivery Scheduling

Broadening access to non-traditional students requires programming flexibility. Courses cannot be beholden to the typical semester schedule, for example, but instead must be offered at times and locations convenient to working adults. This means offering plenty of weekend and evening courses and making high-demand courses available at a variety of campuses or off-campus sites. Further, courses can be offered in a flexible, modular format; that is, broken into a series of short (3 or 4-hour) modules (sections), each covering a particular topic. In this format, students could take one or two modules to brush up on certain skills, or enroll in an entire series of modules for more complete training.

Flexible scheduling of student services is also important for working adults, who often are unable to use campus resources that operate only during traditional business hours. Providing access to advising, tutoring, support groups and other services during extended night or weekend hours, or via the Internet, is helpful to keeping part-time adult students engaged. Further, these services must be available to students enrolled in non-credit training programs.

5. Online course delivery

Online course delivery (also called “distance learning”) is appealing because it removes many of the barriers – time, location, transportation, childcare – that can prevent working adults from pursuing postsecondary education. There is some research suggesting online learning can be an effective way of delivering education and skills training to low-income adults.

For example, outcomes for low-income workers were good under the **New Jersey Online Learning Pilot Project**. Through this \$500,000 project, funded by state New Jersey Department of Labor, over 100 low-income single working mothers received computers and Internet access to participate in online courses at home. This enabled the women to do coursework as their job and family obligations allowed, and many reported doing so while their children slept. Studies of the New Jersey pilot revealed that online learning was cost effective, as it eliminated many of the childcare and transportation costs associated with campus-based programs. Further, the program improved participants’ wages by 14 percent.¹⁵

On one hand, the growth of online learning “means that immense numbers of adult learners whose homes are beyond any commutable distance to a college or university...or those whose time available for study comes only in the middle of the night...present a breakthrough in access. On the other hand, uneven access to technologies due to income, race/ethnicity, disability, or other personal traits threatens the goal of universal access to higher education.”

Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, *Serving Adult Learners in Higher Education: Principles of Effectiveness*, 2000.

Online learning is not a panacea, despite its appeal as a relatively low-cost way to expand college access. For one thing, there are many prospective students, particularly those who are low-income, who do not have a computer or Internet access at home. Moreover, intrinsic to distance education are some of the very pitfalls to persistence and completion that learning communities and student success courses are designed to overcome, namely isolation from peers

and access to faculty and staff support. To combat this, many institutions have adopted a **hybrid approach to distance learning**, in which online courses or programs require some regular face-to-face interaction among students and faculty.

Under the New Jersey pilot project, for example, monthly face-to-face support groups – arranged around participants’ busy schedules – enabled the women to discuss their educational experiences and socialize. Participants reported that these groups were essential to their success in the program, not only providing a support network but motivating them to complete their coursework and do well.¹⁶ In essence, the meetings created a learning community for online students.

In November, 2008, Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty and the Minnesota University and College System announced **an initiative to increase the share of MnSCU credits earned through online course** to 25 percent of the total by 2015. In the 2007 academic year, online credits accounted for 9.2 percent of total credits earned at MnSCU.¹⁷ As part of the initiative, the Governor has asked the University of Minnesota and MnSCU to build their capacity to deliver online non-credit education and training to adult learners and businesses in the state. Few higher education institutions across the country currently provide non-credit courses online.

6. Work Study

Another strategy for supporting adult learners is utilizing federal and state work study programs to provide on- and off-campus jobs, preferably in a student’s area of study. Work study jobs enable students to combine work and school more easily, and can provide opportunities to integrate courses with hands-on occupational experience, exposing students to career options and local employer contacts.

In addition to the Federal Work Study (FWS) Program, students with financial need in the state may be eligible for the **Minnesota Work Study Program**. The Minnesota program supplements the FWS, and like its federal counterpart, provides participating students with subsidized employment on or off-campus (the state pays 75 percent of the student’s wages and the employer pays the other 25 percent). In 2007-2008, Minnesota Work Study Program awards totaled approximately \$12.4 million (the funding level has not changed in the last decade) serving nearly 11,000 students with an average state award of \$1,163. However, demand for work study awards exceeds supply. Higher education institutions estimated a \$19 million need for work study dollars in 2007-2008.¹⁸ Further, the state work study program does have rules that bar participation for some low-income adults:

- ✓ Students must be enrolled on a half-time basis in a degree, diploma or certificate program¹⁹
- ✓ When awarding Work Study to students, priority must be given to students enrolled for at least 12 credits or the equivalent

Other states have expanded access to work study opportunities for low-income students, for example through partnerships between college and university systems and the state Temporary Assistance to Needy Family (TANF) agencies:

Kentucky’s Ready to Work (RTW) initiative began in 1999 as a joint effort of the Kentucky Community and Technical College System and the state’s Cabinet for Health and Family Services to make additional work-study resources available to TANF students in the state’s community and technical colleges. Under the initiative, RTW Coordinators located on campuses throughout the state link participants to work-study opportunities, where they can earn up to \$2,500 per year (earnings that are not deducted from the student’s welfare check if they are also enrolled in the state’s TANF program). Coordinators also facilitate access to skills assessments, tutoring, mentoring and peer support groups; and help with career counseling, financial aid, job development, job placement, and job retention services. In addition, RTW participants may utilize critical support services offered under TANF, including childcare and transportation aid.

Retention rates and GPAs for RTW students are higher than the average Kentucky community college student: the overall semester-to-semester retention rate is more than 81 percent and the average GPA

among these students was 2.7 in 2006. Further, RTW produced increases in earnings and work retention rates better than any other TANF program in Kentucky.²⁰

Similarly, **Hawaii's Bridge to Hope** is a collaborative program between the state's Department of Human Services and the University of Hawaii System. The program provides funding for assistantship and internship positions for low-income adult students who are in the university system and are participating in Hawaii's TANF program. The program satisfies TANF work requirements and helps link students to work opportunities in their area of study. Hawaii appropriated \$300,000 out of its general revenues for the Bridge to Hope program for fiscal year 2004–05.

7. Childcare & Other Supplemental Supports

Affordable childcare is crucial to a working parent's ability to attend classes. According to the 1999–2000 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, fully 59 percent of low-income adult students had dependent children. States can help ensure that these students are not excluded from pursuing a postsecondary education because of childcare issues by subsidizing childcare costs.

Minnesota's Postsecondary Child Care Grant Program provides money to financially needy students to help cover childcare costs. In 2006-2007, the state allocated \$4.9 million to the program, which provided 2,832 students with childcare grants. The average award was \$1,796 for the school year, and the maximum grant was \$2,300. While the childcare grant program provides critical funding to many student parents in the state it, like the State Work Study Program, falls short of meeting the current need for assistance on many campuses across the state: postsecondary institutions estimated a total of \$6.7 million needed for the 2006-2007. Further, note that students must be enrolled half-time to be eligible for the grant.²¹

Access and Success at the College of St. Catherine

Colleges and universities find their own ways to support students who are parents. **The Access and Success Program at the College of St. Catherine**, for example, provides services specifically to student mothers: in addition to offering tutoring and mentoring, the program established lactation rooms as well as computer labs and study spaces on campus that are adjacent to children's play areas. Further, laptops can be borrowed so that mothers without their own computers can work on assignments at home.

The program also helps moms with personal issues, such as finding stable housing and childcare, and providing emergency loans to cover things like car repairs or sick childcare so students don't miss classes. The program facilitates weekly peer support groups for student mothers, too.

The goal of the program is to retain students year to year at the same rate as for the general student population. Retention rate for all St. Kate's students is 79 percent; for the student parents it's currently at 78 percent.

For more information, visit the Access and Success Website at <http://minerva.stkate.edu/offices/administrative/access.nsf>

Institutions can also support working parents by providing on-campus childcare programs – programs that are available in the evenings and weekends as well as during more traditional hours. It is important to note that for the many adult students who attend part-time and do not spend a great deal of time on campus, placing their child in an on-campus daycare center for an entire day may be costly and inconvenient. The availability of drop-off childcare for such students is important.

At the federal level, the **CCAMPIS (Child Care Access Means Parents in School)**

program provides funds to postsecondary institutions to support or establish campus-based childcare programs primarily serving the needs of low-income students (those who are Pell grant-eligible). The 2008 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act increases grant amounts under the program, while lowering the

threshold from \$350,000 to \$250,000 the total amount of Pell Grants awarded at the institution in order to qualify for the program. The CCAMPIS program is limited in its reach, however; only four institutions in Minnesota are funded under this program.

In addition to childcare assistance, things like subsidizing the costs of course books, activity fees, and transportation (with transit passes, free or reduced parking, and emergency car repair aid) can ease the financial burdens low-income adult students face. **Minnesota's Alliss Grant**, for example, is designed to help adult learners begin or return to college by covering the cost of tuition and required books for one postsecondary-level course. The grant is available to Minnesotans, regardless of income, who have been out of school (either high school or college) for at least seven years and do not possess a bachelor's degree. The selected course must be part of an A.A., A.S., or A.A.S degree program or a developmental-level course if it is required for the student to start a degree program. Inver Hills Community College, for example, encourages its ASAP students (see the box on page 6 for more on the ASAP program) to use Alliss Grants, either for their introductory academic and career planning course or a course where the required books are particularly expensive.

Funding Student Support Services

As the above examples demonstrate, services to ensure that low-income adult students succeed in postsecondary programs come in myriad forms and are financed by a variety of sources at the federal, state, institutional, and private levels. In general, however, there is far too little funding to adequately meet the needs of working adult students on most campuses (note that community colleges are nearly twice as likely as other types of institutions to designate funds for low-income adult programs²²). Advising and counseling services, for example, are so poorly funded that student-to-counselor ratios at the nation's community colleges stand at about 1,000 to 1.²³ While many funding streams have been mentioned already in this report, it's worth exploring this topic more.

Federal funding to provide low-income and underrepresented students with support services comes primarily through the aptly named **Student Support Services (SSS)** program, one of several **TRiO** programs financed through the federal Higher Education Act. The program's mission is to increase the retention and graduation rates of first generation college students, low-income students, and students with disabilities by offering academic and personal support. Two-thirds of the students served must be BOTH low-income and from families where neither parent went to college.

Students enrolled in SSS are eligible for:

- ▲ General counseling and guidance
- ▲ Help tracking their academic progress
- ▲ Career counseling and testing, individual and group tutoring, peer mentoring
- ▲ Assistance in completing financial aid and other important forms
- ▲ Free access to a number of social and cultural events scheduled and facilitated by SSS

Evidence indicates that TRIO SSS benefit students in the state: according to data collected by Minnesota TRIO, students in the program are more than twice as likely to remain in college as students from similar backgrounds who did not participate in the program. However, current funding levels mean that only about 10 percent of eligible students in the state are being served.²⁴

In August 2008, the federal Higher Education Opportunity Act was reauthorized. Among the provisions in the new law intended to increase college persistence and success among nontraditional students is an increase in the minimum grant amount for each TRIO program, including SSS, to \$200,000. In addition, “individualized counseling for personal, career, and academic matters provided by assigned counselors,” is added as a permissible activity to SSS.

The Higher Education bill also authorizes creating a **Student Success Grants** pilot to help at-risk students stay in college and complete courses, especially during their first year. In this pilot, every student who receives a Pell Grant would also receive a \$1,500 Student Success Grant to offset the costs to the college of providing services that help with persistence and completion. Such services include intensive advising and counseling, college and career success courses, work study jobs with private employers in the students’ field of study, learning communities, curricular redesign to support blended or accelerated remediation, tutoring, and childcare and transportation assistance. The program has yet to receive appropriations.

In addition to higher education-specific funding, federal dollars that serve low-income workers can be used to support adult student success. **Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)** dollars, for example, are used by Kentucky and Hawaii to extend work study opportunities and otherwise promote college success among low-income adults, as described on pages 6-7.

Taking a slightly different approach than Kentucky or Hawaii, **Maine’s Parents as Scholars (PaS)** program serves TANF-eligible participants, but is financed separately using state funds. Like TANF recipients, PaS participants are required to work, but they can count both school and study time toward work participation requirements. Students must be pursuing a degree full time, but the program provides childcare and transportation assistance to all participants. In addition, PaS covers much of the cost of books and supplies, clothing, and occupational expenses for tools/fees.

Upon entering postsecondary programs, PaS participants earned a median wage of \$8.00 per hour. After they graduated, PaS participants’ hourly wages increased to a median of \$11.71 per hour - an increase of nearly 50 percent.²⁵ A new project, funded by a grant from the Maine Department of Labor, will explore how technology – specifically access to distance education courses – might support the education experience of University of Maine students enrolled in PaS.

The federal **Food Stamp Employment Training (FSET)** program, created to help Food Stamp recipients gain skills, training, and experience needed to obtain jobs, is another potential source of funding for student support services. Under the program, states receive grants that are 100 percent federally funded as well as a 50 percent federal match on certain state expenditures: states may receive a 50 percent match on FSET administrative costs that exceed those covered by the 100 percent administrative grant (there is no cap on these reimbursements); a 50 percent match of federal funds to reimburse FSET participants for childcare costs associated with their education and training; and a 50 percent match for transportation and other expenses directly related to participation in education and training such as textbooks, tuition, lab fees, and necessary school supplies. Minnesota currently allocates only \$26,000 annually for the 50 percent match fund.

Washington State is looking to combine FSET dollars with community college funds to support a growing number of participants in vocational training. FSET-funded support services would include assessment; case management; job readiness training; basic skills/ESL training; vocational training; job search assistance and job placement; and supplemental supports like transportation, child care, housing, and clothing.²⁶

Finally, funds can be delivered through **financial aid programs** specifically to support persistence and retention. Among its recommendations for building “adult friendly” postsecondary programs, the national Workforce Strategy Center calls on states to extend their financial aid programs to include funds to colleges, based on the number of need-based aid recipients enrolled, expressly for support services like academic advising, tutoring, and peer counseling, as well as child care and transportation assistance.²⁷ There are a handful of states that do so:

The **Illinois Student Success Grant** was designed to support students who are at risk academically, economically disadvantaged, or disabled. Under the program, the Illinois Higher Education Board (IHEB) directs grant dollars to colleges for personal, academic, or career counseling; assessment and testing; mentoring; and completion programs. While not funded in recent years, IHEB has recommended \$4 million for Student Success Grants in Fiscal Year 2009. These funds would flow from the IHEB budget and be distributed to community colleges based the level of need among students.

Washington Opportunity Grants provide students with need-based awards to cover tuition and fees along with \$1,000 per year for educational supplies. In addition, public colleges receive \$1,500 per full-time equivalent enrollment in the Opportunity Grant program, which must be used to provide individualized student success services, including counseling and advising, mentoring and tutoring, as well as transportation and childcare on an emergency basis. The addition of student success funding in the Opportunities Grant program is significant since colleges typically do not have a dedicated funding stream for such services. Further, the state has begun piloting local partnerships with Workforce Development Councils to link Opportunity Grant students with business and labor mentors in their fields of study, who can help arrange ways for the students to engage in career exploration, job shadowing, and internships.

In 2007-2008 Washington awarded Opportunity Grant grants to 3,871 students. These students were retained from one semester to the next at higher rates than comparable students with traditional Pell grants and other low-income students not receiving Opportunity Grants. For example, financially independent Opportunity Grant students had a 71 percent retention rate compared to the largely unaided, older students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Independent students who received both a Pell Grant and an Opportunity Grant had an 86 percent retention rate.²⁸

Financial Aid

While financial aid dollars can be used by colleges and universities to deliver persistence and completion services to low-income students, the vast majority of financial aid goes directly to students to help cover college costs – support that is crucial to low-income students’ ability to enter and complete school. Research on low-income adult students reflects what we know about traditional-age students: tuition aid is positively related to persistence and degree completion.²⁹ Data from the Minnesota Office of Higher Education confirm that financial aid has a positive impact on persistence among part-time students who attend two-year institutions in the state: fully 57 percent of first-year undergraduates who received a Federal Pell Grant or Minnesota State Grant award in 2002-2003 returned for a second year of school, compared to 27 percent of those who did not receive an award.³⁰

A note on Federal Pell Grants

Higher-education officials are hopeful that as part of the economic stimulus package being considered by the federal government, Congress will increase Pell Grants for low-income students. House leaders have outlined a \$15.6 billion increase in Pell Grants as part of their proposal to help higher education.

The 2008 Higher Education Act authorized an increase in the maximum Pell Grant to \$5,800 from its current level of \$4,731. However, Congress has not appropriated the funds needed to increase the award to the new maximum. The current maximum Pell covers just 33% of the tuition, fees, and living expenses associated with attending a four-year, public institution, meaning thousands of low-income students have high levels of unmet need.

For more, see the November 2008 Center on Law and Social Policy report, *Recover, Renew, Rebuild: Workforce Policies for a Strong and Fair Economy* at <http://www.clasp.org/>

There are several strategies states can pursue to improve access to financial aid, thereby increasing the number of low-income adults obtaining postsecondary credentials. Critical to this population is that states offer financial aid that is need-based (as opposed to loans or merit-based aid) and available to students attending part time or less. In this regard, Minnesota does quite well, and in fact, the **Minnesota State Grant Program** is frequently cited as doing more than many state financial aid programs to support working adult students. The State Grant, for example, meets several criteria for “adult friendly” postsecondary programs, as identified by the Workforce Strategy Center:³¹

- ✓ Available to students attending less than half-time (as few as 3 credits)
- ✓ Available for courses offered throughout the calendar year, including the summer
- ✓ A supplement to, not a substitute for,

Pell Grant awards

- ✓ Funds remedial courses that are needed to complete a degree or certificate

Despite meeting these criteria, the Minnesota State Grant does have elements that can be detrimental to low-income working adult students:

1. The State Grant includes a Living and Miscellaneous Expense (LME) allowance intended to cover room and board, books and supplies, and miscellaneous expenses. The LME, which is set by the state legislature, is simply not large enough and, not having kept pace with inflation, does not reflect current market prices. Set at \$6,065 in 2007, the LME was substantially less than the average total living expenses for undergraduates nationwide (\$9,561) and is significantly less than living cost allotments used by colleges across the country, which ranged from \$10,022 to \$11,131.³² Further, the LME remains the same regardless of the number of children a student has. Some states increase living expense allocations in their financial aid awards to reflect the number of dependents students have.

2. Under the State Grant Program, part-time students are “docked” in LME calculations: the LME is pro-rated for students enrolled less than full-time. In other words, the amount of financial aid they receive to cover living expenses is reduced in proportion to their credit load. This reduction occurs despite the fact that a part-time student’s living expenses don’t change when they take fewer courses.

3. Minnesota limits State Grant eligibility to the equivalent of eight semesters (120 credits) of study. The limit applies to all prior college credits, regardless of where or when they were earned or whether they were supported by a State Grant. This can be especially detrimental to students who must take developmental classes before being admitted into college-level courses – classes that are financial aid eligible and count toward the total credit limit on aid, but do not count toward a certificate or degree.

Outreach is Critical

It is unclear what effect, if any, these rules have on limiting State Grant take-up among low-income working adults. What is clear, however, is that only a fraction of older, part-time students make use of the Minnesota State Grant. Data from the Minnesota Office of Higher Education for 2002-2003 show that part-time students and older students are much less likely to apply for aid than their full-time, younger counterparts: just 27 percent of part-time students at community and technical colleges applied for aid, compared to 65 percent of full-time students at these institutions; and 70 percent of students ages 23 and younger applied for aid, while only 41 percent of those who were 24 years old or older did so.³³

It is not surprising, then, that a much smaller share of part-time students receive financial assistance than do their full-time counterparts. In fall 2002, 43 percent of full-time community college students in Minnesota received awards, while only 19 percent of part-time students received aid awards. That's fewer than 2,800 of the new entering students who attended two-year institutions on a part-time basis in 2002-2003.³⁴

These figures correspond with national data: a 2002 survey that found that the likelihood of knowing about the availability of financial aid drops along with family income, with the lowest-income families least likely to know about available resources and how to access them. While about half of all undergraduates do not apply for financial aid, adults attending community colleges are the least likely to apply for aid. As a result, less than one third of adult students nationwide receive federal, state or institutional grant aid.³⁵

Moreover, these figures underscore that Minnesota needs to do a better job of getting information about financial aid to low-income populations, and of providing assistance navigating the complicated application process. Several states have devised extensive outreach campaigns. **Kentucky's Go Higher** media campaign, for instance, specifically targets adults, encouraging them to return to school and offering assistance applying for and obtaining financial aid. **California**, for its part, has spent about \$34 million a year since 2003-04 to expand local community college financial aid outreach and capacity. Another \$3 million annually has been dedicated to a statewide media campaign to promote the availability of financial aid. California reports an increase in financial aid uptake since the inception of the campaign. **North Carolina** is also addressing capacity issues; the general assembly appropriated \$3.6 million in 2006 to hire additional financial aid officers at each of the state's community colleges.³⁶

Emergency Financial Aid

A final strategy related to financial aid that can help low-income working adults with persistence and completion is for states and institutions to establish a pool of funds to be delivered to students confronted with a sudden financial crisis. Emergency financial aid is a one-time form of assistance intended to keep unforeseen monetary problems from forcing students to drop out of school (the box below describes one such successful program).

As the current economic crisis leaves millions of Americans struggling to make ends meet, access to emergency financial assistance may be the only way some students can cover educational costs and stay in school. The Chronicle of Higher Education recently reported that almost a quarter of private colleges and universities and 13 percent of public institutions expect second-semester retention for the 2008-2009 school year to be worse than last year's.³⁷

Some postsecondary institutions have responded with emergency financial assistance. After witnessing a 30 percent rise in requests for additional aid this fall, for instance, Syracuse University in New York launched a campaign to raise \$2 million for emergency grants to enable students to return for their spring semester. The **Syracuse Responds Initiative** has helped more than 350 students return to school. Similarly, **Spelman College** in Atlanta launched a fundraising drive that matched students with donors willing to cover unpaid balances. About 500 students (one quarter of the student population) had not fully paid their bills by the end of the first semester. Seniors needing emergency financial assistance to graduate have been given priority; to date, it appears the infusion of aid dollars will enable them all to graduate.³⁸

Dreamkeepers Emergency Financial Assistance

The Dreamkeepers Emergency Financial Assistance Program was established in 2004 as a way to ensure that students aren't forced out of school due to a financial emergency. Begun as a Lumina Foundation-funded pilot program at 11 community colleges, Dreamkeepers was expanded in 2008, with a grant from the Wal-Mart Foundation, to include 7 more schools. Participating colleges are now required to raise some of their own funds.

- ✓ Between 2004 and 2008, 2,347 students received \$1,007,033 in assistance through the program, with an average grant of \$567.
- ✓ The colleges implementing the program have seen retention rates rise, from an average of 51% to 72%.
- ✓ Most aid recipients requested funds for housing, followed by transportation, tuition and books. Recipients tended to be older, have children, and be enrolled in vocational field of study.
- ✓ Recipients may also benefit by becoming better connected to on- and off-campus support services. Program administrators often linked students to services like assistance applying for financial aid, financial literacy or time-management courses, and/or information about TANF, homeless shelters, childcare or food pantries.

For more information on the Dreamkeepers program, visit:
<http://www.mdrc.org/publications/479/full.pdf>

Rethinking Measures of Success

A final strategy worth considering is reframing traditional ways policymakers view postsecondary student success, thereby liberating institutions to focus on retention and completion outcomes rather than just enrollment or (often unrealistic) graduation timelines.

Federally defined graduation rates, for instance, are measured by the number of first-time, full-time enrollees who earn degrees within six years at four-year institutions or three years at two-year community and technical colleges. With their open admissions policies, community colleges are educating many students who lack the resources or academic preparation to progress speedily to graduation. As we know, a majority of community college students attend part time, with lulls in enrollment due to personal circumstances. Others take courses to improve certain skills to get a better job, with no intention of obtaining a degree. Not surprisingly, graduation rates at many of these institutions are lower than they are at institutions that admit students who are academically well prepared and financially able to pursue a degree uninterrupted.

Washington has undertaken a statewide initiative to measure and reward improvements in student achievement within its community and technical college system. **Washington's Student Achievement Initiative** is a program that rewards colleges based on gains in benchmarks such as improving basic skills; building to a year of college credit; completing college-level math; and completing certificates, degrees, and apprenticeship training. The initiative is unusual for the emphasis it places on helping students reach early milestones in college – milestones that state data analyses demonstrate are helpful in predicting whether students will ultimately complete a credential.³⁹

¹ U.S. Department of Education, The National Center for Education Statistics, *Descriptive Summary of 2003–04 Beginning Postsecondary Students: Three Years Later*, 2008.

² Ibid.

³ National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, *Measuring Up 2008: The State Report Card on Higher Education*, 2008.

⁴ R. Purnell and S. Blank. *Supporting success: Services that may help low-income students succeed in community college*. New York: MDRC, 2004.

⁵ Tom Bailey and Mariana Alfonso. *Pathways to Persistence: An Analysis of Research on Program Effectiveness at Community Colleges*, Community College Research Center and the Lumina Foundation for Education, New Agenda Series, Volume 6, Number 1, January 2005. Bailey and Alfonso report that undergraduate enrollments in the US are concentrated heavily in large introductory courses in English, math, psychology, sociology, economics, accounting, biology, and chemistry. In fact, just 25 courses generate about half of all student enrollments in community colleges and about a third of enrollments in four-year institutions.

⁶ Tom Bailey and Mariana Alfonso. *Pathways to Persistence: An Analysis of Research on Program Effectiveness at Community Colleges*, Community College Research Center and the Lumina Foundation for Education, New Agenda Series, Volume 6, Number 1, January 2005.

⁷ Lauren O'Gara, Melinda Mechur Karp & Katherine L. Hughes. *Student Success Courses in the Community College: An Exploratory Study of Student Perspectives*, New York: Community College Research Center, Brief #39, September 2008.

⁸ Matthew Zeidenberg, Davis Jenkins, and Juan Carlos Calcagno. *Do Student Success Courses Actually Help Community College Students Succeed?* New York: Community College Research Center, Brief #36, June 2007.

⁹ Lauren O'Gara, Melinda Mechur Karp & Katherine L. Hughes. *Student Success Courses in the Community College: An Exploratory Study of Student Perspectives*, New York: Community College Research Center, Brief #39, September 2008.

¹⁰ Melinda Mechur Karp, Lauren O'Gara Katherine L. Hughes. *Do Support Services at Community Colleges Encourage Success or Reproduce Disadvantage? An Exploratory Study of Students in Two Community Colleges*, New York: Community College Research Center, Working Paper No. 10, January 2008.

¹¹ Cathy McHugh Engstrom and Vincent Tinto, Syracuse University. "Learning Better Together: The Impact of Learning Communities on the Persistence of Low-Income Students," in *Opportunity Matters: A Journal of Research Informing Educational Opportunity Practice & Programs*.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Raymond J. Wlodkowski, Jennifer E. Mauldin and Sandra W. Gahn. *Learning in the Fast Lane: Adult Learners' Persistence and Success in Accelerated College Programs*, The Center for the Study of Accelerated Learning, Regis University, published as part of the Lumina Foundation for Education's New Agenda Series, Vol. 4, Number 1, August 2001.

¹⁴ Amy-Ellen Duke and Julie Strawn. *Overcoming Obstacles, Optimizing Opportunities: State Policies to Increase Postsecondary Attainment for Low-Skilled Adults*, Center on Law and Social Policy, March 2008.

¹⁵ Dr. Mary Gatta, *Findings From the Field: Early Findings of the New Jersey Online Learning Project for Single Working-Poor Mothers*, Rutgers University Center for Women and Work, December 2003.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Jenna Ross. "A new frontier of online learning in Minnesota: State-run colleges hope to be 25 percent online by 2015," *Star Tribune*, January 2, 2009.

¹⁸ Minnesota Office of Higher Education, Work Study Appropriations and Average Awards, 1990-91 to 2007-08.

¹⁹ Students may be employed in State Work Study positions during one period of non-enrollment or less than half-time enrollment per aid year if they sign a statement of intent to enroll as at least a half-time student the next academic term or provide proof of registration for the next academic term.

²⁰ Kentucky Community College and Technical System, at <http://www.kctcs.net/readytowork/>

²¹ Post Secondary Child Care Grant Program Data, Minnesota Office of Higher Education, 2008.

²² Bryan Cook and Jacqueline E. King. *Improving Lives Through Higher Education: Campus Programs and Policies for Low-Income Adults*, American Council on Education, Center for Policy Analysis, May 2005.

²³ Amy-Ellen Duke and Julie Strawn. *Overcoming Obstacles, Optimizing Opportunities: State Policies to Increase Postsecondary Attainment for Low-Skilled Adults*, Center on Law and Social Policy, March 2008.

²⁴ Minnesota TRiO at <http://www.mntrio.org/index.php/about-us/what-is-trio>

²⁵ Information on the Parents as Scholars Program is available on the State of Main's Website at <http://www.state.me.us/dhs/bfi/tanf/PAS.htm>.

²⁶ In order to draw down these funds, states must include a description of these activities and a proposed budget in a FSET plan, and must have the plan approved by the Food and Nutrition Service, USDA. For more information on FSET, see <http://www.workforcealliance.org/atf/cf/%7B93353952-1DF1-473A-B105-7713F4529EBB%7D/FSET-brief-general%20Jabinow06.pdf>

²⁷ Christopher Mazzeo, Brandon Roberts, Christopher Spence and Julie Strawn, *Working Together: Aligning State Systems and Policies for Individual and Regional Prosperity*, Workforce Strategy Center, December 2006.

²⁸ Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges *Opportunity Grants: A Progress Report on the Postsecondary Opportunity Program*, Research Report No. 08-4, October 2008.

²⁹ Raymond J. Wlodkowski, Jennifer E. Mauldin and Sandra W. Gahn. *Learning in the Fast Lane: Adult Learners' Persistence and Success in Accelerated College Programs*, The Center for the Study of Accelerated Learning, Regis University, published as part of the Lumina Foundation for Education's New Agenda Series, Vol. 4, Number 1, August 2001.

³⁰ The persistence rate for students who attended two-year institutions on a full-time basis and who received an award is about the same as the rate for those that did not receive an award, suggesting that financial aid has bigger impact on those students who are more likely to be juggling school with work and family obligations. OHE

³¹ Christopher Mazzeo, Brandon Roberts, Christopher Spence and Julie Strawn, *Working Together: Aligning State Systems and Policies for Individual and Regional Prosperity*, Workforce Strategy Center, December 2006. The Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) has identified similar financial aid programming elements that support adult learners. Information on MDRC provided by the Minnesota Department of Higher Education, 2009.

³² Minnesota Office of Higher Education, *Minnesota State Grant Review 2008*, October 2008.

³³ Minnesota Office of Higher Education, *Persistence of Minnesota Undergraduates*, January 2008.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Christopher Mazzeo, Brandon Roberts, Christopher Spence and Julie Strawn, *Working Together: Aligning State Systems and Policies for Individual and Regional Prosperity*. Workforce Strategy Center, December, 2006.

³⁶ To see examples of marketing tools from these and other states, visit the College Access Marketing Web site at <http://www.collegeaccessmarketing.org/gallery/targetaudience.asp?Targetgroup=6>. See, also, *Money on the Table: State Initiatives to Improve Financial Aid Participation*, an **Achieving the Dream Policy Brief** by Heath Prince, October 2006.

³⁷ Stacy Teicher Khadaroo. "Colleges scramble to help cash-strapped students: Many students need extra aid to pay spring-semester tuition," *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 21, 2009.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ For more information, see the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges Website at http://www.sbctc.ctc.edu/college/e_studentachievement.aspx