



An Affiliate of the National Working Families Success Network

## **Background on the Working Students Success Network**

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### **The Challenge**

Today's community college students often face severe economic instability, including housing and food insecurity. They need more than academic support to help them stay in school and earn the degrees and certificates needed to help them enter careers with family-sustaining wages. This is particularly true for low-income, first-generation and minority students many of whom are working adults with dependents. Community colleges serve the greatest percentage of these students.

Over the past decade, many community colleges have sought new strategies in their effort to ensure students with the greatest needs succeed. Some have recognized the breadth and intensity of their students' needs and have responded by changing traditional ways of offering services to ensure that their students stay in school and attain their postsecondary goals. Instead of seeking solutions to single problems, these colleges are looking at student needs—both academic and nonacademic—comprehensively and making deep substantive changes in how they work and what they do to address them.

### **One Strategy: The Working Students Success Network**

A new evaluation reveals what a groundbreaking group of colleges in four states are doing to put students on stable financial ground to help them succeed in college—and beyond.

The study examines approaches undertaken by 19 community colleges in four states—Arkansas, California, Washington, and Virginia (see attached list)—that participated in the Working Students Success Network (WSSN). Led by the community college reform organization Achieving the Dream (ATD), the effort aims to give low-income students the best possible chance to succeed in college. WSSN provides a cohesive suite of services that help students address academic and nonacademic barriers to student success. The newly released study examines how participating colleges have changed their approach to ensure that all students have what they need to persist and complete their studies. The evaluation reviews how the services are being delivered and provides lessons for colleges about how institutions that have made new practices part of their everyday work are addressing nonacademic barriers to student success.

WSSN is a \$12.5 million effort funded by the Annie E. Casey, Lumina, W.K. Kellogg, Kresge, and MetLife Foundations. It was built on several prominent national efforts to assist low-income families to secure better employment, strengthen their financial circumstances, and generate economic self-sufficiency.

To help build the evidence base and inform the broader field about the initiative, the WSSN hired DVP-PRAXIS LTD to conduct an implementation study focused on (1) documenting the services colleges designed and delivered to students to help address basic needs and improve financial stability, including the integration or bundling of these services, and (2) assessing implementation progress – from the exploration and design stage, to early and mature implementation, and eventually to institutionalization and sustainability.

## **Key Findings**

The study focused on the implementation of the program. It indicates that WSSN can serve as a catalyst for institutions to re-imagine how to organize and deliver services in a student-centered way, meeting their students where they are and creating an institutional culture in which the whole campus contributes.

Participating colleges in the WSSN network are combining educational, career, and financial management strategies and supports for students. The DVP-PRAXIS study reports that these services were designed to help students:

- strengthen academic and job skills and opportunities leading to careers that pay a living wage;
- gain access to income supports by tapping into available public benefits and other resources that address basic needs and financial insecurities, and
- receive information, coaching, and training to make informed financial decisions around budgeting, financial aid, and debt and money management, as well as to learn about banking services, such as checking and savings accounts, and credit cards.

In the initial three years, participating institutions have made particular strides in:

- Expanding services in areas where they had previously offered limited support, including income and work supports, financial literacy, and asset building.
- Targeting more intensive and customized support to the students with the greatest need, including adults in basic education programs, students on public assistance, those in workforce education or training programs, and those seeking GEDs to transition into college.
- Engaging outside partners—community-based organizations, businesses, and public human services agencies.
- Integrating multiple services to meet students’ basic needs and improve their financial security, including public benefits information, financial literacy, and career and employment services.

To reach the broadest number of students, services that don’t require significant “high touch” personal interaction and follow up are typically provided as part of required student success courses and orientations. But colleges also conducted individual needs assessments to match supports to individual student needs. Typically, a coach, advisor, or counselor worked with students individually and intensively to help address particular needs.

## Promising Practices

The DVP-Praxis study identified key strategies undertaken by WSSN colleges, including two promising approaches for colleges that want to provide comprehensive and integrated services to students that address a broad spectrum of students' basic needs and can improve their financial stability:

- **One-on-one, personalized assistance (e.g., coaching)** that addresses multiple areas and issues related to students' basic needs and financial stability. High-touch, personalized coaching and the personal relationships between coaches and students were widely seen by faculty, staff, and administrators as a “game changer” for addressing the complex circumstances facing students. This was especially important for students who had little or no prior experience or familiarity with postsecondary education.
- **A centralized location where students' basic needs and financial insecurities can be addressed.** A centralized one-stop shop or “hub” to provide services in a centralized location helps colleges integrate and bundle services for students. Typically the services are provided by college staff and partners and create a highly visible symbol of how the college is daily addressing the struggles faced by low-income students.

The study, which summarizes findings across three waves of data collection conducted from October 2015 to June 2017, including telephone interviews with 19 colleges and site visits to a subset of 8 colleges, also identified exemplar institutions, common challenges, and strategies that have helped institutions engage in the cultural change required to provide comprehensive supports in new ways.

## Integrating WSSN into the Daily Work of the Institution

The study found that five of the eight community colleges—Big Bend, Clark, and Highline in Washington, North Arkansas, and Patrick Henry in Virginia—that were visited by researchers delivered integrated student services and fostered culture change around equity and the de-stigmatization of poverty. These institutions have already made WSSN services and strategies part of their daily work moving forward. These colleges point the way to how colleges can create combined services as a “system of supports” rather than as a series of single, one-time services, and how to integrate the services into existing institutional functions and activities. The report notes that their efforts have been strengthened because they systematically evaluate what they are doing and are using data gathered to continually improve services and outreach. (*See attached snapshots of what these institutions have done.*)

## Facilitating Factors

The report identified key factors that enabled institutions to implement the WSSN initiative with rigor and embed it in their daily work. The mature institutions:

- **Demonstrated committed leadership** and shared responsibilities across the institution;
- **Broke down silos** between student service programs and key departments of the university;
- **Developed widespread “buy-in”** to an integrated model of service delivery and deeper understanding of the conditions of poverty that affect their students. They extended the buy-

in by elevating key services like food banks as symbolic reminders of the institution's commitment to its students financial stability; and

- **Broadened engagement** with and collaboration of external partners.

### **Key Challenges**

In addition, the report identified three key challenges that can affect the sustainability of the effort:

- **Limited resources and capacity to make system-level changes** to college policies, practices, and procedures that address students' basic needs and financial stability;
- **Ensuring better connections** between those charged with implementation of WSSN services such as student services and workforce development and those with authority over academic and curricular decisions; and,
- **The need for ongoing and sustained engagement of faculty** to generate cultural responsiveness to student poverty, and thereby build support and buy-in for support services that address the wide array of issues their students face.

### **A Laboratory for Colleges**

WSSN has served as a laboratory to explore how best to deliver deeper services, determine which services work best in what combination, connect students to additional resources offered by the college and by community partners, and target support to large numbers of students who need them most. In the future, research will explore if and to what extent WSSN has an impact on student persistence and graduation.

The types of supports introduced by WSSN institutions are crucial if the nation is going to meet its future workforce needs. To retain and graduate a greater percentage of students who enroll, community colleges must work with students who have the greatest challenges to overcome as they pursue a college credential.

This year, Achieving the Dream will share information about what it has learned to spread promising and emerging practices across its network and across the nation. This report can provide a starting point for other institutions to begin moving in directions that will ultimately provide support to the students who need it the most.