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Successful Practices that Address the Underutilization of Financial Aid in Community Colleges

The Financial Aid Challenge

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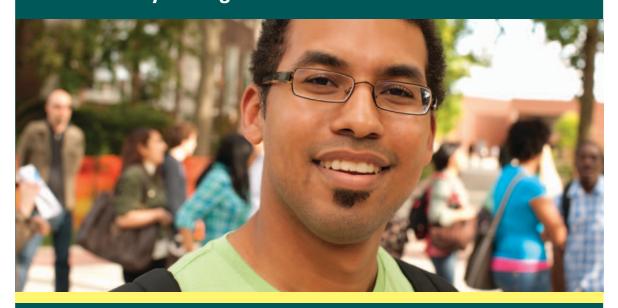## The College Board Advocacy & Policy Center

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The Financial Aid Challenge: Successful Practices that Address the Underutilization of Financial Aid in Community Colleges

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Too often, low- and moderate-income students attending community colleges do not apply for financial aid. In the 2007-08 academic year, 58 percent of Pell-eligible students who attended community colleges either full time or part time applied for federal financial aid, compared with 77 percent of Pell-eligible students at four-year public institutions.[1] Although community college students are most likely to be eligible for need-based federal aid, they are less likely than their peers at other types of institutions to file the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

This report will serve as a guide for leaders and administrators at community colleges who are interested in increasing the number of students applying for and receiving financial aid. Included are examples of successful programs, policies and approaches, and valuable recommendations on financial aid administration that are specific to the community college student population.

This report recommends that in the short term, community college leaders review and reevaluate their policies and procedures surrounding financial aid administration and ask whether the following steps are being taken on their campuses:

- Provide bilingual services and materials

- Offer evening and weekend office hours

- Apply multiple approaches to convey financial aid information to all students

- Use multilanguage media, online resources and local opinion leaders to drive awareness

- Link financial aid application and follow-up with college enrollment or registration

- Incorporate evaluation metrics and data collection into office practices

- Coordinate activities and meet with local high school counselors to provide grade-specific information to students

- Involve the families of students when providing financial aid materials and activities

- Conduct workshops or information sessions for students interested in college and communicate financial aid opportunities in a manner that is culturally and linguistically appropriate

- Integrate financial aid counseling with other outreach efforts

- Build a list of community organizations that already help students with the application process

- Partner with other education institutions or community organizations to offer financial aid counseling to all students

- Support state or regional efforts to improve application rates

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1. Mark Kantrowitz, "FAFSA Completion Rates by Level and Control of Institution" (October 14, 2009). http://www.finaid.org/educators/20091014fafsacompletion.pdf. Last accessed January 28, 2010.

In the long term, community colleges must actively promote and financially support student access programs. Community college leaders can establish a continuing commitment by the following actions:

- Make a public commitment to student access, directing funds and staff to financial aid administration and access programs at the institution
- Survey potential students to learn where students get information about the community college and what they know about financial aid prior to enrolling
- Participate in transition programs with area high schools
- Set up mentoring opportunities for high school students
- Consider consolidating resources with area community colleges or across the state to establish a common system for financial aid administration
- Work with state governmental agencies to coordinate priorities and policies for financial aid administration on a statewide basis

All of these recommendations will not apply to every college. Community college leaders need to identify the reasons why their students are underutilizing financial aid opportunities and then devise a plan to lead them successfully through the financial aid process. Ultimately, each community college must evaluate its own situation and determine the best and most appropriate approach for ensuring student access to financial aid.

I. Introduction

Too many community college students who may be eligible for financial aid do not apply for it. The question of why this happens more frequently in community colleges than in other types of colleges goes to the unique role of community colleges in higher education. As open-access institutions, community colleges enroll a diverse student body. Students vary in age, sophistication, family background and income. Low community college tuition may convince students that they can afford college without financial help. With less revenue per student than other types of colleges, community colleges do not always have enough staff to provide the support and help needed by their diverse student body to solve the multiple life issues and problems students may encounter. Given these challenges, what can a community college do to increase the number of financial aid applicants? This report provides some examples of successful approaches to this problem that can be used as a guide by other community colleges.

During the two-year period from fall 2007 to fall 2009, full-time enrollment at U.S. community colleges increased by 24.1 percent.[1] Community colleges attract students because of the combination of the low cost of attendance, geographic convenience and willingness to enroll anyone with the potential to benefit from postsecondary education. These colleges provide educational options that lead directly to employment or further education. The value of community colleges is most apparent in times of high unemployment, when those who have lost their income enter college with the hope of a better future. This growth in enrollment is not always accompanied by increased financial support from state and local sources. Community colleges are being asked to do more with less. These trends lend even more urgency to finding ways to help students receive the financial assistance that is rightfully theirs.

Research indicates that low- and moderate-income students who are attending community colleges and would be eligible for need-based federal financial aid **are the least likely** to file the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, when compared to their peers at other types of institutions. In the 2007-08 academic year, 57.8 percent of Pell-eligible students who attended community colleges either full time or part time applied for federal financial aid, compared with 76.8 percent of Pell-eligible students at four-year public institutions.[2]

The FAFSA determines students' ability to pay for their education, and thus their eligibility for federal, state and institutional grants, loans and work opportunities. The FAFSA provides a standardized and documented report of students' and their family's income and assets, regardless of circumstances. For many students, the estimate of how much they are expected to pay toward their college costs will influence the price of the college they will consider, and their expectations of how much aid they might receive.[3]

The consequences of not filing a FAFSA, and therefore not receiving assistance, may be that a student attends part time to save money, or works more than 20 hours a week while attending full time; both of these actions reduce the chance of successfully completing a degree. Student aid is an obvious and important part of the effort to help students succeed. As community colleges struggle to improve positive outcomes for students, it is vital to make sure that every eligible student receives his or her fair share of financial aid. This report is limited to what colleges can do now, with the realization that state and federal efforts can also contribute to the solution. The goal here is to identify successful practices that increase FAFSA filing rates and to help more community college students receive financial aid.[4]

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1. "Community College Enrollment Surge: An Analysis of Estimated Fall 2009 Headcount Enrollments at Community Colleges" (AACC Policy Brief 2009-01PBL: December 2009).

2. Mark Kantrowitz, "FAFSA Completion Rates by Level and Control of Institution" (Oct. 14, 2009). http://www.finaid.org/educators/20091014fafsacompletion.pdf. Last accessed January 28, 2010.

3. "Breaking through the Barriers to College" (USC Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis, October 2006).

4. A review of the report's methodology is included in the appendix.

II. Challenges Related to FAFSA Filing

Several studies have examined the reasons behind the lack of FAFSA filing and the resulting underutilization of financial aid by community college students.[5] These studies have noted the following challenges students may encounter in applying for aid:

- Community college students may lack a basic understanding of financial planning for a college education.

- Students do not receive consistent, early and accurate information about what it means to go to college, in addition to information about financial aid prior to enrolling in college.

- Even when provided with information about financial aid options, some students may not follow through because they are reluctant to borrow and take on debt.

- Some groups of community college students may distrust or misunderstand government agencies that ask for personal financial information as a prerequisite for providing aid.

- Students attending evening and online classes find it difficult to access on-campus college services.

- For many community colleges, public funding is scarce, and the financial aid needs of students may not receive adequate priority or attention.

- Financial aid offices lack sufficient human and technology resources to provide students with information and one-on-one assistance.

Community colleges do a disservice to their students if they do not make every effort to ensure that all students who have financial need take advantage of available aid. Every community college should review its institutional FAFSA filing rates, which are readily available from the U.S. Department of Education data center, assess current efforts to reach potentially eligible students, identify steps that could be taken to improve the filing rates, and devise a plan to increase the number of students applying for and qualifying for federal financial aid.

5. "Apply to Succeed: Ensuring Community College Students Benefit from Need-Based Financial Aid," A report from the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance: (September 2008); S. Goldrick-Rab, "Promoting Academic Momentum at Community Colleges: Challenges and Opportunities," CCRC Working Paper No. 5. (Community College Research Center: February 2007); "Student Aversion to Borrowing: Who Borrows and Who Doesn't," A report by the Institute for Higher Education Policy and *Excelencia* in Education (December 2008); J. King, "Missed Opportunities Revisited: New Information on Students Who Do Not Apply for Financial Aid" (American Council on Education Issue Brief, February 2006).

III. Improving Financial Aid Administration

Many community college students who do not apply for aid have self-selected themselves out of receiving assistance, assuming that they are ineligible for grant assistance. Given the number of websites and published guides that are available, it is probably not worth suggesting that more and better information is needed. The colleges with high FAFSA filing rates reach out to students personally, make filing the FAFSA part of the enrollment process and do not wait for students to make the first contact.

A. Financial Aid Offices

The typical community college financial aid office faces a number of challenges — limited space and resources, staff turnover, communicating effectively with a diverse and dispersed student population, keeping technology up to date, and making sure the college is compliant with ever-changing regulations. The financial aid office is required to maintain data exchanges and records with multiple internal and external organizations, so accounting and reporting consume a significant amount of staff time. With so many compliance-related requirements, it is easy to shortchange the outreach and counseling activities necessary to ensure that all potentially eligible students apply for and receive aid.

> The personal one-on-one connection made between the financial aid staff member and the student is invaluable in initiating the process for filing the application.

The personal one-on-one connection made between the financial aid staff member and the student is invaluable in initiating the process for filing the application. Because many community college students may be unfamiliar with the process or be apprehensive about dealing with financial and governmental institutions, such proactive communication is essential. At a minimum, community college financial aid offices should be prepared to reach out to provide accurate and timely information about financial aid and help students understand the true costs and financial benefits of a college education. The core of this work includes providing detailed information about college expenses, the sources of aid and applicable rules and requirements, and support throughout the application process, a process that is not always straightforward and simple.

Additionally, college financial aid offices should be on the lookout for students who file the FAFSA and have it sent to the college, but never follow up with the documentation required to receive the assistance. Improvements in technology make it possible to regularly identify and reach out to those students who are enrolled and have filed the FAFSA, but have incomplete files. Outreach to and follow-up with students can be time intensive, and many of these understaffed offices find it difficult to take on additional work.

In order for community college financial aid services to move beyond basic functions, college leaders will need to provide more institutional resources to financial aid offices and include financial aid information in external and comprehensive outreach programs.[6] Ensuring that more students receive aid will require adequate support for the financial aid office. This extra support should be linked to evidence using accountability measures and transparent outcomes assessments. Financial aid offices can be run with a student focus, and can efficiently and effectively handle the needs of all students. Measures that can be employed include assessing the number and type of questions typically asked by students contacting or visiting the office, and then improving the communication tools, such as websites, that

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6. "Early and Often: Designing a Comprehensive System of Financial Aid Information," A report of the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (April 2008).

can be used to answer those questions routinely. Another measure would track aid applicants, with the goal of increasing the number of FAFSA filers who complete their applications and receive an award. Keeping track of the data will help motivate the financial aid office to creatively and effectively increase its outreach efforts.

To quote one financial aid director, "creating a 'client services' environment that is responsive to students, reinforced with an adequate use of technology and production-based processing, is essential. If structural barriers exist, campus leaders need to set high expectations for service and back them up with adequate resources."

Although this is beyond the control of individual schools, improvements need to be made to the FAFSA application itself. Many students find the current application long and complicated, and this may discourage them from applying for financial aid. Recent progress by the U.S. Department of Education to reduce the complexity of the FAFSA on the Web and the renewal FAFSA, and to provide a link to IRS data, is encouraging. Most experts agree that a simpler form will help.[7] Eliminating screens and streamlining and simplifying the form may get more students to file, and may enable schools to provide the needed help. Simplifying the form also helps the financial aid offices by allowing their efforts to be directed to more outreach and access initiatives for those community college students in need of assistance.

B. Institutional Outreach and Community Partnerships

Outreach entails different approaches for the diverse mix of traditional and nontraditional students as they enter community college. Evidence suggests that adult students have a more difficult time connecting with these services. They are unfamiliar with the institution's offices and services, which may not offer nighttime and weekend hours. Many part-time adult students have work and family obligations that keep them off campus and away from the institution more often than full-time students. At a minimum, the college should provide full-service financial aid help to students who attend after working hours.

The more complicated issue is determining which outreach efforts will reach adult students. The college may have market information about the process that adult students follow when deciding to enroll in the community college. This survey would include questions about where they obtained information about the community college and what knowledge they had about student aid before enrolling. Knowing where prospective students access information can help the college design initiatives that will assist adult students with the financial aid application process before they enroll.

The college may know which community organizations refer students to the college and could use this list to build a stronger referral process that includes early help with the student aid application. Partnerships between colleges and community organizations provide a low-cost and mutually beneficial process by which they can help adult students understand the opportunities offered by the college, along with knowledge about options for receiving financial aid. Employees and volunteers in these organizations can be taught financial aid basics so that they can help potential students file the FAFSA and estimate a likely student aid package under different enrollment options.

Government agencies could also be included in this partnership list. Welfare recipients or unemployed and displaced workers, for example, often apply for benefits through public agencies. Much of the information applicants provide to determine eligibility for these programs would also help determine their eligibility for student aid. The investment of time to develop these relationships will pay off in increased enrollment and financial aid applications. Community organizations with ties to local workforce development initiatives, rehabilitation programs, employment divisions and other local social services

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7. Free Application for Federal Student Aid (U.S. Department of Education). www.fafsa.ed.gov. Last accessed February 1, 2010.

can provide effective help in reaching adults. These groups already serve the population of potential community college students and can provide a transition from the students' familiar environment to the unfamiliar world of the college. Students can learn about applying for financial aid in a comfortable setting and make connections with the resources available from other community services.

C. High School and College Collaboration

Collaboration between community colleges and local high schools can help reach undecided traditional-age students. One of the problems community colleges face is a last-minute surge of applicants at the beginning of each semester. This overburdens the financial aid office and reduces the amount of time available to reach out to new students and lead them through the financial aid process. Helping students consider the option of attending the community college earlier can help alleviate this last-minute rush. This coordination can include assistance with academic, organizational and cultural transitions for students. Examples of collaboration include data-sharing agreements, developing comparable exit and entrance academic standards, dual enrollment, shared counseling staffs, and summer bridge programs. Having a structured pathway for the student makes the college-going process more manageable. Students are more likely to do what needs to be done, such as applying for financial aid, if they understand how this step fits into the larger process. Helping students think about their college options beginning in early high school, finding effective ways to match their skills and interests with continuing education options, and making sure they understand what financial aid they might receive will help them consider all options and make the right educational decision earlier.

High school counselors also are overburdened and limited in providing time for what they perceive as a highly personal, confidential, detailed and complicated financial aid application process. They will need help from community college faculty advisers or financial aid officers. The further along the student is in high school, the more specific the information will need to be. During students' senior years, they may take a shared curriculum at the community college, participate in transition programs, meet with community college advisers, or get a current community college student as a mentor. All of these efforts take commitment and time to do well.

IV. State-Level Initiatives

When looking to improve financial aid administration, change must begin at the top. The community college programs that have been effective in increasing the percentages of students applying for financial aid have a common factor — the presence of statewide coordination. These community colleges have found support and leadership in the state's executive offices or state higher education commissions or councils, depending on the structure of their higher education system. This incentive originates from either the state agencies or the governor's office and identifies a state-level commitment to higher education access.

A. State-Level Coordination

In many instances, the state higher education agency or governor makes a conscious effort to increase student access to financial aid by designating an outreach division within the state education agency, setting up a P–16 education council, or implementing a state working group with representatives from the business, P–12, postsecondary education, government and community sectors to provide coordination and guidance.[8] These state-level organizations are able to set statewide priorities, determine capacity, combine and reallocate resources to needier programs, and coordinate existing programs to avoid duplication.

For example, recognizing that Nevada consistently ranks near the bottom in college access and attainment, the governor gave the Nevada P–16 Advisory Council executive oversight of the state's activities to raise college awareness and participation. The state's P–16 advisory council is charged with strengthening coordination between elementary, secondary and higher education systems to ensure that students have the necessary information and resources to make the transition to college. Council members represent all educational stakeholders, including K–12 and higher education; other members are business representatives and appointees from the governor's office, the Nevada Assembly and the Nevada Senate. They are expected to use their business and area connections to advance college access goals and encourage collaboration and cooperation across the state and its educational sectors.

When looking to improve financial aid administration, change must begin at the top.

Another example is the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education (ACPE). It recently established an outreach division within its agency to address early awareness and intervention activities for Alaskan youth. In order to accomplish this goal, the outreach division created the College Access Advisory Team to identify leaks in Alaska's college pipeline and formulate a strategy for establishing a college-going culture within the state. One of its goals is to increase the rate of enrollment in postsecondary education by emphasizing financial aid filing for underserved populations.

The team serves as a planning, implementation and oversight committee for issues relating to college access within the state. It consists of 15 key stakeholders, including state and national partners, who meet every two weeks to guide and refine priorities. Though this initiative is relatively new, it is already making an impact across the state. Since 2007, the ACPE has established a statewide peer mentoring system, created a comprehensive database to track college participation and completion, and assisted in developing capacity and sustainability for college access programs across the state. The commission is currently evaluating the programs' activities to determine their effectiveness.

8. "Western Policy Exchanges" (Boulder, CO: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, October 2009).

These types of state-level organizations serve as a statewide education network, supplying colleges with information on what other state colleges or organizations are doing to increase access. They set up programs such as conferences, workshops and tutorials to provide parents, students, high school counselors, financial aid officers and community organizers with information on best practices and how to coordinate efforts. Because the councils tend to have diverse representation, they have access to a variety of resources and people to help create a college-going culture across the state.

B. Statewide Outreach and Financial Support

In addition to coordinating statewide higher education activities, state agencies and organizations have access to potential funding sources. They can use their partnerships and connections to pool resources and statewide funds under a central organization. Combining these financial resources across the state increases the amount of money available and, therefore, the opportunity to make a meaningful difference for students.

The College Foundation of North Carolina (CFNC)[9] is one example of how multiple state-level organizations can combine resources to offer comprehensive, free information to help the state's citizens. CFNC provides an extensive number of no-cost services geared toward college educators, students, parents, counselors and school administrators. Its services include statewide training programs, financial aid process overview, financial literacy courses, career-planning tools and educational publications.

CFNC is a highly visible state initiative that focuses on encouraging financial aid application and college enrollment. It has regional representatives in seven communities across the state, as well as other staff members who provide college access workshops, presentations and training sessions for audiences that range from elementary students to adults. CFNC features statewide outreach programs and has commitments and support from a diverse group of state and community-based organizations.

People primarily access CFNC's services through its website, CFNC.org, which currently has more than 2.4 million user accounts and almost 10,000 visitors a day.[10] During the past year alone, the number of North Carolina students filing the FAFSA has increased more than 50 percent, and nearly 355,000 college applications were submitted by North Carolina students using CFNC.org.

States such as Tennessee and Arkansas, as well as North Carolina, also take advantage of state resources that administer lottery scholarships to increase statewide attention on financial aid applications. For many states, the state-run lottery system provides funding for scholarships to in-state residents. For example, in Tennessee, all scholarships and grants are administered by the Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation, using funds funneled to an education account by the Tennessee Education Lottery Corporation.

Although the availability of financial aid is part of the attraction, the high-profile nature of the lottery system, combined with the additional funding, makes it easy to attract student attention and increase participation. Tennessee uses this as an opportunity to educate students on the financial aid process.

In many cases, the states require that in order for students to be eligible for the state lottery scholarships, they must first submit a FAFSA. The scholarships may not be need based, but requiring students to file the FAFSA to determine their eligibility increases the overall number of students applying for and potentially receiving additional financial aid. This has been an effective practice in getting students who may have typically self-selected out of the process to submit the form and apply for financial aid.

9. CFNC is made up of College Foundation, Inc., North Carolina State Education Assistance Authority, North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities, North Carolina Community College System, and North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

10. "CFNC Services" (College Foundation of North Carolina). www.CFNC.org. Last accessed 2/18/2010.

V. Successful Community College Programs

The criteria used in this report for selecting specific programs and initiatives as examples of success include those that succeeded with diverse community college student populations and addressed their unique and individual challenges. The programs used a combination of early and accurate information, mentorships and peer-to-peer interaction, consolidation of resources, and involvement in the local community; however, no single solution is successful for all populations and challenges. Community colleges need to devise appropriate methods for each distinctive student population and incorporate multiple approaches.

The following institutional practices all contribute to improved utilization of student aid at the community college. They represent the diversity of the higher education system itself, with programs operating in urban as well as rural communities, and include policies administered across multiple states or within single institutions. One consistent feature among these programs and initiatives is the importance they place on personal interactions and practical solutions in getting students to apply for financial aid.

A. Early and Accurate Information

First-generation, traditional-age students and their families often are unfamiliar with the college-going process and do not know how to navigate through the college admission and financial aid systems. They may not even know how to access the help available to them. In order to address students' specific challenges, successful programs and initiatives have provided them and their families with early and accurate information. Involving students and their families early in the process helps ease the confusion and tensions associated with the process, and builds confidence.

> The first point of contact for getting information to traditional-age students is high school.

The first point of contact for getting information to traditional-age students is high school. Collaboration between high schools and community colleges to provide students with grade-specific information on financial aid and college admission is an effective way to introduce the student to college. An example of a successful partnership program is the Puente Project in California; it provides a pathway by which high school students can transition smoothly to the local community college and, if applicable, a four-year institution.

Puente places counselors in both high schools and colleges to provide extensive academic, personal and financial aid counseling. A Puente counselor is located at each high school and works closely with the students and their parents as they prepare for college enrollment and apply for financial aid. The project also incorporates the family into the counseling process by offering parent-specific workshops on financial aid.

Currently the project includes 34 high schools and 58 community colleges throughout California.[11] Under the sponsorship and direction of the University of California's Office of the President and the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, the project hopes to expand its reach into more high schools and community colleges in the coming years.

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11. "Early and Often."

I Can Afford College

Strong leadership at the state and institutional levels drives California's commitment to access and financial aid opportunities for low-income students. In 2004, the California State Legislature and the governor set aside money from the community college budget to increase awareness about financial aid opportunities and hire additional staff who would provide students with free one-on-one help. Called I Can Afford College, this effort is aimed at getting low-income high school students, currently enrolled community college students and other low-income Californians to identify financial aid opportunities and apply for aid.

Under this initiative, the California Community College System office was directed to begin contracting with community colleges to establish and implement a statewide financial aid public awareness campaign to communicate that:

- California community colleges are affordable.

- Financial aid is available to cover enrollment fees and assist in academic costs.

- Financial aid information and application assistance are available through local community college financial aid offices.

The first step in setting up the systemwide campaign through the state's community colleges was to have system office representatives, designated as I Can Afford College campaign contractors, meet with community college representatives. The community colleges then took the lead in identifying the relevant populations for these informational campaigns and helped establish messages and materials that would be effective in getting information to the targeted audience.

Although the state pays for the public campaign, financial aid offices at the community colleges perform the on-the-ground work to reach lower-income and minority populations. They use appropriate-language media and local opinion leaders to drive awareness about California's community colleges and the availability of aid. At Pierce College in Los Angeles, for example, one of the primary challenges facing prospective community college students was to overcome language barriers and dispel myths about the enrollment and financial aid processes. The college's financial aid office worked with the I Can Afford College campaign to develop materials and secure Spanish-language media opportunities. Through bilingual workshops and online resources, they provided expert financial aid advice and were a constant presence in the community. The financial aid offices were able to break down language barriers and alleviate some transportation concerns to provide students with greater access to financial aid resources.

The community colleges also have access to community-based and faith-based organizations and corporate partnerships, as well as online media, including ads on YouTube, to promote and disseminate information. The campaign's home page, www.icanaffordcollege.com, serves as a central location for financial aid information and connects interested students to their local community college financial aid office. Visitors to the website are able to apply immediately for financial aid or be connected to free individual financial aid assistance from their nearest community college.

In 2007, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office commissioned a survey to determine to what extent the I Can Afford College campaign had been successful in increasing awareness about the availability of financial aid at California's community colleges. The survey of selected California residents focused on specific areas, such as awareness of information and campaign messages, usefulness of the information and campaign materials, perceptions and beliefs surrounding aid, and action taken after receiving the information.

According to the survey's findings, close to half of those surveyed (48.4 percent) had read, seen or heard information about financial aid for community college students. After receiving this information, students were then more likely to visit a community college website, apply for admission to a California

community college and fill out a financial aid application.[12] For those students already enrolled in community colleges but not receiving aid, about half applied or planned to apply for financial aid after hearing the campaign information. The survey concluded that the I Can Afford College campaign, and the subsequent work of financial aid offices, is highly successful in increasing the likelihood of a student applying for financial aid and enrolling in a California community college.

At Home in College

Across the country, in New York City, At Home in College operates as a collaborative program between the city's public high schools and the community colleges of the City University of New York (CUNY). At Home in College, with the additional support of the nonprofit organization Robin Hood, works with over 200 high school seniors from seven New York City public high schools and more than 100 students from CUNY's General Education Development (GED) programs. Its goal is to ease the transition from high school to community college for public high school students and GED students by providing instruction on college admission and financial aid counseling.

At Home in College offers:

- College access activities, including help with completing online college applications, filing for financial aid, college visits, information about different careers and programs of study, and enrolling in college

- Transitional mathematics and English courses at the public high schools to prepare students for the CUNY placement exams

- Fee waivers for the CUNY application

- Advice on college access activities for participating CUNY community colleges

At implementation, each school–community college partnership develops a College-Going Culture Team consisting of high school faculty, college staff and administrators. This team is charged with developing a common understanding of the college-going culture between the institutions, looking at structures and practices in their respective schools and colleges that deal with college access, and evaluating postsecondary outcomes for their students. The team's meetings serve as a place for its members to discuss ways to strengthen and improve the college-going structures at their schools. These meetings also help ensure effective communication and coordination between the partners.[13]

The program is implemented at the individual institutions and housed under the English and mathematics departments at the area high schools. Qualified students have the opportunity to enroll in a transitional English course, a transitional math course, and a College Access and Success Workshop. Using the senior year in high school as a bridge to the community college, the program aligns the high school curricula with the entrance or placement criteria at CUNY.

English and mathematics teachers and college counselors are charged with delivering the services and offering any additional support or advice to students. Before beginning instruction, these counselors are offered professional development opportunities, including an initial training session, as well as paid leave time for additional training. The high school and college staff members serve as liaisons between the two institutions, keeping the curricula and college access programs at both the high schools and the community colleges aligned.

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12. "California Community Colleges 'I Can Afford College' Financial Aid Awareness Survey," conducted by JD Franz Research Inc. of Sacramento, and commissioned by Astone/Crocker/Flanagan on behalf of the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (2007).

13. "At Home in College Overview," The City University of New York. http://web.cuny.edu/academics/CUNYPublicSchoolPrograms/at-home-in-college/about-us.html. Last accessed February 3, 2010.

For GED students not currently enrolled in high school, the program offers an eight-hour, college-preparatory class at the participating community college. The orientation is incorporated into their GED program and offers relevant information on applying for financial aid and enrolling in college. At Home in College hopes to expand this aspect of the program in the future by creating "one-stop" centers, where information would be provided on high school completion, college enrollment and workforce development.

Daniel Voloch, the director of the At Home in College program, expressed confidence in other institutions' ability to duplicate this program. He feels replication is possible in other areas because most institutions, specifically high schools, already have the structure and curricula in place to deliver the services. Students in high school are already required to take English during their senior year, so it is a matter of the school redesigning the English curriculum to include lessons on college access and admission. The school, along with its community college partners, must make a conscious decision to promote college access by considering changes to their current curriculum.

The program started out with seven participating high schools and two community colleges. It has since expanded to 20 high schools and six community colleges. Of the 226 high school students enrolled in At Home in College, 190 (84 percent) graduated from high school. Of these graduates, 143 (75 percent) enrolled in a postsecondary institution. It is also important to note that this program does not exhibit the usual gap in college enrollment for minority students. Seventy-four percent of African American students and 75 percent of Hispanic students enrolled in college after graduating from high school.[14] This is higher than the national averages of 40 percent and 39 percent, respectively.[15]

B. Mentorships and Peer-to-Peer Interaction

For low-income and minority students, the objectives for many of the successful outreach programs are to inform them of the importance of education and address their aversion to taking on debt. Programs that have been effective in getting students to complete and submit financial aid applications rely on the personal relationship between the student and his or her mentor. The mentor serves as both an expert on the college enrollment process and an adviser for financial planning.

Admission Possible, based in St. Paul, Minn., is an intensive mentoring initiative that concentrates on low-income students. It joins with the AmeriCorps network and its volunteers to deliver free weekly after-school sessions, ACT/SAT® preparation, college admission guidance and financial aid counseling. The program currently serves more than 3,600 students and program alumni as they make the transition to college.

Admission Possible measures its success on the number of students who fill out and submit a FAFSA, receive scholarships, and graduate from college.[16] More than 80 percent of students participating in Admission Possible have either graduated from college or are pursuing a degree. The Admission Possible program has replicated its practices in Milwaukee, and after only two years is working with four greater Milwaukee area high schools and serving 150 students.

A number of other community college access programs have used AmeriCorps volunteers to deliver this peer-to-peer mentorship. In Austin, Texas, College Forward is an AmeriCorps program that has roughly 40 college graduates serving as "college coaches" or "college persistence coordinators" to more than 970 high school students and 450 low-income or first-generation community college students. College Forward volunteers go into the high schools and community colleges to provide a number of support services. During a high school student's junior and senior years, the volunteers will offer help on test

14. Ibid.

15. "Table 204: Enrollment rates of 18-to-24-year-olds in degree-granting institutions, by type of institution and sex and race/ethnicity of student: 1967 through 2007," *Digest of Education Statistics* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

16. "College Access Organization Award of Excellence," National College Access Network. www.collegeaccess.org/awards.aspx. Last accessed January 30, 2010.

preparation, researching and applying to college, editing essays, and understanding the financial aid process. After a student graduates from high school, College Forward continues its services and supports the student until he or she earns a degree. College Forward's commitment to continuous support services emphasizes the peer-to-peer interactions and personal relationships between the AmeriCorps volunteers and students.

Bluegrass Community and Technical College

At Kentucky's Bluegrass Community and Technical College (BCTC), the Department of Multiculturalism and Inclusion (M&I) serves the needs of the Hispanic student population with focused mentoring on recruitment, financial advising and academic counseling. Through the department's Office of Hispanic Outreach and Services, students receive help on understanding college processes, exploring career and academic goals, and increasing self-awareness.

Since the mid-1990s, the Hispanic population of central Kentucky has grown more than 250 percent, and educational institutions at all levels have had to adjust their services and programs to meet those students' needs. While the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS) has seen significant growth in the numbers of multicultural students, BCTC has experienced the largest growth in its population of Hispanic, African American, Asian and Native American students. KCTCS experienced an increase of 59 percent in the number of Hispanic students, 34 percent in the number of African American students and 44 percent in the number of Asian students; for those same groups, BCTC saw 89 percent, 74 percent and 93 percent increases, respectively. These increases have led the BCTC and its Department of Multiculturalism and Inclusion to focus their efforts on recruiting, retaining and mentoring all students to enroll in college.

The leadership at BCTC has been essential in ensuring that the institution remains committed to the needs of its multicultural population. Beginning with the former BCTC president, James Kerley, M&I has received extensive funding and resources to become a comprehensive division, with separate offices for Latino Outreach and Diversity Outreach. This support has continued under the current BCTC president, Augusta Julian. M&I, along with its two offices, has been elevated to the president's office, thereby incorporating the goals of the outreach programs into the school's mission. The executive leadership at BCTC has ensured that BCTC remains committed to serving the entire community by reaching out to all students and informing them of their college opportunities.

The division takes the approach that "Higher Education Begins Here/La Educación Superior Empieza Aquí" and reaches out to students by interacting with them in their communities and mentoring them throughout the college process. Three of its more popular services include:

- The Latino Leadership and College Experience Camp (LLCEC), a weeklong intensive program held in the residence halls at BCTC. Professors from BCTC teach current high school and college students about college-going processes such as application, enrollment, registration, orientation and advising. In 2009, 36 high school students and 12 current community college students attended the camp. According to a survey conducted after the camp, 93 percent of the participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "The LLCEC has inspired me to go to college."

- The Latino/Multicultural College Fair allows students to meet with college representatives. In 2009, it served 850 immigrant, refugee and Hispanic youth from 32 high schools across the state. Since 2005, this program has provided education access information and one-on-one mentoring to more than 2,200 youths living in Kentucky.

- The Promesa Mentor program trains mentors from different communities to assist families with admission applications, scholarship forms and basic financial aid forms. These mentors, or "community educators," are composed of community leaders and professionals as well as faculty, staff and current students at BCTC. Since 2007, the program has trained more than 60 mentors to assist students in all college-going processes.[17]

The goal of these activities is to increase students' knowledge of postsecondary opportunities in a culturally and linguistically relevant environment. By linking educational opportunities to the students' communities, the programs break down cultural barriers and encourage multicultural students to enroll in college.

The Office of Hispanic Outreach and Services not only serves the needs of the student population, but also offers services to other college administrators, faculty and staff, educating them on the cultural differences and perceptions of the Hispanic community.[18] It serves as a bilingual resource for BCTC faculty, staff, students and alumni to create an atmosphere of cultural acceptance.

C. Partnerships to Expand Resource Options

As many community colleges face scarce funding at all levels for essential college functions, some institutions have looked to consolidate resources or partner with area community organizations to expand their service options. The financial aid services for some community colleges are now being supported or offered through these education and community partnerships. Although these efforts may take away local administrative control from the individual community colleges, the programs operate under the common goal of getting financial aid information and assistance to students.

System Office of the Connecticut Community Colleges

The Connecticut Community Colleges system has streamlined its approach to handling financial aid concerns for students across its 12 campuses. It has created, integrated and centralized financial aid services under the system office of the Connecticut Community Colleges to handle the administrative and technological functions of financial aid management across the state. The system office has three functional staff members and three technical support staff members to coordinate the financial aid policies and regulations for the individual campuses.

The mission of financial aid services is to provide leadership and direction in all areas of financial aid administration, including policy analysis and development, research, legislative and regulatory analysis, and program management.[19]

A major function of the office is to offer a common technological infrastructure and internal database for the 12 community colleges. Each campus's financial aid office has access to one data system that handles day-to-day processes such as management of student records, application filing and financial aid distribution. The data system consolidates the responsibilities and activities of all the financial aid offices into one program, allowing staff members at the financial aid services office to handle the functions in a coordinated and efficient way. This relieves the financial aid offices of technical and administrative duties that would otherwise take up a significant portion of their time and resources.

The financial aid services office has also taken the 12 separate campuses' practices and regulations regarding financial aid administration and aligned them under a common set of policies and strategies. Before the formation of the financial aid services office, the 12 community colleges were operating under

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17. "Bluegrass Community and Technical College: Kentucky College Access Network Grant Report" (Office of Hispanic and Latino Outreach, Bluegrass Community and Technical College, Feb. 3, 2009).

18. "Examples of Excellence!" (*¡Excelencia* in Education*!*). www.edexcelencia.org/. Last accessed February 1, 2010.

19. Connecticut Community Colleges System, Financial Aid Services. www.commnet.edu/finaid. Last accessed February 12, 2010.

12 different policies and practices for financial aid administration. Though they all operated under the common goal of serving the financial need of students, they took divergent and conflicting approaches. The financial aid services office streamlined the practices and brought all of the campus financial aid offices under one common policy structure.

At first, the community colleges were reluctant to give up institutional authority to manage financial aid; however, due to the leadership of the system office and the common goal of "keeping the student in mind," a centralized system for financial aid administration was able to gain support from the campuses. In addition, the office set up an implementation team, with representatives from each community college, to discuss all policies and regulatory decisions. Because financial aid decisions were being made by financial aid officers, the initiative gained substantial credibility and legitimacy amongst the community colleges. The team, now called the Banner Team,[20] is still in place today and serves to direct the actions of financial aid services and disseminate information to the community colleges.

The director of financial aid services, Tom Bradham, is adamant in saying that the office does not supervise the colleges. The authority for financial aid decisions still resides with the individual financial aid offices at the community colleges. The staff members at financial aid services do not work directly with students; they are involved purely at the administrative level. To financial aid services, the community colleges are their clients, and its role is to relieve colleges of the administrative burden of financial aid processing.

Since the formation of this centralized office in 2001, the Connecticut system has seen the number of students applying for and receiving aid more than double at a time when enrollment has grown by 25 percent. In the 2008-09 academic year, 63 percent of the system's students applied for aid, compared to 42.5 percent of community college students nationwide. In addition, Chancellor Marc Herzog has estimated that the new centralized office has saved the system nearly $2 million in salaries alone, in addition to other significant administrative expenses.[21] Under this new structure, financial aid offices at the community colleges are able to redirect resources and time to providing financial aid counseling and enrollment services to students, instead of being burdened by tedious administrative functions.

College Goal Sunday

College Goal Sunday is a statewide volunteer program that provides free information and assistance for students and families applying for financial aid. College Goal Sunday brings together financial aid professionals from community colleges and universities, along with other community volunteers, to help students and their families complete the FAFSA.

The College Goal Sunday program was created by the Indiana Student Financial Aid Association with funding from the Lilly Endowment and the Lumina Foundation for Education. Since 2001, the Lumina Foundation has provided the necessary funds and structure to help establish College Goal Sunday programs in other states. College Goal Sunday, a program of the YMCA, now has affiliates in 39 states, with the long-term goal of having a program in every state.

College Goal Sunday targets low-income students in their senior year and adults pursuing education beyond high school; however, individual affiliates may focus their efforts on student groups particular to their state's demographics. In implementing a College Goal Sunday program, affiliates consult with the state's college access programs, such as TRIO and GEAR-UP, area school districts, and local community colleges, to identify their own underserved populations. Because many of these institutions already work with the underserved populations, they offer unique insight into the characteristics of these groups.

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20. The Connecticut Community Colleges System uses the software package, Banner Financial Aid System software, to handle its financial aid processing. The Banner Financial Aid System is a set of integrated database systems configured to allow the system to perform its administrative functions in an efficient and coordinated manner.

21. S. Godlewski, "A Two-Year System Streamlines Student Aid So Campuses Can Focus on Counseling" (*The Chronicle of Higher Education* June 29, 2009).

The state affiliates hold focus groups with these partners and examine the factors that may prevent students from accessing financial aid information and applying for aid. As a group, the affiliates discuss where these populations are located, who influences their decisions, and why these students are not connecting with college access programs. In conducting these focus groups, College Goal Sunday develops a marketing campaign that strives to make this underserved population more aware of financial aid opportunities. Campaign strategies and messages target the underserved population, and work to reach them at familiar locations and through influential leaders.

After College Goal Sunday is implemented, the associated events include informational sessions, workshops on filling out the FAFSA and one-on-one counseling. During one-day workshops, College Goal Sunday takes participants step by step and line by line through the financial aid application. The sessions also provide general information about financial aid, including recognizing the differences between grants and loans, and understanding the eligibility requirements for different grants.

College Goal Sunday partners with college access programs and community colleges to help deliver the financial aid services to students. Community colleges, for example, often serve as the sites for the College Goal Sunday events and provide marketing resources and advertising materials to publicize the events. The community colleges also provide financial aid staff to coordinate and facilitate the activities.

College Goal Sunday relies heavily on volunteers to deliver these services and facilitate the workshops and informational sessions. These volunteers tend to come from the local community and college access programs. They undergo detailed training before offering financial aid assistance and receive a variety of PowerPoint presentations, YouTube videos, informational guides and fact sheets to help them conduct the sessions.[22] This structure and delivery format is consistent across all affiliates and keeps the programs operating under a standardized set of processes and objectives.

Although each program follows a similar structure, state affiliates have their own records of accomplishments and successes with targeted audiences. For example, in Indiana, College Goal Sunday partners with the Indiana Student Financial Aid Association to assist more than 60,000 state residents. The event has more than tripled its reach, from 10 sites statewide to 34 sites in 29 Indiana cities and towns. In Arizona, College Goal Sunday helped 4,074 parents and students complete the FAFSA; more than 88 percent of the participating families have found the program helpful.

22. "Early and Often."

VI. Recommendations

The most effective approach has proven to be one-on-one communication, taking the student step-by-step through the application process.

The activities and examples profiled in this report offer some valuable recommendations for community colleges interested in increasing the number of students applying for financial aid. Improving financial aid administration is not just a matter of producing more and better information; a community college must be committed to reaching out to students personally and leading them through the application process. The community colleges must be actively educating potential students on the value of a community college education and getting them the necessary information early. The most effective approach has proven to be one-on-one communication, taking the student step-by-step through the application process. The community colleges should also consider a partnership with other education institutions or community organizations so they can reach these students where they live, and communicate the information in a way that is familiar and comfortable.

It is this personal connection and interaction that reduces the challenges for students applying for aid. It reduces the confusion and tension of the financial aid process, making the student feel more secure and self-confident. There are both short- and long-term strategies that community colleges can use to help alleviate these challenges and encourage more students to file for financial aid.

A. Short-Term Recommendations

Community colleges can first review and reevaluate policies and procedures that facilitate access to financial aid. In most instances, this occurs in the financial aid office. In the short term, community colleges may consider the following suggestions for their institutions:

- Distribute bilingual services and materials.
- Offer evening and weekend office hours.
- Apply multiple approaches to convey financial aid information to all students.
- Use multilanguage media, online resources and local opinion leaders to drive awareness.
- Link financial aid application and follow-up with college enrollment or registration.
- Incorporate evaluation metrics and data collection into office practices.
- Coordinate activities and meet with local high school counselors to provide grade-specific information to students.
- Involve the families of students when providing financial aid materials and activities.
- Conduct workshops or information sessions for students interested in college, and communicate financial aid opportunities in a culturally and linguistically appropriate manner.
- Integrate financial aid counseling with other outreach efforts.
- Build a list of community organizations that already help students with the application process.
- Partner with other education institutions or community organizations to offer financial aid counseling to all students.
- Support state or regional efforts to improve application rates.

B. Long-Term Recommendations

Many of the long-term recommendations for increasing the number of students applying for financial aid rest on the continuing commitment of the community college to promote student access. These programs need to be assured of adequate financial support and leadership dedicated to the goals of reaching out to all students and informing them of their opportunities. Leaders at the executive level may consider the following suggestions for establishing a long-term commitment to student access:

- Make a public commitment to student access, directing funds and staff to financial aid administration and access programs at the institution.

- Survey potential students to learn where students get information about the community college and what knowledge they have about student aid prior to enrolling.

- Participate in transition programs with area high schools.

- Set up mentoring opportunities for high school students.

- Consider consolidating resources with area community colleges or across the state to establish a common system for financial aid administration.

- Work with state governmental agencies to coordinate priorities and policies statewide for financial aid administration.

C. Conclusion

Ultimately, the community colleges must determine the best and most appropriate approaches for ensuring student access at their institutions. All of these recommendations and changes do not have to be implemented at once and will not apply to every college.

Each community college needs to evaluate its own situation to determine what the current level of nonapplication is and identify which subgroups of students are underutilizing financial aid opportunities. Leaders must devise a plan that incorporates accurate and timely information, establishes personal one-on-one interactions with students, and collaborates with other college access organizations to increase the number of financial aid applications and recipients. Any combination of these approaches will help in creating a community college environment that is efficient in working with students who need assistance and in building partnerships across multiple organizations.

To quote one financial aid director, "Campus leaders need to set high expectations for service and back them up with adequate resources." Community colleges do a disservice to students if they do not make a full commitment to ensuring that all potential students receive the necessary information about and assistance with financial aid. In order to be effective, community colleges cannot wait for the student to make the first contact, but must reach out to students and personally guide them through the financial aid process.

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Methodology

JBL Associates Inc. undertook this study for the College Board and the American Association of Community Colleges both to understand the problems associated with reduced rates of financial aid application for certain student groups and to identify effective initiatives that increase application for financial aid among community college students.

A. Data Collection

We took three approaches to identifying the programs that work to encourage community college students to apply for federal financial aid.

1. We conducted a review of the literature on successful financial aid initiatives and access programs, and reviewed relevant case studies.

2. Using data from the FAFSA data center and *IPEDS*, we identified community colleges with a high ratio of federal financial aid recipients to enrollment, and conducted interviews with their financial aid representatives.

3. We identified and conducted reputational interviews with experts in the field of financial aid access and outreach.

The purpose of this data collection was twofold. First, we wanted to confirm and understand key factors that contribute to the underutilization of federal financial aid; second, we wanted to identify the practices that work to increase the number of community college students filing for federal financial aid.

B. Interviews with Financial Aid Representatives and Area Experts

In identifying institutions and individuals to contact for our data collection interviews, we used both quantitative and qualitative methods.

First, we applied data from the FAFSA data center and *IPEDS* to find the top 12 community colleges that have both a high percentage of undergraduate students filing for financial aid and a high percentage of undergraduate students

receiving Pell Grants. The combination of the two percentages allowed us to look at not just whether students filed their FAFSA, but also if they were eligible for aid and enrolled in the institution.

Through the websites of these 12 community colleges, we identified the relevant financial aid person or department to interview. We attempted to contact each of these individuals by both telephone and e-mail. For those responding to our initial communications, we conducted interviews to gather information on what they, or others, have done that might explain the higher rates of student aid application and receipt.

Second, JBL Associates developed a list of financial aid and access experts to be interviewed. The list was shared with College Board staff, who made additional suggestions. We also acquired permission from the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) to use their electronic listserv to contact members. Introductory e-mails were sent out to potential interviewees, explaining the project and requesting their assistance on this study. We also conducted follow-up phone calls with respondents.

Over a three-week period, we interviewed 22 individuals representing community colleges, financial aid offices, college access organizations, student advocacy groups, corporate and private foundations, and area experts.

We posed three main questions to these interviewees:

1. What are the barriers or constraints that prevent students from applying for financial aid?

2. What recommendations do you have for improving current practices in administering the financial aid application?

3. What are the current state or community college initiatives that have been successful?

From our interviews with both sets of financial aid representatives, we developed an initial list of approaches and initiatives that have been successful in increasing the number of financial aid applicants. We then narrowed this list according to factors such as institutional type, geographic location, student population served, and level and degree of community college involvement.

C. Surveys of Successful Programs and Initiatives

After a final list of successful programs and initiatives was approved by the College Board, we conducted interviews with relevant community college leaders and program or initiative representatives. We posed questions to the key representatives in the following four areas:

1. Development of the Initiative

- How did you select this particular initiative?
- What populations of students are affected by this initiative?
- How did you get the initiative started?
- How did you get support for the program?
- What were the initial funding sources for the program?

2. Characteristics of the Initiative

- What are the core goals or objectives of the program?
- What activities or types of contact define the program?
- Who provides leadership for the program? Staff?
- Do you partner with others (states, institutions, associations, etc. …) to carry out the program?
- How did you obtain and maintain "buy-in" from key stakeholders and supporters?
- What factors or attributes of the program have been critical to the effectiveness of the program?
- Is the initiative a stand-alone program or is it integrated into other programs?
- What are the financial costs of this initiative?

3. Effectiveness and Evaluation of the Initiative

- How do you know the initiative is working?
- What has changed as a result of the program's presence? What has been its impact?
- Are there measures of success or benchmarks for the program? Is there a data collection system?
- What methods are used to measure outcomes and to determine the effectiveness of the program? Is there a formal review of the program on a continuous basis?
- Are the activities of the program tracked? Can you provide reports, analyses, etc.?
- Is there a method for receiving feedback from participants? What was the feedback?
- Is there regular reporting to communicate results? To whom?

4. Challenges and Lessons Learned from the Initiative's Development

- What factors or conditions (both internal and external to the program) have served as challenges, constraints or barriers to the development of the program?
- What could have been done differently to alleviate any of the challenges or barriers?
- What lessons would you share with others interested in producing a similar initiative?
- Could this program be replicated for other states, institutions or organizations?
- Will these strategies work in other community colleges and states?

From these interviews, we also collected additional materials or names of people to contact that would enhance our descriptions of the programs. The summaries of these programs and the subsequent analysis of our findings are presented in this report.

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