The Efficacy of Wraparound Support Services on Improving Postsecondary Student Outcomes

Most jobs today require some form of postsecondary education or training, making it increasingly necessary for people to set a career goal and follow the right path to achieve it. An estimated 72 percent of jobs will require additional education beyond high school by 2031,[1] but learners of all ages are often not aware of the most effective or direct path to a given career or know where to start. Those who want to earn a degree or credential must keep up with their rigorous coursework while simultaneously trying to overcome financial burdens, navigate complex administrative processes, and take care of their mental and physical health.

Wraparound support services are a continuum of programs and services designed to meet the varied needs of students and remove the barriers that impede their academic and future success. This brief will summarize the characteristics of postsecondary students and the challenges they face, detail how existing support services have benefited students, and make recommendations to federal and state policymakers on how they can increase awareness of and access to these critical resources.

Today's Higher Education Students

There was a time when most college students were recent high school graduates who enrolled immediately in a residential baccalaureate degree-granting university. However, that profile has shifted over time and no longer accurately depicts the majority of individuals in postsecondary education today. In the past decade, direct college enrollment immediately after high school graduation dropped from 68 percent to 62 percent.[2]

Higher Learning Advocates, a D.C.-based advocacy organization, documents what today's postsecondary students look like. Students are diverse in many ways:[3]

- One third of undergraduates are older than 25
- 42 percent are students of color
- Only 16 percent of undergraduates live on campus
- More than a third of students (38 percent) are enrolled part-time
- Just over half of undergraduates (51 percent) are independent students (students who are not financially dependent on their parents)
- 22 percent are parents
- More than half (56 percent) are first-generation students

Key Takeaways

- Students today face complex barriers that prevent them from successfully enrolling in and/or completing postsecondary education.

- High-quality wraparound support services provided by states, institutions, and nonprofit organizations can improve student persistence and completion rates and lead to better post-graduation outcomes, but few students have access to or awareness of these free resources that can help them overcome the challenges they face.

- Policymakers should streamline unduly bureaucratic processes that hinder students' access to government assistance and fund more initiatives that connect students to the information and programs they need to achieve their higher education goals.

Understanding the Needs of Postsecondary Students

The diversity of today's higher education student population, the complexity of their lives, and the various types of degrees or certificates they pursue contribute to the unique challenges they face in completing their education. This is particularly true for students who are first-generation, minority, or from lower-income backgrounds. Despite gains in enrollment and completion rates among historically underrepresented groups, large gaps remain.[4,5] Black and Hispanic students and students from lower-income families continue to enroll in and complete college at much lower rates compared to their peers.[6] Contributing factors limiting students' potential include:

Lack of Trusted Mentors and Counselors

Advisors on high school and college campuses often have high caseloads, which limits the number of students they can connect with, the amount of time they can spend with each student, and the amount of ongoing support they can provide. College advisors with caseloads of 300 or more students have a higher turnover rate than those with lower caseloads.[7]

Difficulty Navigating, Accessing, and Understanding Financial Aid

The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is intimidating. It requires personal information and uses complex formulas that make it difficult to predict eligibility for grant aid without going through the process. An analysis of the graduating class of 2023 found that more than 1.6 million high school graduates did not complete the FAFSA. Of those graduates, about 792,000 were assumed to be Pell grant eligible, which translated to about $4.01 billion in Pell grant aid going unclaimed.[8] Finding scholarships can be challenging as students navigate a complex landscape of opportunities and criteria. It can be unclear how best to find them and a lack of confidence about grades or skills may keep students from pursuing them.

Unclear or Inefficient Academic Pathways

Only 60 percent of baccalaureate students graduate within six years[9] due to a wide range of factors, including confusion about required classes, changing majors, and unclear connections to careers. Transferring institutions can also cause delays. A GAO analysis found that students lost, on average, 13 credit hours in the transfer process, or about a semester's worth of classes.[10]

Unfulfilled Basic Needs

Food and housing expenses are an important and significant portion of the cost to attend college, representing about 20 percent of the total cost of attendance at a private institution and between 40 and 50 percent at a public institution.[11] A nationally representative survey of undergraduates found that almost a quarter reported experiencing food insecurity in the 30 days prior to taking the survey.[12] A GAO study determined that less than half of low-income students who were likely eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) reported receiving it, indicating that many students are not receiving the help to which they are entitled.[13] Mental health is also a large and growing concern among college students. Thirty-six percent of surveyed students screened positive for depression in the two weeks prior to taking the survey, and 46 percent reported experiencing anxiety.[14]

Feeling Disconnected from Career Objectives

Being able to get a better job and increase earnings has been the top reason people decide to attend college over the years.[15,16,17] Students need to be able to connect their academic pathway with their career goals. In a 2021 survey, most freshmen respondents indicated they had used or planned to use all of the career connection services listed, but analysis of the seniors who responded to the survey found much lower actual usage.[18] This indicates that students are very interested in gaining a better understanding of how their academics will lead to potential careers, but many are not engaging in these activities despite this interest.

Wraparound Support Services Lead to Better Student Outcomes

Governments, institutions of higher education, foundations, nonprofit organizations, and other entities recognize the benefits of wraparound support services for students. Evaluations of programs like the City University of New York's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (CUNY ASAP) have demonstrated that providing wraparound services significantly increases enrollment, credit accumulation, and graduation rates among participants.[19] But not every community has the resources to develop a comprehensive program like CUNY ASAP. There are many successful wraparound support services that meet the needs of today's students including:

Mentorship/Guidance Counseling

A study of an evidence-based one-on-one coaching program at a Midwest community college in 2020 found an 18 percent higher retention rate among students who received coaching compared to a similar group of students who did not participate in the retention coaching program. Even higher rates were observed for part-time students, Black students, and students enrolled in developmental education courses. This result was even more impressive as there was a nationwide decline in enrollments at this time due to the pandemic. The coaching involved helping students clarify goals and identify obstacles, reassuring students that they were supported in their higher education and career goals.[20]

Financial Aid Counseling and FAFSA Completion

Nonprofit organizations have developed resources, both online and in-person, to help students and families understand college costs and plan how to finance a postsecondary education. Online tools can outline financing options and provide guidance on financial management concepts and consumer rights. Assistance completing the FAFSA is available online, via toolkits, guides, and FAQs, and through in-person events or one-on-one assistance. State-based and nonprofit organizations hold free FAFSA events in the areas they serve to assist students and families with completing and submitting the application for aid. Some organizations help not only students and families, but also provide training for teachers and counselors to help them learn how to assist students with financial literacy and FAFSA completion. These organizations have worked with over two million students and families to help them plan and pay for college.[21]

Academic Pathways

Programs like the University of Central Florida's Direct-Connect work on a deeper level than a standard articulation agreement. UCF partners with six area state colleges to guarantee admission when transferring with a degree from a partner college, and accomplishes this through unique agreements and even data sharing between the institutions to facilitate process improvements.[22] Virginia has a statewide guaranteed transfer program that ensures admission to more than 30 private and public colleges and universities if the student graduates from one of the 23 community colleges with a minimum GPA.[23] There are also concerted efforts to make the academic pathways to careers more understandable. For example, Georgia State University provides students with a wealth of career readiness information, including giving first-year students workforce information on their selected major to assist them in making more informed career decisions early in their college experience.[24,25]

Basic Needs Assistance

More than 750 colleges and universities across the country have, or are in the process of establishing, campus food pantries.[26] California has been leading the nation in tackling hunger in college. The state passed legislation in 2017 to establish the "Hunger Free Campus Initiative," which provides awards to public institutions that create a meal sharing program, promote the program widely to students, and establish easily accessible food pantries on campus.[27] Additionally, colleges are increasingly investing in developing or expanding available mental health services and resources, though there remains more demand.[28]

Academic and Career Exploration Platforms

Helping students understand the connection between their academic course of study and potential careers has been shown to increase enrollment and retention in college.[29,30,31] Nonprofit organizations have developed free online platforms designed to help students plan their academic and career paths, starting in middle school or earlier in some cases. The platforms include activities and tools to help students learn about themselves and explore colleges and careers, and are available and in use by schools across the state in the states these organizations serve in.

Wraparound support services provide comprehensive assistance to address various academic, financial, personal, and social challenges students may face. Critically, available evidence suggests these initiatives improve postsecondary student success by creating a supportive and inclusive environment to help students thrive and succeed.

Policy Recommendations

Support programs that improve high school students' financial literacy and awareness of academic and career pathways

Federal and state policymakers should invest in early aid and career awareness interventions so high school students have a more comprehensive understanding of the many college financing and education-to-employment pathways available to them, including college, apprenticeships, and shorter-term credentialing, and licensing programs.

Connect students with available government assistance programs they may be eligible for and make it easier for them to access these public benefits.

Although many public benefit programs are available, the complexity and varying criteria of these programs makes them difficult for individuals to access, particularly for postsecondary students. Both Congress and state governments should look for ways to connect eligible students to public benefits and develop a one-stop resource center for students looking for additional aid. For example, Congress could notify Federal Work-Study recipients and student parents using on-campus childcare centers of their potential eligibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Use the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education to further develop successful wraparound support program models, including career-connected learning programs.

Congress and the Department of Education should use the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education to create a competitive grant program so that eligible entities, including state-based and nonprofit organizations with new or existing programs, can experiment with wraparound service models and improve student success.

Remove preferred lender list restrictions preventing nonprofit and state-based organizations from counseling students on campus.

To help reduce the burden and provide a wider base of student support, institutions can partner with state-based nonprofit organizations who have the expertise and resources to provide specific types of interventions to students. These organizations can give students personalized information and advice, but current federal policies too often block these cooperative agreements.

1 Carnevale, A., Smith, N., Van Der Werf, M., and Quinn, M. (2023). After Everything: Projection of Jobs, Education, and Training Requirements through 2031. *Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.* Retrieved from https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/projections2031/#resources.

2 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2023). Immediate College Enrollment Rate. *Condition of Education.* Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=51#:~:text=In%20every%20year%20from%202010,enrolled%20in%202%2Dyear%20institutions.

3 Higher Learning Advocates (2022). 101: Today's Students. Retrieved from https://higherlearningadvocates.org/wp-content/uploads/101-Todays-Students-August-2022.pdf.

4 Barshay, J. (2023). College completion rates are up for all Americans, but racial gaps persist. *KQED.* Retrieved from https://www.kqed.org/mindshift/61037/college-completion-rates-are-up-for-all-americans-but-racial-gaps-persist.

5 National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2021). Persistence and Retention: Fall 2019 Beginning Cohort. Retrieved from https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/PersistenceRetention2021.pdf.

6 Reber S. and Smith E. (2023). College enrollment gaps: How academic preparation influences opportunity. *The Brookings Institution.* Retrieved from https://www.brookings.edu/articles/college-enrollment-gaps-how-academic-preparation-influences-opportunity/.

7 Tyton Partners (2023). Driving Toward a Degree: Awareness, Belonging, and Coordination. Retrieved from https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Driving-Toward-a-Degree-2023.pdf.

8 National College Attainment Network (2023). NCAN Report: In 2023, High School Seniors Left Over $4 Billion on the Table in Pell Grants. Retrieved from https://www.ncan.org/news/662266/NCAN-Report-In-2023-High-School-Seniors-Left-Over-4-Billion-on-the-Table-in-Pell-Grants.htm.

9 National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2020). Completing College: National and State Reports. Retrieved from https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/Completions_Report_2020.pdf.

10 U.S. Government Accountability Office (2017). Higher Education: Students Need More Information to Help Reduce Challenges in Transferring College Credits. Retrieved from https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-17-574.pdf.

11 Trellis Research (2022). State of Student Aid and Higher Education in Texas. Retrieved from https://www.trelliscompany.org/portfolio-items/state-of-student-aid-in-texas-2022/?portfolioCats=28%2C26%2C4145%2C29%2C35%2C27%2C30%2C4144%2C2764.

12 Alonso, J. (2023). For the First Time, U.S. Releases Data on Student Basic Needs. *Inside Higher Ed.* Retrieved from https://www.insidehighered.com/news/students/physical-mental-health/2023/08/04/federal-data-belatedly-measure-student-basic-needs.

13 U.S. Government Accountability Office (2018). Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits. Retrieved from https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-19-95.pdf.

14 Trellis Research (2023). Student Financial Wellness Survey: Fall 2022 Semester Results. Retrieved from https://www.trellisstrategies.org/research-studies/student-financial-wellness-survey-sfws-fall-2022/.

15 Strada Education Foundation (2023). The Value of Community Colleges: Recent Students' Motivations and Outcomes. Retrieved from https://stradaeducation.org/report/the-value-of-community-colleges-recent-students-motivations-and-outcomes/.

16 Fishman, R. (2015). 2015 College Decisions Survey: Deciding to go to College. *New America.* Retrieved from https://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/deciding-to-go-to-college.pdf.

17 Stolzenberg, E. et al (2019). The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2019. *HERI at UCLA.* Retrieved from https://www.heri.ucla.edu/monographs/TheAmericanFreshman2019.pdf.

18 Strada Education Foundation (2021). Understanding Undergraduates' Career Preparation Experiences. Retrieved from https://stradaeducation.org/report/pv-release-dec-8-2021/.

19 CUNY ASAP and ACE Evaluations. Explore the transformative impact of CUNY ASAP|ACE through research and evaluation, where insights help propel student success in higher education. Retrieved from https://www1.cuny.edu/sites/asap/evaluation/#1485896758384-38213ace-5ac5.

20 InsideTrack. Midwest Community College Boasts 18% Higher Retention During Coaching Phase of Multi-Year Student Success Redesign. Retrieved from https://www.insidetrack.org/case-studies/illinois-central-college#section-gated-resource.

21 Education Finance Council (2023). Helping Families Plan and Pay for College: Education Finance Council 2023 National Impact Report. Retrieved from https://www.efc.org/page/National_Report.

22 Lavinson, R. (2021). Articulation Agreements Are Just a Small Part of the Answer. *Inside Higher Ed.* Retrieved from https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/tackling-transfer/articulation-agreements-are-just-small-part-answer.

23 Virginia Community College System. Statewide Transfer Agreements. Retrieved from https://www.vccs.edu/transfer-programs/.

24 Georgia State University. Career to College. Retrieved from https://collegetocareer.gsu.edu/.

25 Georgia State University (2023). Timothy Renick, Executive Director of GSU's National Institute for Student Success, Delivers Remarks Before Congress. Retrieved from https://news.gsu.edu/2023/06/14/timothy-renick-executive-director-of-gsus-national-institute-for-student-success-delivers-remarks-before-congress.

26 Swipe Out Hunger. Join the Network. Retrieved from https://www.swipehunger.org/joinnetwork/.

27 Western Center on Law & Poverty (2018). Responding to the College Hunger Crisis: New laws to prevent hunger from undermining college success among low-income College students in California. Retrieved from https://wclp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/College_Student_Hunger_NAHC2018_WCLP.pdf.

28 Surovell, E. (2023). Colleges Are Investing in Student Mental Health But 'There's Still a Long Way to Go,' Survey Finds. *Chronicle of Higher Education.* Retrieved from https://www.chronicle.com/article/colleges-are-investing-in-student-mental-health-but-theres-still-a-long-way-to-go-survey-finds.

29 Metsker, M. (2022). How Illinois Tech Drove Record Enrollment by Focusing on Career Readiness. Retrieved from https://www.gouconnect.com/career-everywhere/how-illinois-tech-drove-record-enrollment/.

30 Falduti, B. (Education Strategy Group, 2021). States' Pivotal Role in Expanding Postsecondary Advising. Retrieved from https://edstrategy.org/states-pivotal-role-in-expanding-postsecondary-advising/.

31 National College Attainment Network (NCAN, 2021). Closing the College Graduation Gap: 2021 National College Access and Success Benchmarking Report. Retrieved from https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.ncan.org/resource/resmgr/publications/ncanbenchmarking2021.pdf