

Final Evaluation Report

Public Benefits and Community Colleges

Lessons from the Benefits Access for
College Completion Evaluation

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Gateway Community & Technical College, KY
LaGuardia Community College, NY
Northampton Community College, PA
Skyline College, CA

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The College Completion Agenda and Community Colleges

Over the past decade, the idea that more Americans need to obtain a postsecondary credential has become a widely held position, including among state and federal policymakers, business and civic leaders, and national philanthropic organizations. The reasons for this convergence is not surprising, because graduates outperform their peers in “virtually every measure of economic well-being and career attainment – from personal earnings to job satisfaction to the share employed full time.”¹ It is expected that by 2020, 65 percent of all jobs in the economy will require some kind of postsecondary education or training beyond high school, with more than a third of jobs requiring either an Associate or Baccalaureate degree.² Creating a well-educated workforce to compete for these jobs will require stakeholders committed to the college completion agenda, especially community colleges, to address the numerous issues that research indicates can affect student success in college. Overcoming these issues is especially critical for low-income students who, according to a recent White House *Call to Action*, “lack the guidance and support they need to prepare for college, apply to schools that are the best fit for them, apply for financial aid, enroll and persist in their studies, and ultimately graduate.”³

During the past decade, federal policy efforts have sought to address many of the financial, academic, and non-academic barriers to college access and completion. For example, federal policymakers have increased Pell Grant maximums, improved consumer protections for student borrowers, and created income-based loan repayment programs to minimize debt burden. Most recently, the U.S. Department of Labor made unprecedented public investments in community and technical colleges through the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training Grant (TAACCCT) Program. These grants directed \$2 billion over four years to public two-year colleges nationally, and encouraged colleges to develop structured career pathways, provide wrap-around student supports, and partner with employers, community based organizations, and the workforce development system.⁴

National philanthropic organizations also have made strategic investments to improve postsecondary attainment. Over a decade ago, the Lumina Foundation launched Achieving the Dream as a national imperative to improve student success in community colleges, especially for students of color, those who are low-income, and first-generation students. More recently, the Foundation’s strategic priorities emphasize the goal of 60 percent of adults having a quality postsecondary credential, including shorter-term occupational and technical certificates by 2025. Similarly, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is seeking to “double the numbers” of low-income students with college credentials by 2020. Other foundations, including Joyce, Annie E.

¹ Pew Research Center (2014). *The Rising Cost of Not Going to College*. (February) From <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/02/11/the-rising-cost-of-not-going-to-college/>

² Carnavale, A.P., Smith, N. & Strohl, J. (2013). *Recovery: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements through 2020*. Washington, DC: The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (June).

³ The Executive Office of the President. (2014). *Increasing College Opportunity for Low-Income Students: Promising Models and a Call to Action* (January).

⁴ United States Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration. *Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training Grant Program*. Accessed on October 6, 2014 from <http://www.doleta.gov/taaccct/>.

Casey, Ford, and Kresge also have made investments to improve postsecondary attainment – in some instances by supporting states and colleges to focus efforts on low-skilled adults, connecting various systems like adult education, workforce, and community colleges to better align their policies and practices.⁵ As a result of this national push to increase postsecondary completion, community college leaders are facing pressure for substantial institutional reform.

Institutional Reform Must Address Financial, Academic, and Non-Academic Issues

Financial supports are particularly critical to provide access to higher education, and to help students persist in college and ultimately earn a certificate or degree. The research evidence has consistently shown that reducing the price of college through financial aid can influence students' postsecondary decisions, including enrollment and persistence, dropout behavior, and academic progress.⁶ Yet, financial issues are not the only barriers students face, as many high school graduates and adults returning to college from the workforce often are unprepared for college-level programs, as evidenced by their reading, writing, and mathematics skills.⁷ For example, a study comprising institutions participating in the Achieving the Dream initiative found that 59 percent of students enrolled in at least one developmental course.⁸

In addition, research indicates that non-academic student supports are an important component of student success. A recent report from Jobs for the Future suggests that colleges need to view comprehensive student supports as an integrated set of services with multiple departments – admissions, financial aid, academic supports, and advising – all working together toward a common goal.⁹ Analyses from the Center for Community College Student Engagement have identified 12 high-impact practices that strengthen the student-college relationship, including the provision of non-academic supports, and that can improve student outcomes.¹⁰ Researchers also have documented that “intensive advising models” and “student success courses” can improve student achievement. These models often combine academic supports with regular guidance

⁵ For example, the Kresge Foundation's Student Success Centers; the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Center for Working Families; the Joyce Foundation's Shifting Gears initiative; and the Ford Foundation's Work Support Strategies project.

⁶ Long, B.T. (2008). *What is Known about the Impact of Financial Aid?* National Center for Postsecondary Research, Working Paper (April); Richburg-Hayes, L., Brock, T., LeBlanc, A., Paxson, C., Rouse, C.E., & Barnow, L. (2009). *Rewarding Persistence: Effects of a Performance-Based Scholarship Program for Low-Income Parents*. New York: MDRC (January); Richburg-Hayes, L., Sommo, C. & Welbeck, R. (2011). *Promoting Full-Time Attendance Among Adults in Community Colleges: Early Impacts from the Performance-Based Scholarship Demonstration in New York*. New York: MDRC (May); Miller, C., Binder, M., Harris, V. & Krause, K. (2011). *Staying on Track: Early Findings from a Performance-Based Scholarship Program at the University of New Mexico*. New York: MDRC (August).

⁷ Price, D.V. and Tovar, E. (2014). Student Engagement and Institutional Graduation Rates: Identifying High-Impact Educational Practices for Community Colleges. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*. DOI: 10.1080/10668926.2012.719481.

⁸ Bailey, T., Jeong, D.W., & Cho, S.W. (2010). Referral, enrollment, and completion in developmental education sequences in community colleges. *Economics of Education Review*, 29(2), 255–270.

⁹ McDonnell, R.P., Soricone, L. and Sheen, M. (2014). *Promoting Persistence Through Comprehensive Student Supports*. Boston: Jobs for the Future (March).

¹⁰ Center for Community College Student Success (2014 and 2013). *A Matter of Degrees: Practices to Pathways; and A Matter of Degrees: High-Impact Practices for Student Engagement*. Austin: University of Texas.

about college and career planning, time management, and study skills training.¹¹ In short, the research suggests that providing comprehensive supports for learners leads to better student success, because these supports help students create social relationships, clarify aspirations and enhance commitment, develop college know-how, and make college life feasible.¹² For students who are supporting families, addressing these non-academic challenges are especially critical, because they are ensconced in everyday life issues, such as childcare, transportation, safe housing, and food insecurity.¹³

¹¹ Rutschow, E. Z. and Schneider, E. (2011). *Unlocking the Gate: What We Know About Improving Developmental Education*. New York: MDRC (June).

¹² Community College Research Center. (2013). *What We Know About Non-Academic Student Supports*. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University (September).

¹³ Lower-Basch, E. (2011). "The Cost of Learning: How Public Benefits Create Pathways to Education." *Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity*.

The Premise behind Benefits Access for College Completion

The Benefits Access for College Completion demonstration (BACC) represented a collaborative multi-year investment from several philanthropic organizations to demonstrate how student supports from public human services programs could help address the college completion agenda. The idea fueling BACC was that existing financial aid programs are insufficient, and

Intermediary and Funding Stakeholders for BACC included:

- CLASP (The Center for Law and Social Policy)
- AACC (American Association of Community Colleges)
- Lumina Foundation
- Annie E. Casey Foundation
- Ford Foundation
- Kresge Foundation
- Open Society Institute

that high levels of unmet need lead to excessive work, poor grades, and dropping out of college. The underlying assumption for BACC was that, if students received additional financial and non-academic supports through public benefits programs, in addition to financial aid, their personal lives would become more stable and they would make more progress toward their postsecondary educational goals. This national demonstration supported seven community colleges in six states to develop and implement benefits access services on their campuses, with the goals of increasing the numbers of eligible students who received public benefits, and, thus, subsequently improving academic progress toward a postsecondary credential. During BACC, colleges primarily focused on developing mechanisms to screen

students and/or help them apply for public benefits programs, such as food stamps (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP) or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), including the childcare and transportation benefits associated with these public benefit programs. Notably, the expansion of Medicaid that accompanied the Affordable Care Act occurred in the middle of the BACC demonstration, and many participating colleges directed significant outreach and publicity efforts to help students enroll in Medicaid. Overall, the expectation was that BACC colleges would demonstrate how best to implement benefits access services on their campuses, sustain them beyond the demonstration by embedding benefits access into ongoing college operations, and ultimately, make the case for expanding these models to other colleges.

About This Report

This Final Evaluation Report provides the lessons learned from the BACC demonstration project at five of the seven community colleges over the past three years.¹⁴ From the onset of BACC, the evaluation was focused on documenting and learning how the participating colleges approached this work, and how and why they made adjustments during the demonstration. This evaluation approach was intended to provide useful formative feedback to the colleges during the demonstration, but it also was intended to help answer the overarching evaluation question posed by the funders: *What are the most promising models for community colleges to increase benefits access for their students, and how can these models be integrated into community college operations?*

¹⁴ Two Michigan colleges also were affiliated with the BACC demonstration. However, their work – part of the Michigan Benefits Access Initiative – was funded independently of BACC, and had its own evaluation. Thus, they were not included in our evaluation.

During the course of our evaluation, we observed three key findings that emerged from the BACC demonstration. Colleges converged on the need for a centralized hub to deliver benefits access services, and also began moving toward an opt-out model of pre-screening and screening for benefits access by connecting this initial step in the application process to existing student support services like financial aid and advising. Cutting across these two findings is the critical importance of leadership and commitment to benefits access – up and down the administrative hierarchy and across departments and divisions, but especially for student services.

Synopsis of Our Evaluation Methods

DVP-PRAXIS LTD and the OMG Center for Collaborative Learning conducted a three-year mixed methods evaluation that included field work through two in-depth site visits at each college (once in the early implementation stage and again near the end of the initiative), participant observation during national learning community events, ongoing review of college materials and grant reports submitted to the national intermediary, and periodic telephone interviews with college leads, the national intermediary, and technical assistance providers. In addition, the evaluation collected aggregate program data from colleges that documented the number of students who were screened, applied for benefits, and received benefits at each college. From one college, we also collected student-level administrative data that was matched with state human service agency records on public benefits receipt.* A more detailed discussion of our methodology can be found in Appendix B.

*The evaluation intended to have a significant quantitative focus to complement the qualitative data collected, but obtaining public benefits data from state and county agencies proved difficult. Data were collected and analyzed from Gateway Community & Technical College only.

In the following sections, we first present an overview of the BACC demonstration and the various approaches colleges explored at the onset. In Section 2, we provide a detailed discussion of the three main findings from our evaluation, including how the model for delivering benefits access services changed during the demonstration, highlighting specific examples from the five colleges. In Section 3, we discuss the impact analysis at one college where quantitative student data were matched with state administrative data on the receipt of public benefits. We conclude the report by summarizing our core findings, and pointing to additional research that is needed to better understand how benefits access services can be implemented and sustained on a college campus, and the impact of these benefits on student academic outcomes.

Section 1: Participating Colleges and Their Approaches to Benefits Access

Five community colleges with a diverse range of student enrollment across the U.S. were included in the in-depth evaluation for the BACC demonstration (Table 1): Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C) in Cleveland, OH; Gateway Community & Technical College in Florence, KY; LaGuardia Community College in Long Island City, NY; Northampton Community College in Bethlehem, PA; and, Skyline College in San Mateo, CA. Overall, these colleges enrolled more than 100,000 students, over half of whom completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). About one-third of students were eligible for the maximum Pell Grant, which was seen as an indicator that students might be eligible for additional public benefits, because income eligibility levels for federal financial aid are similar to those for public benefits programs.¹⁵

BACC did not prescribe a singular model or approach for participating colleges to implement. Rather, the funders and intermediaries offered an overarching logic model of key strategies they expected colleges to address, while allowing each college to determine which public benefits to prioritize, and how each would deliver these services (Appendix A). In other words, the expectation was that colleges would design and implement benefits access services by addressing systemic barriers that students face when seeking such benefits, and these services would be institutionalized by the end of the grant period.

Table 1: BACC Colleges at a Glance¹⁶

BACC Colleges	Total Students	Completed FAFSA	Eligible for Max Pell Grant
Cuyahoga Community College	48,164	24,711 (51%)	15,222 (32%)
Gateway Community & Technical College	4,944	4,122 (83%)	2,531 (51%)
LaGuardia Community College	20,370	13,948 (68%)	9,019 (44%)
Northampton Community College	14,485	8,703 (60%)	3,920 (27%)
Skyline College	14,859	4,875 (33%)	2,295 (15%)
TOTAL	102,822	76,602 (55%)	32,987 (32%)

Source: College Data Files, 2011-12

¹⁵ Eligibility rules for public benefits programs are considerably different than for federal student financial aid, although benefits programs target similar populations of low-income students. For more information about these programs and their usage for education and training, see for example, http://www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/publication-1/SNAP-Policy-Brief_College-Student-Eligibility-Update.pdf and <http://www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/publication-1/Ensuring-Full-Credit-Under-TANFs-Work-Participation-Rate.pdf>. Or more generally, see <http://www.clasp.org>.

¹⁶ Enrollment numbers based on 2011-2012 data; Maximum Pell Grant eligibility was calculated based on the Expected Family Contribution, or EFC, which is based on a federal formula to determine student financial need. Students with an EFC of zero are considered eligible for the maximum Pell Grant, which was \$5,500 for the 2011-2012 academic year based on full-time enrollment.

Colleges chose which benefits to focus on for their students, and worked with their respective state or county benefits agencies to train college staff, develop processes for screening or applying for benefits on campus, and follow up on student applications. Although colleges approached benefits access differently, four core areas of work were addressed across the five colleges:



Although colleges began this work by providing pre-screening and screening activities, an early lesson was that application and case follow-up supports were needed in order to solidify students' connections to public benefits, and such services were much more labor-intensive and required a deeper knowledge of benefits access programs than colleges anticipated.

Colleges rolled out this work with different levels of knowledge and experience. For some colleges, benefits access was a new approach to offering non-academic supports to students, which meant a steep learning curve around both the knowledge of public benefits programs and how to provide access to these programs on their campuses. Other colleges were able to leverage existing programs and processes in place when they launched BACC. In all cases, colleges began with the premise that broad-based marketing and outreach would draw students in to be screened for benefits and/or to help them apply for benefits. In several cases, the idea was for screening and application services to be provided at multiple locations throughout the college (and by numerous staff in various departments). In other cases, the college provided these services in a particular location. The flexibility in how the colleges chose to implement benefits access services reflected the demonstration and learning characteristics of the BACC initiative, and provided a rich and diverse arena for colleges to try various approaches to benefits access, collect data for continuous improvement, and make adjustments to how they organized and delivered these services to students. Table 2 provides an overview of the approaches to benefits access that emerged across the five colleges.

FAFSA Under-Reports Public Benefits Recipients

Colleges were encouraged to use FAFSA data to identify students potentially eligible for public benefits. Our analysis of colleges' FAFSA data indicated that only 14 percent of students enrolled in the demonstration colleges who completed the FAFSA, and were maximum Pell-eligible, reported receiving at least one public benefit (N=6,203). Thus, it appeared that almost 26,000 maximum Pell-eligible students across these five colleges were not receiving public benefits for which they might be eligible. Yet, our analysis of data provided by Gateway Community & Technical College suggests that FAFSA data on public benefits is considerably under-reported: of 1,017 students who received SNAP, TANF, childcare, or transportation benefits according to state administrative records, only 222 (or 20%) reported they received these benefits on the FAFSA. In other words, existing data available to colleges are unlikely to provide precise information on students who currently receive or who might be eligible for public benefits.

Prior to implementation, colleges conducted a gap analysis to identify students who might be eligible for public benefits, and thus target their marketing and outreach efforts. Yet, considerable limitations with available data made it difficult for colleges to discern whether students in the target populations were already receiving public benefits, and if not, would be eligible for them. For example, in all but one case, colleges did *not* have access to public benefits data from the state or county agencies who administered these programs. Over time, several colleges were able to match student records with these agencies, but only for the students the colleges helped screen or apply for benefits. While this type of data sharing enabled colleges to follow up on specific students' applications, the data were insufficient to identify which college students already received benefits, and which students might be eligible but did not receive them.

During the demonstration project, approximately 2,200 students across these five colleges applied for one or more public benefits, and 1,354 received public benefits (SNAP, TANF, and/or childcare).¹⁷ Although broad-based and targeted outreach did not yield large numbers of students to be screened or assisted with a benefits application, colleges did serve increasingly more students during the demonstration – in large part due to more proactive recruitment blasts around specific benefits programs at particular times during an academic term, and because of more intrusive opt-out policies and practices.

¹⁷ While application and benefits receipt numbers were obtained from each of the colleges, definitions were not standard across colleges, and therefore these numbers represent rough estimates. For example, one college reported numbers of students who received benefits independent of BACC work, and another college reported on number of benefits applied for, not the number of unique individuals who applied.

Table 2: Overview of College Approaches to Providing Benefits Access Services

<p>Tri-C</p>	<p>Project GO! benefits access services are provided through the department of financial aid. Project GO! targeted students with \$0-\$3000 EFC for benefits access support by placing a flag on their record during the enrollment/registration period. In order to clear the flag, students are required to complete a pre-screening survey that helps staff identify who may be eligible for benefits. Peer Financial Coaches, who are paid work-study students, follow up with students who completed the screening survey and offer additional screening and application support for benefits access. Deeper follow up and one-on-one support is provided through grant-funded staff dedicated to benefits access, but these positions may not continue after the demonstration ends. In addition, Project GO! information has been integrated into student orientation materials, and the college is considering whether to incorporate benefits access information into the first-year experience course.</p>
<p>Gateway</p>	<p>As part of its accreditation plan, QEP (Quality Enhancement Process), a new advising model was developed, requiring professional advisors to conduct a short non-academic barriers survey with all students to assess the need for public benefits. Based on the results from this pre-screening, advisors refer students to the Counseling Department to see a dedicated benefits access coach – formerly a grant-funded position that the college sustained. Public benefits applications are completed through appointments with the coach or through kiosks – called Resource Stations – that are available throughout the Gateway campuses. A resource binder placed at each Resource Station directs students through the steps to access and sign up for benefits independently if they so choose. Information about accessing benefits is included as a module in the mandatory orientation for all incoming students. In addition, Financial Aid staff has received training on benefits eligibility requirements and benefits information is included on the department’s website as an additional source of financial aid.</p>
<p>LaGuardia</p>	<p>Single Stop was already operating at the start of the BACC demonstration, providing benefits access to SNAP and TANF, as well as tax prep, legal services, and financial literacy services. Single Stop was relocated to the Enrollment and Registration Center alongside financial aid, and has become known by students and faculty as the central place for students to get benefits access services. Students are targeted for benefits access screening based on financial aid data (household size, income, and EFC), and a “positive service indicator” is placed on a student’s record if these data indicate potential eligibility for public benefits. Financial aid staff, Single Stop staff, and advisors and counselors can see this indicator, and direct students to the Enrollment and Registration Center and/or Single Stop for more in-depth benefits access screening and/or support with benefits applications. During peak times of the year, Single Stop and college staff take advantage of wait lists for financial aid to conduct “on-the-spot” immediate screening and/or application support for public benefits.</p>
<p>Northampton</p>	<p>Benefits access screening and application assistance is offered in several locations throughout the college, including the College Center 200 Office (where the Director of the New Choices/New Directions program and BACC project leader is housed), the Enrollment Center, and in counseling offices at both the main and satellite campuses. Benefits access responsibilities were written into job descriptions for two new counselors who are expected to be the primary access points for benefits at the college after the BACC demonstration ends. In addition, departments throughout student services are encouraged to have preliminary benefits access conversations with students, and to refer students as needed to counselors or the College Center 200 Office for more in-depth benefits access support.</p>
<p>Skyline</p>	<p>Skyline has incorporated benefits access services into its SparkPoint Center – a pre-existing program on campus supporting students’ non-academic needs. Modeled on the Center for Working Families, SparkPoint provides a career center, food pantry, and financial coaching to students and community members, as well as tax preparation support. Benefits access services are provided through a dedicated benefits access coordinator and student ambassadors, and also are offered by financial coaches. In addition, financial aid staff has been trained to conduct quick screens of students based on income on household size and to make referrals to SparkPoint. At high-volume times, a benefits access representative sits within the financial aid office to conduct on-site, online pre-screening sessions with students.</p>

Section 2: Key Evaluative Findings – What It Takes to Do This Work

As the colleges adapted benefits access services, and learned what worked and what did not during the demonstration, three critical findings emerged that appear to be necessary conditions for colleges to successfully implement benefits access services and embed these services into ongoing operations. As noted above, benefits access services involved pre-screening, screening, application assistance, and case follow-up.

1. Benefits access services should be provided through a **centralized hub**, with knowledgeable staff and individualized support for students. This hub should be widely known by campus stakeholders and highly visible to students.
2. Benefits access services should be provided as **opt-out**¹⁸ for targeted students who are most likely to be eligible for public benefits based on available data. The most promising way to deliver these services is to **connect them with existing academic and non-academic services** on campus. This will enable various campus stakeholders to refer students to the benefits access process through services they already are providing, and understand the roles and responsibilities for which they are accountable.
3. From the outset of design and implementation, **leadership at multiple levels of the college and across all divisions and departments** should recognize benefits access services as an institution-wide priority, and take appropriate steps to insure that the necessary policies and practices for institutionalization of benefits access are addressed.

Each of these findings is discussed in more detail below, with illustrative policies and practices from the participating colleges.

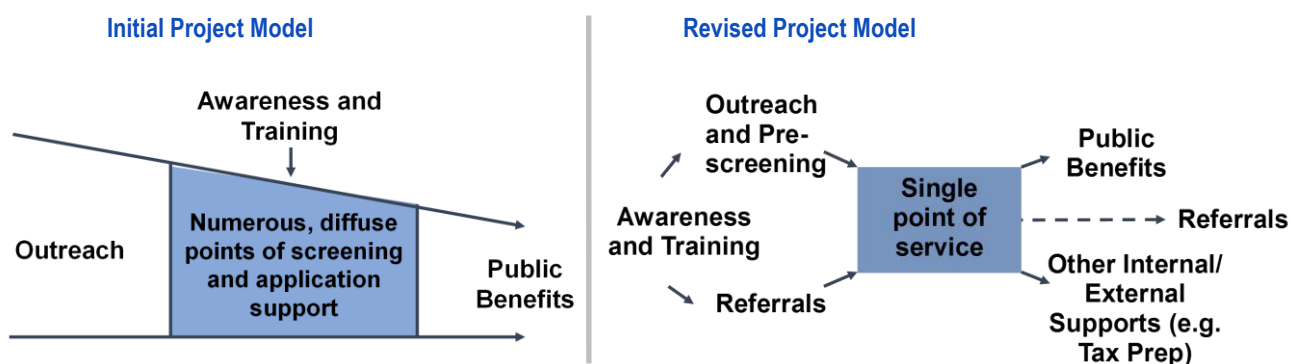
¹⁸ Students were *not* required to apply for public benefits. Opt-out refers to colleges pre-screening or screening students to identify those who might be eligible, and then offering to assist those students in applying for public benefits.

Finding 1: Operationalizing a Benefits Access Hub

Moving toward a single point of service – a centralized hub with a dedicated staff person – is one of three major findings from the evaluation. A centralized hub enabled colleges to build and maintain the knowledge necessary for providing benefits access services for students, created more opportunities to address multiple student needs at the same time, and helped strengthen the college’s relationship and collaboration with state and county agencies that administer public benefits programs. The hub also provided a visible, identifiable location for students seeking benefits access services and for college stakeholders referring them.

During the demonstration, as illustrated in Figure 1 below, colleges recognized that a “single point of service” model, or centralized hub, was a better design for providing benefits access services. This shift in the benefits access model reflected a key lesson for colleges about the complexity of the public benefits access programs – each with its own rules for eligibility, required documentation, and frequency of validation for continued receipt of benefits.

Figure 1: Shifts in the Project Model during the BACC Demonstration



The majority of colleges began BACC *without* an already established hub, and pursued various strategies for implementing benefits access services. For example, one college identified several faculty and staff “point people” who were trained by the local county benefits offices, and, in addition to their respective job responsibilities, were asked to screen students and make referrals to “benefits access” staff (who were new hires and/or graduate student volunteers). Another college identified several existing grant programs on campus that serve low-income students, such as TRIO (specifically Student Support Services), Accelerating Opportunities, Ready to Work, and the Health Profession Opportunity Grant, and trained program directors and staff to screen students and refer them to the BACC project coordinator on campus. These approaches quickly proved ineffective, largely because of faculty and staff resistance, and limited capacity to take on the new responsibilities asked of them in addition to their current roles.

Put another way, colleges without a hub first envisioned and approached benefits as an “add-on” to services already provided, and were not successful in screening and supporting students, because staff felt that it was too much of a responsibility to take on these additional roles. Moreover, those colleges who relied on work study students or interns to conduct the screening also met challenges, because of the short-term appointment of these positions. These individuals often felt under-resourced and unsupported in providing students the necessary information and guidance. These early efforts to provide a diffuse model of benefits access services were not successful, in part because the various staff assigned to provide benefits access services did not have time to build the level of knowledge and expertise necessary to provide these services. Having multiple staff providing services also meant that state and county agencies did not have a single point of contact at the college with whom to engage around training and professional development, to address regulatory issues around the benefits access services, or to follow up on a specific student’s status in the application process.

Over the course of the initiative, colleges started moving toward the “centralized hub” model to provide benefits access services – establishing benefits access screening and application supports within financial aid offices, and advising and enrollment centers. Creating a centralized benefits access hub allowed for colleges to have dedicated program staff with primary responsibility for maintaining up-to-date knowledge of public benefits policies, managing external partnerships, and supporting students in obtaining and maintaining these benefits. Dedicated staff was critical for developing and maintaining relationships with external partners, such as state or county agencies that administer public benefits programs, and also for fostering stakeholder awareness and buy-in campus wide.

In fact, interviewees from across the colleges and from human service agencies almost uniformly pointed to a dedicated staff person as a critical aspect for colleges wanting to provide benefits access services to students. Trying to offer benefits access services in multiple locations, and from multiple staff, inevitably led to variation in service delivery and inconsistent knowledge among the many staff tasked with providing benefits access services to students. Rather, the many moving parts of benefits access services needed a dedicated staff person to balance expectations throughout the college. One counselor described the significant mix of responsibilities for the BACC lead, which included: “[putting] the agenda together and [running] the meetings, ... focusing on embedding [and sustaining the work during] the last several months along with getting the numbers up... hitching BACC to the completion agenda, and packaging it with the financial aid conversation.”

Skyline's SparkPoint Center and LaGuardia's Single Stop

Two colleges – Skyline and LaGuardia – began the BACC demonstration with pre-existing benefits access services, and moved immediately to strengthen these services via a centralized hub.

SparkPoint at Skyline College preceded BACC, and was providing financial coaching and financial literacy services as part of the Center for Working Families network.¹⁹ While benefits access was one of several services available at SparkPoint, BACC enabled the college to enhance its capacity to provide public benefits assistance to students and community members. Within SparkPoint, benefits access services for students were transitioned from the financial coaches (an intensive multi-activity service offered by three FTE staff with a 100-student case load) to one-on-one benefits access support from a dedicated coordinator and several trained student ambassadors. The benefits access coordinator focused primarily on building and strengthening relationships with external partners – such as the area food banks and human services agencies – and keeping abreast of public benefits regulations. The coordinator also followed up on individual student cases if the human services agencies denied their benefits applications. The student ambassadors, most of whom had personal experience with public benefits, provided direct assistance to students by conducting a pre-screening and helping with the online benefits application. During BACC, SparkPoint emerged as a very visible hub for benefits access services and other non-academic supports, and strengthened its reputation among faculty, staff, and administrators who expressed almost universal awareness and buy-in of SparkPoint as an essential component of the college. As one senior administrator reported: “SparkPoint is seen as an extension of financial aid and as a resource for individuals to support college success, empowering a community of learners.”

LaGuardia also had a pre-existing program at the start of BACC, through its partnership with Single Stop USA, a national not-for-profit that connects “financially vulnerable families” with non-academic supports, such as tax credits and benefits access, to students.²⁰ During BACC implementation, the college's Single Stop office was relocated to a more student-friendly location within the highly trafficked financial aid center. In addition, the college increased the capacity of Single Stop by adding several part-time college staff to conduct pre-screening of students and orient students to the services available to them, including assistance with applying for public benefits. Part of the capacity building strategy was to cross-train financial aid specialists in benefits access to allow for immediate referrals to Single Stop when students were seeking federal and state financial aid. This move to co-locate Single Stop with financial aid enabled benefits access to garner more visibility on campus, positioning it as part of financial aid where students could learn about and access numerous financial resources and other supports to help them stay enrolled in college. A LaGuardia college leader noted: “For [benefits access] to be successful, it needs to be linked to financial aid – it's the one place where you can really get a student to think differently about... financial aid – and visually see the link [between these] services.”

Many interviewees noted that having dedicated, trained staff within a centralized hub not only raised the visibility of benefits access services among students, faculty, staff, and administrators, but it also helped build the specialized knowledge needed to help students navigate the various public benefits programs. Staff noted: “Many times I have heard students say ‘I didn’t know that [about benefit eligibility]’ or that ‘[the college] doesn’t have this service,’ but we do [offer these services] and students just didn’t know about them.” To be clear, providing the training and support for staff that directly engage students was a challenge for colleges – even those with a centralized hub. Although a dedicated benefits access director with specialized knowledge is

¹⁹ Modeled on the Annie E. Casey Foundation's "Centers for Working Families," SparkPoint is part of a regional United Way of the Bay Area network of financial education centers designed to serve individuals and families who are working to achieve financial self-sufficiency. SparkPoint services include a food pantry, access to banking services, free tax preparation, an English language institute, among various other services and supports.

²⁰ Goldrick-Rab, S., Broton, K, and Frank, V.M. (2014). *Single Stop USA's Community College Initiative: Implementation Analysis*. Madison: Wisconsin Hope Lab. Single Stop operates in more than 90 sites in California, Florida, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania. This report provides a detailed implementation analysis of Single Stop at 11 community colleges, including LaGuardia.

necessary, frontline staff needs to have enough awareness and knowledge of benefits access to appropriately refer and direct students to the hub, especially if they are located someplace other than within the hub itself. One staff member noted of her colleague who was the main dedicated staff member for BACC during the grant period: “[This dedicated staff] was able to relate to students and build relationships... You cannot build a relationship with a kiosk.”

Elements of a Benefits Access Hub

- Dedicated staff member.
- Connections to other college services and outside community based organizations.
- Maintenance of up-to-date knowledge on ever-changing benefit regulations.
- Visible and accessible location for students.
- Plans in place for data collection and continuous improvement.

A centralized hub also made sense for colleges, because they recognized that students who need one type of public benefit – such as SNAP – are more likely to need other types of benefits like transportation or childcare. In other words, the issues and needs that public benefits aim to address do not occur in isolation, and individuals may require several types of non-academic supports to help them stay in college and earn a credential. One BACC director noted in a report: “Typically students will explore benefits after having utilized one or more of our other services and by having benefited by more in-depth conversations with our staff.” Thus, within a centralized hub, colleges may screen students for some benefits, help them apply for other benefits, and refer them to additional services on campus or even to community based organizations that can provide necessary supports. In addition to providing an array of benefits access services to students, the hub proved an important opportunity for staff within the hub to collect and report data for tracking and continuous improvement, as well as attend regularly scheduled meetings and forums for ongoing dialogue with campus and community stakeholders, and to share the success and impact of the work on students. As one college staff member indicated: “The [hub] created more efficiency and flow to how we served students.”

Operationalizing a centralized benefits access hub also provided students and campus stakeholders a visible, identifiable location where specialized knowledge and trained, dedicated staff is available for students. Colleges pursued several options for the location of this centralized hub – the most common location was the financial aid office, but other options included the advising center or a pre-existing building that centralized other support services such as financial coaching and career services. The key point is that the centralized hub was not tucked away in a building that was disconnected from other support services the college provided its students. Having a centralized hub meant that campus stakeholders – even those with limited direct responsibilities for benefits access – knew where to send students for assistance above and beyond the name of a specific person on campus. For example, one college leader shared: “We knew that it needed to be where students were comfortable talking about finances.”

Finding 2: Opt-Out Benefits Access Connected with Existing Academic and Non-Academic Services

Colleges learned that requiring students to opt-out of benefits access services – by connecting benefits access with existing academic and non-academic services students already were likely to seek – is a more effective strategy to engage and support students. Identifying which students to automatically pre-screen for benefits led to a more targeted use of data by colleges, and to strategic discussions about where to offer the opt-out benefits access services.

During the demonstration, colleges discovered that both broad-based and targeted outreach to students was ineffective. Students simply did not respond to broad marketing messages about public benefits or to targeted emails, texts, or phone-calls asking them to opt-in to the screening and application supports colleges were offering. Colleges reported that students who did show up either already had public benefits or had an open application they hoped the college could help them resolve. As a result, very small numbers of students received any type of benefits access services during the early stages of the demonstration.

During one of the cross-site learning events (about midway through the BACC demonstration), several colleges acknowledged the inadequacy of this approach. In addition, through a presentation on behavioral economics, various college stakeholders, CLASP, and initiative consultants raised the distinction between expecting students to opt-in to benefits access services versus having to opt-out of the initial screening process. The idea was that “too much choice is cognitively taxing, and providing people too many choices can overwhelm them, and make it less likely that any choice is selected.”²¹

This conversation suggesting an opt-out approach for benefits access spurred demonstration colleges to explore different ways to support students by connecting benefits access with existing academic and non-academic services students were already likely to seek. Colleges revisited student flow patterns around financial aid, advising, registration, and counseling to identify the high-volume intervention points where benefits access services could be inserted. These efforts allowed different stakeholders throughout campus to understand how benefits access was a logical extension of existing services, and helped to facilitate buy-in for benefits access as well as increase campus-wide awareness of these services as a core part of the organizational mission. Connecting benefits access services to existing college tasks and procedures reinforced the “fit” of benefits access as a student support the colleges should provide, and created momentum for benefits access to be sustained long term.²² The essential takeaway is that recruiting students to opt-in to benefits access screening is not effective, and that incorporating a pre-screening process

²¹ Ross, R., White, S., Wright, J., and L. Knapp. (2013). *Using Behavioral Economics for Postsecondary Success*. www.ideas42.org.

²² Scheirer, M.A. (2005). Is Sustainability Possible? A Review and Commentary on Empirical Studies of Program Sustainability. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 26(3) 320-347.

into existing services and/or requiring students to take action to opt-out is a better strategy to educate and engage students, faculty, staff, and administrators about benefits access services.

Colleges approached the opt-out model for benefits access services in various ways, but these services were typically connected with advising or financial aid services.²³ For example, Gateway Community & Technical College connected benefits access screening with a new “SMART” (Student Mentoring through Advising, Retention and Transition) orientation and advising program the college was implementing as part of its Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). “SMART” advisors associated with various programs of study (e.g., business; design and technology; and with protective and professional services programs), were trained to conduct one-on-one pre-screening with all their students as part of their formal job responsibilities. The advisers also were trained to refer students, based on responses to a five-question non-academic barriers survey, to the benefits access specialist within the Counseling Department.

Tri-C and LaGuardia Community Colleges used FAFSA data to identify and “flag” students as potentially eligible for benefits, triggering an action students had to take in order to remove the “flag.” For students with a \$0-3,000 Expected Family Contribution, Tri-C attached a “flag” on the students’ online account portal record. In order to remove the “flag,” students were directed to complete an online pre-screen for benefits access. Both the “flag” and the answers to the pre-screen survey were visible to faculty and staff who were advising or assisting students. Interviewees at Tri-C noted that students felt a sense of urgency to get the “flag” off their record, although it did not actually affect the status of a student’s account. In addition, they believed that the “flag” motivated more college faculty and staff to become involved in referring students to the benefits access office, called Project Go!.

While this process yielded significant increases in the number of students who were pre-screened at Tri-C, it did not result in large numbers of public benefits applications. One potential explanation is that the online survey did not require a face-to-face follow up with a benefits access specialist or other college faculty, staff, or administrators. Even though project staff tried to follow up, via e-mails and phone calls, with students who completed the online pre-screen, this outreach was generally unsuccessful in getting students to come into Project Go!. In other words, the “flag” may have required students to provide additional information via an online survey, but it fell short of an opt-out benefits access service, because students were still expected to follow up on their own to meet with a benefits access specialist.

LaGuardia’s use of a “positive service indicator” on a student’s academic record was more intrusive, because it required a student to go to the Single Stop office in the financial aid center to have the “positive service indicator” removed.²⁴ The “positive service indicator” was based

²³ As the BACC demonstration ended, some colleges were beginning to explore how these services could also be embedded in the academic classroom, such as learning communities or student success courses.

²⁴ In actuality, if a student did not follow through to have the “positive service indicator” removed, it simply stayed on their account without any negative implications for the student.

on FAFSA data, and targeted students with income below \$25,000 and Expected Family Contribution of zero. The financial aid screens with these data were made available to financial aid generalists who checked students into the financial aid center, as well as to Single Stop staff and interns. As one staff person noted: “The [positive service indicator] essentially [acted] as the pre-screener and took the guesswork out for anyone who would like to know whether or not any students they met would be eligible for benefits.”

At LaGuardia, co-locating benefits access services in the financial aid center created a direct connection for students – as well as for faculty, staff, and administrators – that benefits access was a core service of the college. Financial aid specialists were cross-trained about benefits, and could walk students to the Single Stop cubicles as needed. Staff could pull students with the “positive service indicator” out of the financial aid queue, conduct initial screening, and offer additional services to the student, including assistance in applying for public benefits. Interviewees noted that the “positive service indicator” was a critical factor in meeting their Single Stop service goals, but also noted that the expanded staff capacity that came with their co-location in the financial aid center was important. As a result of the move, “staff [gained] the ability to screen all students [for benefits eligibility] that came in for financial aid services. [In other words,] eligible students [were] screened on the spot while waiting to be served by the financial aid staff.”

At this point, there does not appear to be a “best practice” for a college to connect benefits access to existing academic and non-academic services. However, embedding benefits access services where students already are engaged, such as in advising and financial aid, appears most promising based on the BACC demonstration. Colleges that were able to connect benefits access with existing services also had an easier time engaging students, and had stronger commitment from leadership throughout the college

Finding 3: Leadership and Commitment to Institutionalize and Sustain Benefits Access Services

Executive leadership is important for sustainability, but depth and breadth of leadership and commitment is perhaps even more critical for benefits access to take root on campus as a core non-academic support service. Moreover, by connecting benefits access services to larger institutional priorities, executive leaders, as well as leaders up and down the organizational hierarchy – and across departments and divisions – indicated a commitment to find the necessary resources to sustain benefits access services beyond the demonstration period. As a result, several colleges faced limited resistance moving forward with implementation, establishing and strengthening the benefits access hub and incorporating opt-out benefits access services by connecting them to other college functions.

Effective executive leadership and commitment, as well as the depth and breadth of leadership up and down the organizational hierarchy – especially in student services – was largely possible, because administrators, faculty, and staff believed that providing benefits access services aligned with their institution’s overall mission. Leadership and commitment also meant that a broad cross-section of faculty, staff, and administrators of various ranks and positions took responsibility for institutionalizing the centralized hub for providing benefits access services, and for identifying the ideal locations where opt-out benefits access pre-screening and student engagement should occur. This broad-based “support and sense of ownership” of an organization’s leadership or management distinguished an institutionalized project from one that was not.²⁵

Additionally, leadership and commitment meant that intentional decisions were made to identify and allocate financial resources for sustaining benefits access services on campus, including shifting staff positions to budget line items, incorporating benefits access responsibilities into job descriptions for new advising staff, and embedding benefits access into the college’s strategic planning or accreditation processes.

Colleges demonstrated depth and breadth of leadership in very concrete and important ways during the BACC demonstration. In one example, Gateway Community & Technical College connected benefits access to its accreditation plan; Skyline College, on the other hand, charged the student services leadership team (SSLT) with leveraging existing financial resources to support SparkPoint after the various grant programs funding this effort ended. A third example from LaGuardia Community College was the intentionality of the Vice President of Student Services, from the very beginning of the demonstration, to include benefits access services – particularly the commitment to fund staff to provide them – in the college’s strategic planning process.

²⁵ Savaya1, R. and Spiro, S.E. (2012). Predictors of Sustainability of Social Programs. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 33(1) 26-43.

Setting the Groundwork for Institutionalizing Benefits Access

- Having top leadership buy-in.
- Putting accountability structures in place (e.g., making benefits access part of the accreditation process).
- Having an administrative home/ownership for benefits access.
- Bringing benefits access services into the annual budgetary process.

At Northampton Community College, the administrative leader of the benefits access project was invited to attend the meetings of student affairs directors from across the college (although she herself did not carry that rank), and the college recruited a diverse set of stakeholders from many student affairs departments – including admissions, advising, enrollment, and financial aid – to serve on the BACC implementation leadership team. This leadership team advised the project director on key implementation strategies, and also served as the vehicle for mapping various student flows on campus to identify where stakeholders could naturally discuss benefits access with students and potentially refer them to the benefits specialists.

As noted above, Gateway Community & Technical College connected benefits access to its QEP, articulating a common vision that stakeholders campus-wide repeated: “Short-term assistance for long-term success,” noting that benefits access was critical to help their students address non-academic barriers to support retention and completion. Connecting benefits access to the QEP was not arbitrary. Rather, it was a strategic decision that emerged from a year-long “listening tour” the President facilitated in 2011. These focus groups consisted of a diverse set of campus stakeholders meeting together, from janitorial and grounds keeping staff to faculty and senior administrators, and identified the biggest reasons students were not succeeding at the college. One of the most widely discussed barriers for students were non-academic, and particularly related to family and personal challenges the college was not equipped to address.

The BACC demonstration began around the same time the president of Gateway appointed an accreditation leadership team and several working groups to address non-academic support services as one of three QEP priorities. During the BACC demonstration, the project team was exploring the nuts and bolts of engaging students and helping them navigate the benefits access application process with the Kentucky Department for Community Based Services. At the same time, the “SMART advising” QEP workgroup was identifying how to incorporate benefits access services into the responsibilities of the expanded professional advising staff – itself a QEP priority. When asked about benefits access services after the demonstration ended, one interviewee noted: “Benefits [access] is built into the [advising] process and into QEP – unless an advisor is not doing [his/her] job, this work will continue.”

The depth and breadth of leadership at Skyline College included dedicated benefits access staff and student ambassadors to directly assist students, and, in the case of the BACC director, to strengthen relationships with external stakeholders and build buy-in among faculty and staff. At the administrative level, Skyline integrated the SparkPoint director into the student services

leadership team as an “equal” representative, and as noted above, this team was charged with finding existing resources to sustain SparkPoint – including benefits access services – beyond the demonstration. SSLT documented the number of students that were served by multiple student services programs, including benefits access and SparkPoint. Thus, the Vice President of Student Services worked with each program to identify those portions of its funding for SparkPoint integration (when appropriate per program funding guidelines) as a way to institutionalize core staff. In this example, SparkPoint – and benefits access – became a core student support service at Skyline similar to advising and financial aid. Moreover, the college’s TRIO program incorporated SparkPoint into its grant proposal to the U.S. Department of Education to meet the federal requirement of providing financial literacy as a service of all TRIO programs.²⁶

Section 3: Evidence of the Impact of Public Benefits on Student Outcomes

One of the expectations for the BACC demonstration was that colleges would be able to match records with state and county human services agencies in order to assess the impact of public benefits on students’ academic outcomes. Although colleges made some progress in matching records on students they directly helped apply for public benefits, only one college successfully matched college data and human services data for all their enrolled students. This section of the report provides our analysis of these data.

The fundamental takeaway is that benefits access can positively impact students’ academic progress. Our analysis of data from Gateway Community & Technical College documents that students who receive public benefits, such as SNAP and TANF, are more likely to enroll for more terms than a statistically matched comparison group of students.

Gateway Community & Technical College is the smallest of the BACC demonstration colleges, enrolling about 5,000 students in an academic year. For the evaluation, we received data for eight terms between Summer 2011 and Fall 2013, with 7,498 unique students. These data included public benefits information for SNAP, TANF, childcare, and transportation at a single point in time for both the fall and spring semesters.²⁷ We focused our analysis on students from Kentucky²⁸ who completed the FAFSA, were eligible for the maximum Pell Grant, and whose parental status was non-missing. This focus reduced our sample to 3,572 unique students – or 47% of the overall database. Table 3 below provides an overview of the analytic sample before we created a statistically matched comparison group.

²⁶ Per the regulations laid out in the U.S. Department of Education’s 2008 Higher Education Opportunity Act.

²⁷ Specifically, we received data on benefits received in October and in January for each of the academic years in the overall database.

²⁸ Gateway also enrolls students from Ohio, but we did not have access to public benefits data for this group of students.

Table 3: Analytic Sample of Gateway Community & Technical College Students from Kentucky Who Completed the FAFSA, Were Maximum Pell Eligible, and with Parental Status Non-Missing (N=3,572)

Summer 2011 – Fall 2013

	Received a Public Benefit	Did Not Receive Public Benefits
Overall	1,651 (46%)	1,921 (54%)
Age	28.51 (avg.)	27.49 (avg.)
Women	1,301 (54%)	1,100 (46%)
Men	350 (30%)	821 (70%)
Black	283 (53%)	247 (47%)
Hispanic	23 (41%)	33 (59%)
White	1,282 (45%)	1,536 (55%)
Have Children	1,272 (56%)	994 (44%)
Number of Prior Terms Enrolled	1.9 (avg.)	2.1 (avg.)
Number of Prior Credits Earned	17.45 (avg.)	22.79 (avg.)

Source: Gateway Community & Technical College; Kentucky Department for Community Based Services

As Table 3 shows, less than half of students received any public benefit during the BACC demonstration. Students who received benefits were slightly older than non-recipients, and were more likely to have children. Additionally, public benefits recipients were more likely to be women and African-American, although the vast majority was White (as is the overall student population at the college). Students who received public benefits had earned fewer credits prior to the BACC demonstration period, and had been enrolled in slightly fewer terms.

Figure 2: Number of Public Benefits Received, Gateway Community & Technical College (N=1,651) Summer 2011-Fall 2013

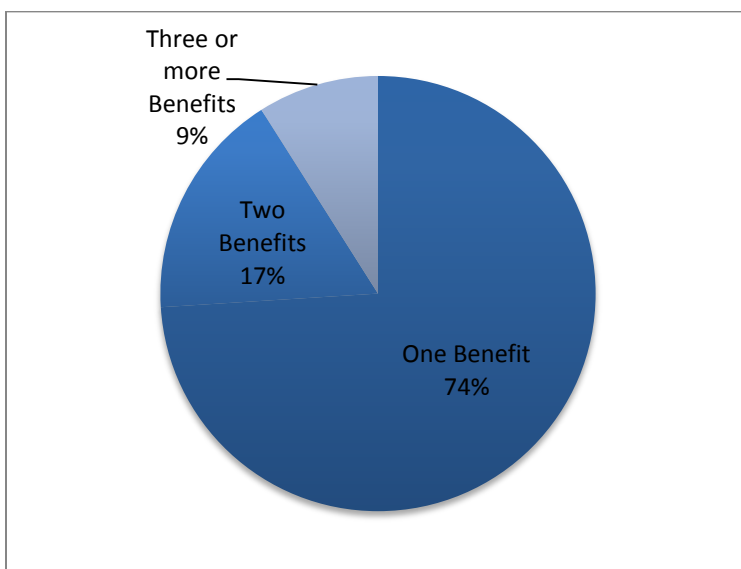
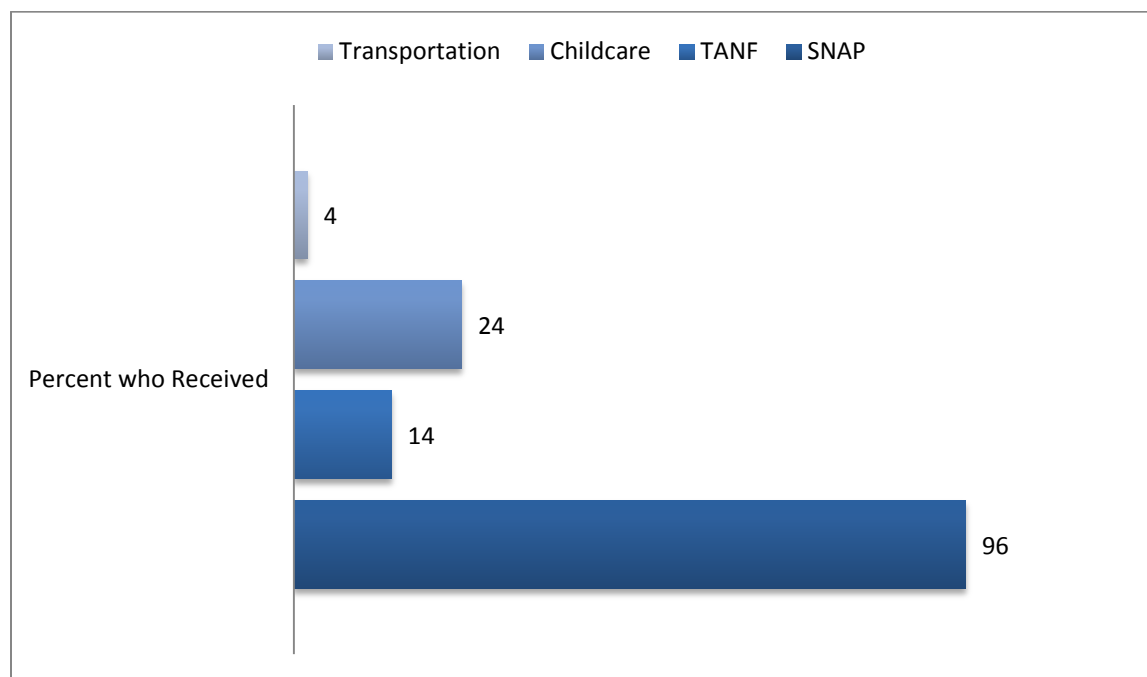


Figure 3: Percentage Who Received Public Benefits at Gateway Community & Technical College, by Type of Benefit (N=1,651)



As shown in Figure 2, almost three-fourths of public benefits recipients at Gateway received only one benefit during the BACC demonstration, while 17% received two benefits, and 9% received three or more benefits. Almost all public benefits recipients received SNAP, 14% received TANF cash assistance, 24% received childcare benefits, and 4% received transportation benefits (Figure 3).²⁹

In order to assess the impact of public benefits on student outcomes, we first conducted a Propensity Score Matching (PSM) technique to statistically balance the group of students who received public benefits with a group of similar students who did not receive public benefits.³⁰ This technique accounts for any differences in observable characteristics (as shown in Table 3) between students in the sample who receive public benefits and those who do not. The resulting PSM-adjusted sample included all 1,651 students who received at least one public benefit during the demonstration and 840 students who did not receive public benefits as the statistically matched comparison.

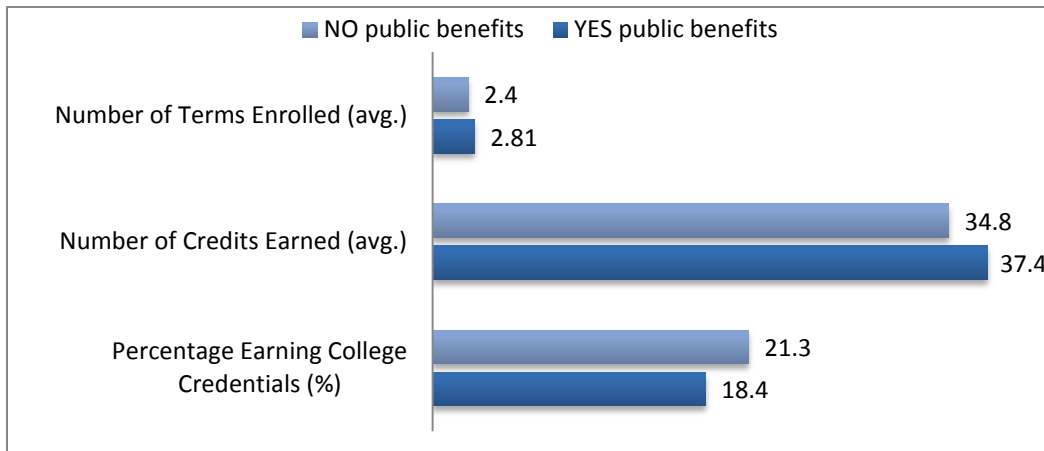
As shown in Figure 4, we found that **low-income students at Gateway who received public benefits between Summer 2011 and Fall 2013 enrolled in more terms during this period.**

²⁹ Our data do not provide detailed information on the supports students may have received in addition to financial assistance through these public benefits programs. For example, the Ready to Work program in Kentucky supported through TANF does provide case management support for recipients, but we do not know the extent to which students took advantage of these supports.

³⁰ See Appendix B for a more detailed discussion of this methodology.

Specifically, public benefits recipients enrolled in 2.8 terms on average during the BACC demonstration, compared with 2.4 for the comparison group. We did not find statistically significant differences in the number of credits earned during the demonstration or the percentage of students who earned a college credential.

Figure 4: Impact of Public Benefits on Student Outcomes, Gateway Community & Technical College (N=2,491)



Note: Neither the difference in number of credits earned nor percentage earning college credentials is statistically significant. Significance for number of terms enrolled is $p < .001$

We further conducted exploratory analyses comparing students who received two or more public benefits with those who received only one public benefit. Compared to students who received only one type of public benefit, students with multiple public benefits were more likely to have children, be women, have enrolled in more prior terms, and to appear in our database later during the BACC demonstration. Yet, these public benefits recipients – all of whom received SNAP, TANF cash assistance, and/or childcare – enrolled in 3.3 terms and accumulated 43 total credits on average during the BACC demonstration, and 24% earned a college credential. These outcomes are higher than for students who received only one public benefit, and also higher than for similar students who did not receive any public benefits.³¹ This exploratory analysis gives some credence to the idea that bundling several public benefits could make a real difference in student outcomes.

³¹ These findings are exploratory and outside of the Propensity Score Model framework, therefore caution should be used when interpreting these data.

Conclusion: Benefits Access at Community Colleges and the Need for More Research on Policy and Practice

This report provides evidence from five community colleges' efforts to design and implement benefits access services, including identifying the policies and practices necessary to embed these services into ongoing operations. Our evaluation also found evidence of the impact of benefits access on students' academic progress that suggests low-income students – especially those who also are parents – and who receive benefits such as food stamps, TANF cash assistance, and childcare in addition to the federal Pell Grant, can be helped along their education pathways toward a credential that could eventually alleviate their need for public benefits.

Although we conclude that providing benefits access to community college students is a promising strategy to generate additional financial and non-academic supports for students, much more evidence is needed for policymakers and practitioners to better understand how public benefits complement higher education benefits, such as the Pell Grant, and how the bundling of public benefits with federal and state financial aid resources, as well as with college academic and non-academic supports, can accelerate college completion for low-income students (Table 4).

One of the challenges to address in future research are the regulatory and privacy barriers that seemingly block efforts for *public* colleges and other *public* agencies to link data, so that more rigorous analyses of student outcomes can be undertaken. As noted in this report, only one of five colleges successfully collaborated with its human services agency to match records between these two public systems. This data match was limited to point-in-time snapshots for each academic term, rather than an ongoing (e.g., monthly) data match that would provide a more reliable picture of the students who have benefits throughout an academic term.

An additional area for future inquiry would provide a more granular view of how colleges adapt and adjust current student services to incorporate benefits access, including how existing roles and responsibilities are reassigned, and new positions are added to provide these services. Related to this in-depth research would be a focus on leadership decisions that result in accountability mechanisms and budgetary allocations that allow for benefits access services to be sustained.

A third area where additional learning is needed revolves around knowledge and information sharing about public benefits among faculty, staff, and students. On the one hand, faculty and staff deeply involved in benefits access struggled with the complexity and nuance of public benefits programs, and stakeholders not directly involved often were unclear about what public benefits were, or that the college did or should provide access to them. On the other hand, colleges noted that students often expressed disinterest in public benefits – indicating they did not need them (even when they were eligible). The BACC evaluation did not explore the reasons for students' resistance to apply for and accept public benefits for which they are eligible.

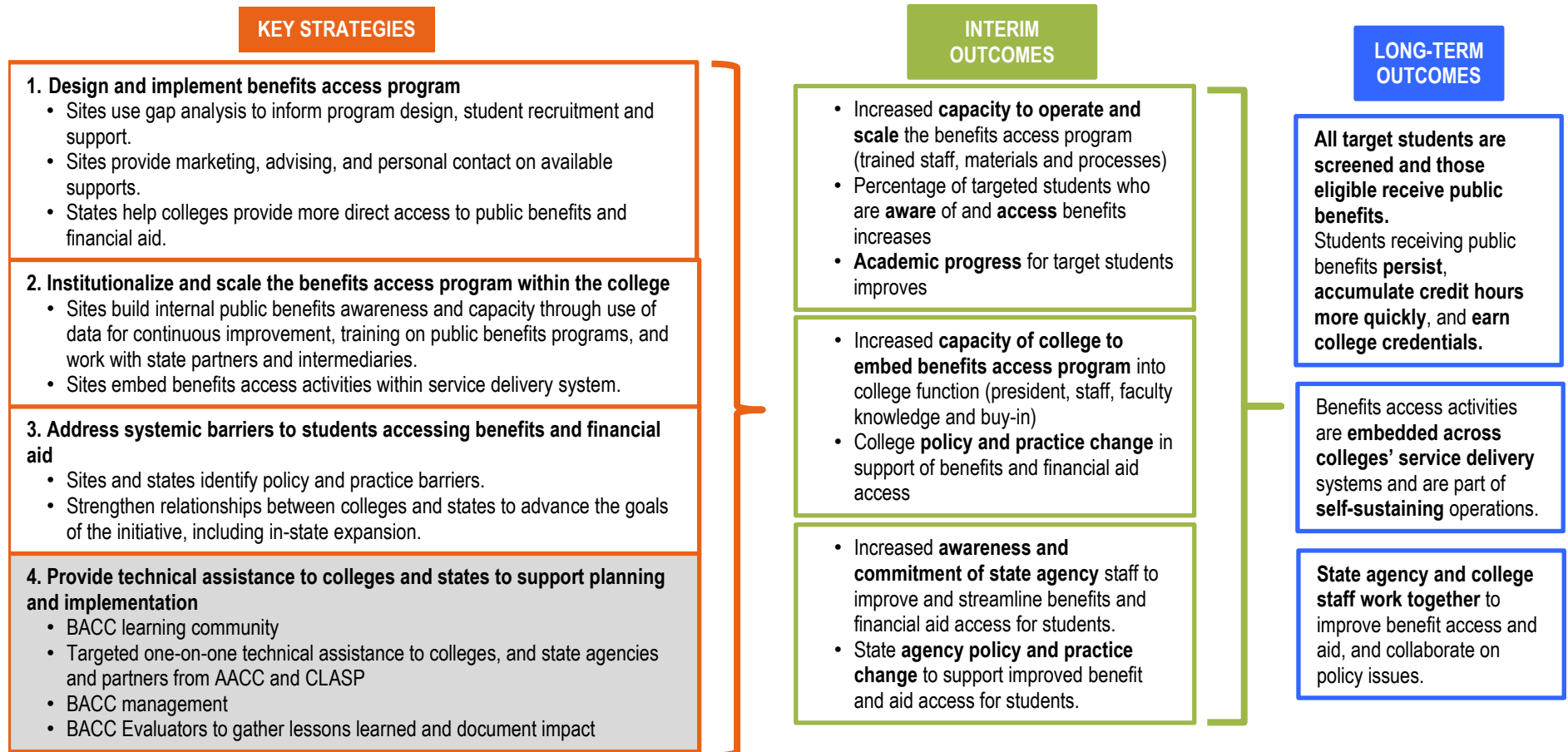
Table 4: Further Exploration and Inquiry about Benefits Access Services at Community Colleges

<p>Questions about Implementation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strategy Innovation: How do colleges continue to innovate around weaving benefits access into college academic and non-academic supports? ● Strategy Tactics: Why do college leaders decide if benefits access services will become part of reassigned roles and responsibilities of existing staff, or of new positions that will be added? ● Sustainability: Aside from the approaches taken by BACC demonstration colleges, what additional ways can college student services areas incorporate benefits access into their work? What are the most important mechanisms for colleges to insure that benefits access services are sustained, including how staff roles and responsibilities are assigned for delivering services? Also, how are accountability mechanisms and budgetary allocations leveraged? ● Policy: What policies are needed at the local, state, and federal level to support the implementation of benefits access services at colleges? For example, how might eligibility and awarding of public benefits be bundled more seamlessly with federal and state financial aid resources, such as Pell Grants?
<p>Questions about Impact</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Student Impact: Ultimately, how do specific benefits access services – both financial support as well as wrap-around student support services – affect college retention and completion for low-income students?
<p>Questions about Context</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● College Commitments: Why and how do colleges make the commitment to benefits access in their communities? ● Student Perspectives: Why do students resist showing up to apply for benefits? What are their experiences with, and attitudes toward, public benefits?

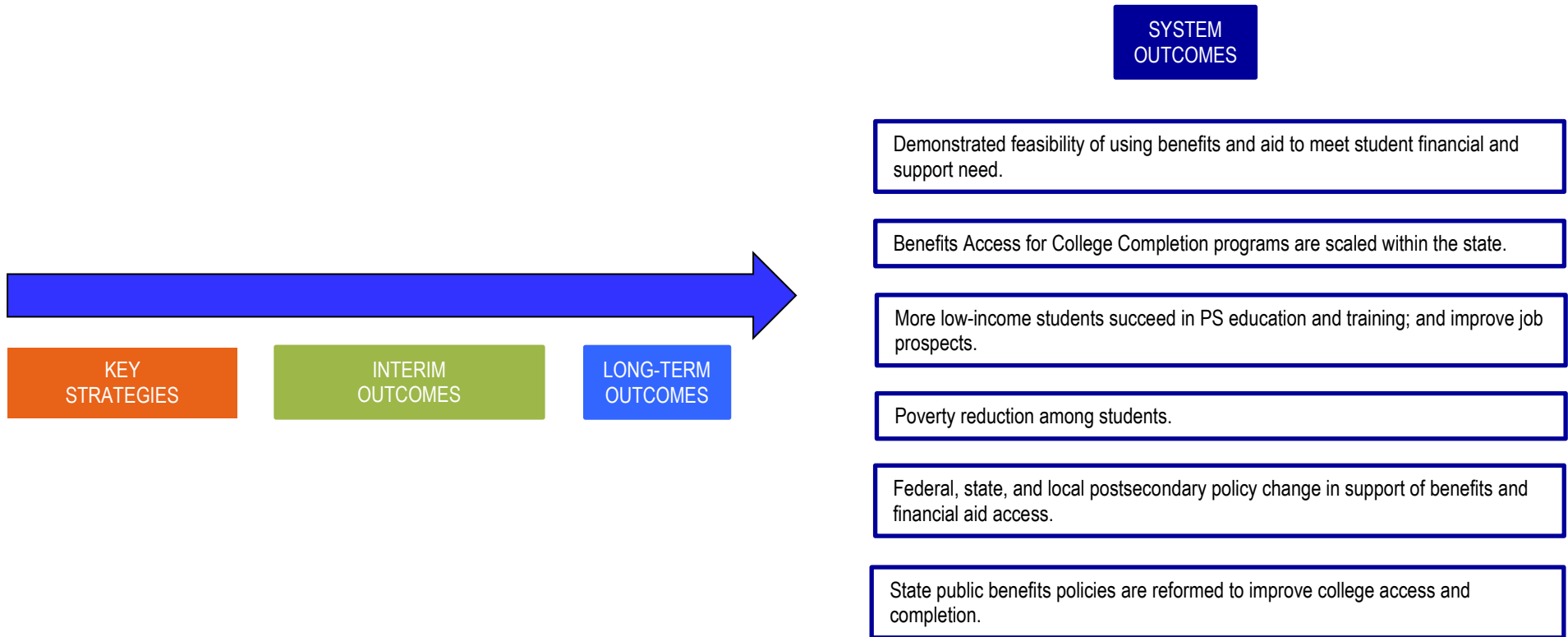
Finally, federal, state, and local policies are not clearly aligned to leverage the use of public benefits to support students enrolled in college. As noted in our report, BACC demonstration colleges struggled with the complex rules and regulations of various public benefits programs, and most did not begin this work equipped to manage these complexities alongside their day-to-day responsibilities to support students with financial aid, academic advising and supports, and non-academic counseling. Additional research to document how federal, state, and local policies across several agencies, programs, and funding streams can be aligned to support college student success and completion could yield important insights for colleges that are seeking to implement benefits access services on their campuses.

Our field-level work provides some important findings into the key factors the colleges learned during the BACC demonstration – such as the need for a hub with dedicated, knowledgeable staff, and the value of opt-out pre-screening for public benefits. However, a much deeper understanding of the reasons why colleges committed human and financial resources to integrating and sustaining benefits access also could yield more generalizable evidence on the drivers of “institutional change” within a community college setting. Moreover, a richer ethnographic understanding of students’ perceptions of public benefits could yield new insights for colleges considering whether benefits access should be part of their comprehensive student services.

Appendix A: BACC Logic Model (Original)



Appendix A: BACC Logic Model (Original)



Appendix B: Evaluation Methodology

Qualitative Methods

Our work with the BACC demonstration began in January 2012 during the planning phase of the initiative. We attended the first cross-site convening, conducted individual conversations with prospective sites about data capacity, communicated regularly with intermediary (CLASP and AACC) partners, and observed BACC application and selection processes in advance of finalizing our evaluation plan in Summer 2012.

Our qualitative data collection methods took place between June 2012, once the consortium of intermediary and funding partners made implementation decisions, and June 2014, as grants to the five colleges were ending. Our evaluation included two in-depth on-site visits to each of the BACC colleges in Fall 2012 and Spring 2014. In between our site visits, we conducted a series of phone interviews with the five colleges every six months. We used semi-structured interview protocols during site visits and phone interviews to collect data from a variety of stakeholders involved in efforts, including community college presidents and vice presidents, administrative deans, faculty members, student services directors, front-line student services staff, community based organization partners, as well as the individuals responsible for directing BACC efforts on campuses.

In addition, we participated in bi-annual cross-site convenings, observed technical assistance calls, conducted regular debrief and check-in calls with intermediary and funding partners, and reviewed documents from the sites on an ongoing basis. We also conducted formal interviews with team members from both CLASP and AACC.

Information from our first year of data collection informed an interim report, which was delivered in Summer 2013, and provided formative feedback to CLASP, AACC, and funding partners about the BACC demonstration.

This Final Evaluation Report is based on data collection from across the full two years of the project.

Quantitative Methods

In addition to our qualitative data collection, we received student-level data from Gateway Community & Technical College in Kentucky for eight terms, from Summer 2011 through Fall 2013. These data were matched with state benefits records prior to being de-identified and shared with our research team to allow us to investigate the relationship between benefits receipt and student academic outcomes. Across the eight terms, we received data on 7,498 unique students.

For the analyses presented in this report, we limited the sample to students who were eligible for maximum Pell Grants (i.e., students with an expected family contribution of \$0), to those who had non-missing values on parental status and to those who were residents of Kentucky. This yielded a final analysis sample of 3,572 students, 1,651 of whom received benefits at some point during the study period (46%) and 1,921 of whom had not (54%).

To analyze the impact of public benefits on student success, we employed a quasi-experimental comparison group design, in which the academic performance of benefits recipients was compared with that of similar peers who did not receive benefits. The latter constitute the comparison group. As benefits are not distributed to the population randomly, but based on both eligibility rules for programs and the motivation and willingness of individuals to seek out and navigate the application process, it is likely that students who receive benefits differ from those who do not on important dimensions. One approach to mitigating such potential differences is to select a comparison group that ensures students are similar on a pooled set of characteristics known to be associated with the outcome of interest. Propensity Score Matching (PSM), a method first published by Rosenbaum and Rubin,³² is a statistical matching technique that employs logistic regression to find such a comparable group.

In carrying out PSM, we constructed a logistic regression model that predicted the likelihood of benefits receipt. In selecting factors to balance the treatment and comparison groups in this model, we chose demographic and academic factors that made theoretical sense with respect to the academic outcomes of interest. The final model incorporated the following factors:

- **Gender:** Probability of being Male; reference group female.
- **Race/Ethnicity:** Probability of being Hispanic, African American, or “Other”; reference group White.
- **Age at Beginning of Study Period.**
- **Parental Status:** Indicator of whether student has child; reference group non-parents.
- **Parental Age:** Interaction of parent status and age; indicator of age of parents.
- **Prior Terms of Enrollment:** Number of prior terms student has been enrolled at Gateway.
- **Prior Credits Completed:** Number of prior credits student has been awarded.
- **First Term of Entry:** Indicator of when student first appeared in study database to ensure treatment and comparison groups are balanced on possible time to reach academic milestones.
- **No Credits Completed:** Indicator for students included in database, but who have no record of credits completed in first term of enrollment during study period.

As we employed sampling with replacement, it was possible for a comparison group member to be matched with more than one treatment case. The logistic regression model indicated that of the 1,921 individuals in the comparison group, 840 were best matched to benefits recipients on

³² Rosenbaum, P. R. and Rubin, D. B. (1983). The central role of the propensity score in observational studies for causal effects. *Biometrika* 70 (1): 41–55. DOI:10.1093/biomet/70.1.41.

the factors detailed above. In total, 54 percent of the comparison group sample was matched to one participant, 88 percent were matched to three or fewer participants, and only one percent of the sample was matched to more than seven participants.

Table B1 shows the mean values of the characteristics among both benefits recipients and the final group of matched comparison students (weighted by the count weight). As a whole, the model characteristics were balanced between the groups indicating the selected comparison group is well matched to the treatment group, and is thus a good fit for conducting analyses.

Table B1. Means and Differences in Standard Deviations between Benefits Recipients and Matched Comparison Group

	Students Receiving Benefits	Selected Comparison Group ³³	Difference in Pooled Standard Deviations
TOTAL Number	1651	840	
Model Factors			
Male gender	.21	.22	.02
Age	28.5	28.7	.02
Parent	.77	.76	.03
Parent Age	22.1	21.7	.03
Hispanic	.01	.02	.05
African American	.17	.17	.01
“Other” race	.04	.04	.00
Number of prior terms enrolled	1.9	1.8	.03
Number of prior credits earned	17.1	16.1	.04
First term in study dataset	2.9	3.0	.05
No credits earned	.07	.08	.02

In addition to examining model balance overall and on an individual factor basis, we conducted several sensitivity analyses to examine goodness of fit and model balance. We first investigated whether our model balance met the guidelines set forth by the U.S. Department of Education’s What Works Clearinghouse (WWC). The WWC requires that all quasi-experimental studies demonstrate that treatment and comparison group populations are, in fact, similar on observed characteristics to avoid selection bias. These guidelines indicate that, regardless of the statistical significance of baseline group differences, treatment and comparison groups cannot differ by more than 0.25 of a standard deviation on any measured characteristic (based on the variation of that characteristic in the pooled sample) and that any group differences greater than a standard deviation of 0.05 must be statistically adjusted for in the outcome analysis.³⁴ As Table B1

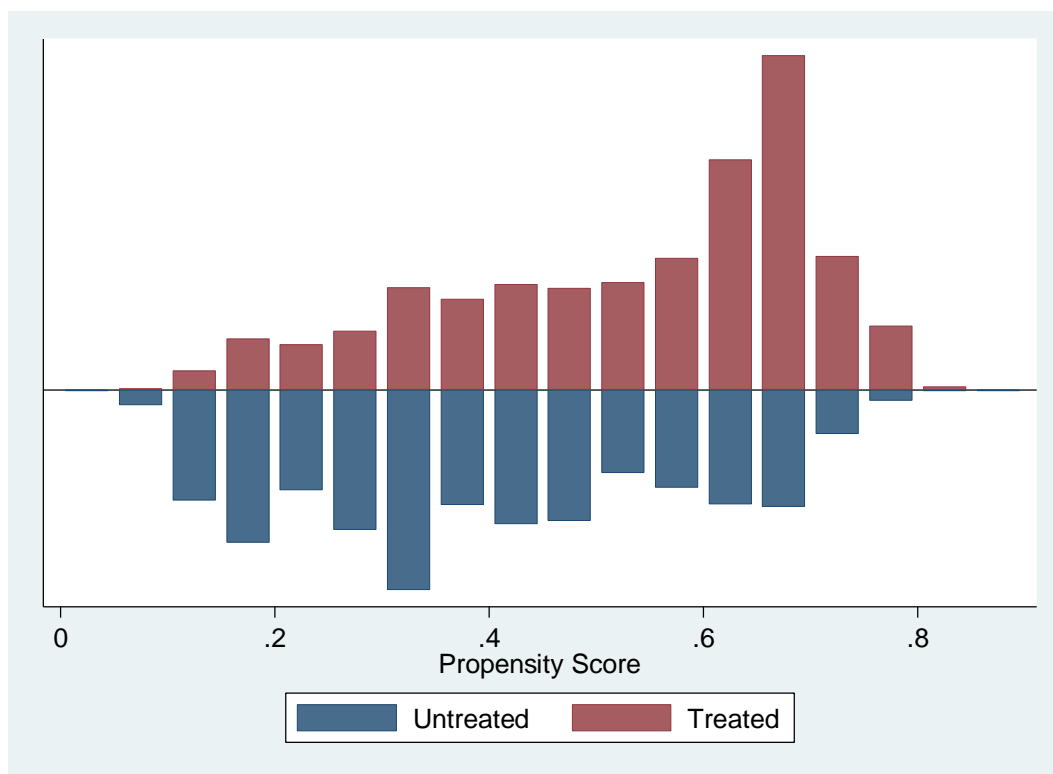
³³ Statistics in this group were weighted by the count weight.

³⁴ U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. 2010. *WWC Procedures and Standards Handbook 2.1*. Retrieved 10/13/14 from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/reference_resources/wwc_procedures_v2_1_standards_handbook.pdf

illustrates, none of the group differences exceeded this standard, again providing evidence of good model balance.

Additionally, we examined the goodness of fit of our modeling approach by looking at the region of common support for cases (i.e., the region in which treatment and comparison individuals have overlapping propensity scores). Figure B1 displays this graph. The red bars represent individuals who received public benefits, and the blue bars represent the matched comparison group individuals. As can be seen, there is a high degree of overlap between the two groups. While treatments have a higher propensity score on average, there are not substantial areas of scores where treatments are not balanced by comparison individuals, and vice versa.

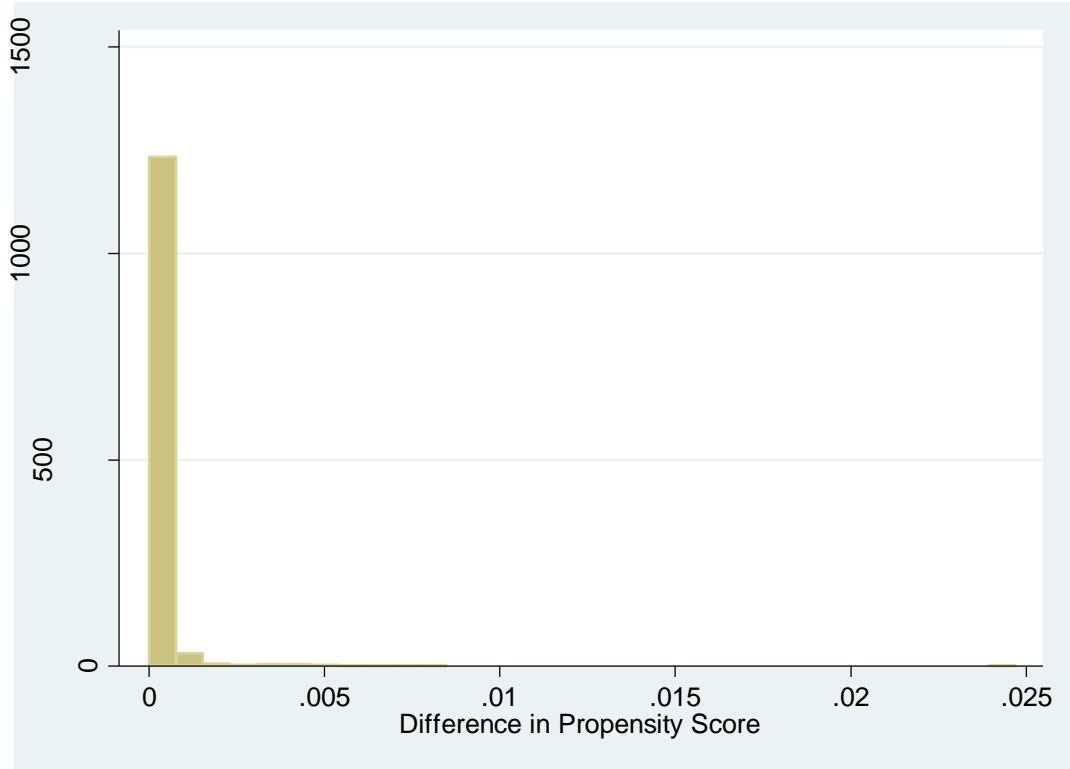
Figure B1. Distribution of Propensity Scores among Matched Sample



Source: Stata command "psgraph," created by Edwin Leuven, École Nationale de la Statistique et de l'Administration Économique.

Another way to think of the balance in the dispersion of propensity scores is to examine the absolute difference in propensity scores between treatments and their matches. Figure B2 presents this graph, which indicates the propensity scores of pairs are nearly identical. Most have no difference in scores between the pair, and all are below .005 in absolute difference. Examination of both of these figures provides additional support that the two groups are highly comparable. While we cannot be sure the two groups are comparable beyond the factors balanced in the model, these results provide additional evidence that the population selected provides a reasonable comparison group to the benefits recipients in this study sample.

Figure B2. Absolute Differences in Matched Pairs Propensity Scores



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