

# COMMUNITY INSIGHTS

What Matters Most For Equity

VOLUME 2 | ISSUE 1 | FALL 2020



**CIVITAS**<sup>®</sup>  
LEARNING



## More equitable outcomes for the students we serve is within our reach.

When we know what's actually working for our students, there is a path to remove the hidden barriers and unintended consequences that limit equity and student success.

We understand that it's not always obvious to know where or how to start the critical work to address disparities, but together, we can.



**Equity, as Achieving the Dream defines it, is “ensuring that each student receives what he or she needs to be successful through the intentional design of the college experience”.**

Welcome to a new volume of the Civitas Learning *Community Insights Report*. These reports shine a spotlight on unique insights and emerging trends from across our partner community. Volume 2 of the *Community Insights Report* builds on the foundation of our first set of reports, continuing the dialogue about opportunities to improve student and institutional outcomes.

For this issue, we are turning that quest for student success toward a topic that is at the forefront of conversations in the United States and abroad: equity. It’s a longtime concern that has received heightened attention during a year in which a global pandemic and social unrest have placed the glare of the spotlight on inequities for marginalized populations.

The higher education community is no stranger to considering equity issues, but the conversation about student equity now has broadened beyond the traditional notion of simply promoting access to postsecondary education. Today’s look at equity encompasses a student’s entire journey through higher education. Equity, as Achieving the Dream defines it, is “ensuring that each student receives what he or she needs to be successful through the intentional design of the college experience”—though the organization recommends that each institution define what equity means on its own campus.<sup>1</sup>

Students now are working to succeed in a new type of academic environment, with higher education and societal changes that are making equity even more difficult to achieve.



## This work is rarely one-size-fits-all.

**Institutional leaders in a June 2020 Civitas Learning panel discussion told us these changes are exacerbating systemic inequities in achievement and persistence. Students face growing challenges ranging from food insecurity to feelings of not belonging.<sup>2</sup>**

Which institutional programs are most effectively promoting equity, then? Unfortunately, the role of analytics in higher education—collecting data to enhance outcomes—for examining the impact of services, programming, and interventions on equity has been minimal. Traditional measures of student success programs have focused primarily on overall results, student satisfaction, and participation levels. While useful, these measures do not control for selection bias or provide sufficient specificity. In fact, only about a third of respondents to a 2019 institutional survey by Tyton Partners reported looking at programmatic outcome data across different student groups.<sup>3</sup>

That survey revealed that, even when institutions consider disaggregated data to measure student success programs' effectiveness, too often they do not execute strategies to elevate the programs that advance equity most effectively.<sup>4</sup>

We set out to look more closely at which college and university initiatives are promoting equity in student success—with the idea of not only discovering which programs are working, but also helping to guide investment and action from colleges and universities. In August 2020 we completed a yearlong study of more than 300 student success initiatives at 29 colleges and universities, including Hispanic-Serving Institutions. While a wide array of factors and intersectionalities are associated with inequities, for this initial equity report, we focused specifically on how student

success programs are working for different races, ethnicities and genders, at different types of institutions. This study found that student success initiatives and investments generally are working, providing measurably improved persistence for the students they serve. Compared with our 2019 aggregate research on student success initiatives, our analysis of initiatives measured from August 2019-August 2020 signals progress toward optimizing programs.

Nearly 90% of all initiatives analyzed improved student success overall with statistically significant positive results on persistence. Of the programs measured, precisely 10.59% had an overall negative or neutral impact on student success. It is worth noting that the colleges and universities included in this review are actively engaged in initiative analysis and have, therefore, had the opportunity to improve programs based on previous measurement results. As such, the results presented in this report represent a subset of colleges and universities, and therefore, may be more positive than the field at large.

**This study's findings challenged some assumptions about effective success interventions, suggesting that a closer look at what works—and for whom—is a wise step in working to close achievement gaps.**

It's also important to note that policies, programs, processes, and initiatives have different effects on different student subgroups. And there is additional variance at each institution. In other words, this work is rarely one-size-fits-all.

Instead of making assumptions about what works and for whom, it is imperative to understand the effectiveness of programs for different students at individual institutions. In some cases, while a program has an overall positive impact, some student subpopulations experience a negative or neutral impact—and vice versa. The trends in this study provide community benchmarks and broader signals, but an institution's specific data and analytics should inform the actions taken for their students.



# What Matters Most For Equity: Background and Analysis

According to our analysis, the most effective student success programs:

- Reinforce belonging;
- Recognize a more comprehensive view of the student; and
- Leverage advising and degree planning.

Let's look at what our findings showed about the latest trends within our community of practice. We'll dive into specifics for each of these *Community Insights* later in the report.

## Success by Institution Type:

Comparing community colleges versus four-year institutions revealed that the positive impact of community colleges' student success programs nearly doubled that of four-year institutions' programs.

**FIGURE 1:**  
**Institution Category, by Program Consistency and Impact**

INSTITUTION CATEGORY	POSITIVE INITIATIVES	NEGATIVE OR NEUTRAL INITIATIVES	AVERAGE IMPACT
<b>Overall</b> (Community Colleges and Universities)	<b>270</b> Initiatives = 89.41%	<b>32</b> Initiatives = 10.59%	<b>+5.76</b> Percentage Points
<b>Community Colleges</b>	<b>78</b> Initiatives = 92.86%	<b>6</b> Initiatives = 7.14%	<b>+7.47</b> Percentage Points
<b>Universities</b>	<b>192</b> Initiatives = 88.07%	<b>26</b> Initiatives = 11.93%	<b>+4.63</b> Percentage Points

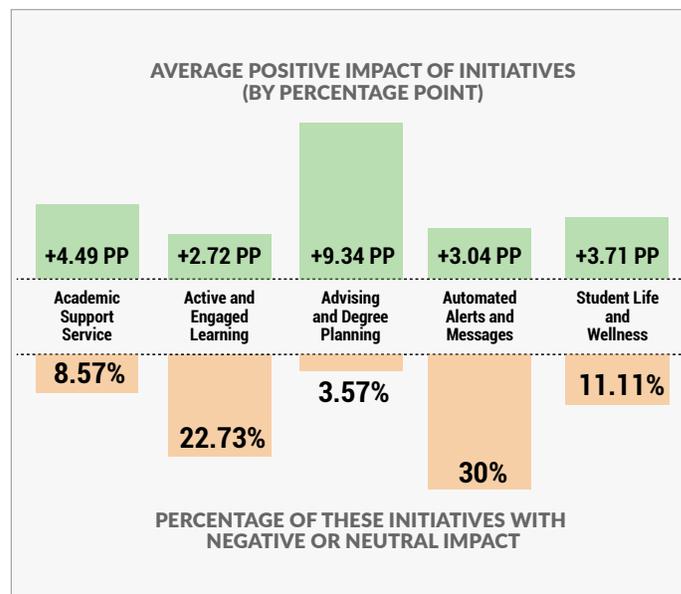
**Note:** When we reviewed programs according to HSI status, we found that HSIs' student success initiatives yielded results close to that of non-HSIs.

## Success by Program Type:

When examining different types of initiatives, the average lift was 5.76 percentage points. But there are interesting trends about what types of programs and investments are working. Different types of programs yielded different results, with advising and degree planning showing the greatest increase in student success: 9.34 percentage points.

In fact, advising and degree planning programs' positive impact more than doubled that of the program type showing the second-greatest improvement. And advising and degree planning programs' lift was greater than that of the next two most-impactful program categories—academic support services and student life and wellness—combined.

**FIGURE 2:**  
**Categories of Student Success Initiatives, by Program Consistency and Impact**



Comparing the outcomes of different types of programs at different types of institutions also shows interesting results. For community colleges and four-year institutions alike, again: it was advising and degree planning that proved most impactful.



# What Matters Most For Equity: Background and Analysis

At community colleges, this type of program had a positive impact of 12.41 percentage points, on average. At universities, advising and degree planning’s average positive impact was 7.77 percentage points. No programs in this category showed a negative or neutral impact on student success at community colleges, and only a small portion (5.26%) did so at four-year schools.

Academic support services—such as supplemental instruction, coaching or tutoring—also yielded positive outcomes, although the improvement was less pronounced at four-year institutions. Conversely, student life and wellness—programs ranging from recreation to housing and food—were effective at both types of institution but had a greater positive impact at universities.

**FIGURE 3:**  
**Categories of Top Performing Student Success Initiatives, by Program Consistency and Impact**

## COMMUNITY COLLEGES:

INITIATIVE CATEGORY	INITIATIVES WITH NEGATIVE OR NEUTRAL IMPACT	AVERAGE IMPACT
Academic Support Services	0.00%	+6.77 PP
Advising and Degree Planning	0.00%	+12.41 PP
Student Life and Wellness	14.29%	+2.09 PP

## UNIVERSITIES:

INITIATIVE CATEGORY	INITIATIVES WITH NEGATIVE OR NEUTRAL IMPACT	AVERAGE IMPACT
Academic Support Services	14.52%	+2.57 PP
Advising and Degree Planning	5.26%	+7.77 PP
Student Life and Wellness	11.11%	+3.79 PP

## Success by Student Populations, Race and Ethnicity:

We also examined the most effective student success programs’ impact on different student populations. Among the populations showing statistically significant impact, the initiatives had the greatest positive effect on students whose race is Pacific Islander or Indian. The positive impact for Pacific Islanders, in fact, was more than double that of the entire population.

The top programs’ positive impact for white students, on the other hand, was slightly below that of the overall population. And, among populations showing statistically significant impact, white students experienced positive results that were greater than average in only the student life and wellness category.

**FIGURE 4:**  
**Top 3 Performing Student Success Initiatives, by Subpopulation-Race**

<b>Asian... +5.75 PP Overall</b> ACROSS ALL PROGRAMS <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+8.30 Percentage Points... Advising and Degree Planning</li> <li>+4.70 Percentage Points... Academic Support Services</li> <li>+2.39 Percentage Points... Student Life and Wellness</li> </ol>
<b>Black... +6.78 PP Overall</b> ACROSS ALL PROGRAMS <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+11.34 Percentage Points... Advising and Degree Planning</li> <li>+6.59 Percentage Points... Academic Support Services</li> <li>+3.24 Percentage Points... Student Life and Wellness</li> </ol>
<b>American Indian... +10.76 PP Overall</b> ACROSS ALL PROGRAMS <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+12.45 Percentage Points... Advising and Degree Planning</li> <li>+6.55 Percentage Points... Academic Support Services</li> </ol>
<b>Pacific Islander... +11.73 PP Overall</b> ACROSS ALL PROGRAMS <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+11.73 Percentage Points... Advising and Degree Planning</li> </ol>
<b>Two or More... +8.19 PP Overall</b> ACROSS ALL PROGRAMS <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+9.98 Percentage Points... Advising and Degree Planning</li> <li>+6.10 Percentage Points... Academic Support Services</li> <li>+3.48 Percentage Points... Student Life and Wellness</li> </ol>



<b>Unknown... +6.47 Overall</b> ACROSS ALL PROGRAMS	
1.	<b>+10.1 Percentage Points...</b> Advising and Degree Planning
2.	<b>+4.37 Percentage Points...</b> Academic Support Services
3.	<b>+1.63 Percentage Points...</b> Student Life and Wellness
<b>White... +4.8 Overall</b> ACROSS ALL PROGRAMS	
1.	<b>+8.38 Percentage Points...</b> Advising and Degree Planning
2.	<b>+4.15 Percentage Points...</b> Academic Support Services
3.	<b>+3.76 Percentage Points...</b> Student Life and Wellness
<b>Overall... +5.76 PP</b> ACROSS ALL PROGRAMS	
1.	<b>+9.34 Percentage Points...</b> Advising and Degree Planning
2.	<b>+4.49 Percentage Points...</b> Academic Support Services
3.	<b>+3.71 Percentage Points...</b> Student Life And Wellness

Note: Some subpopulations did not have a critical mass for program impact evaluation.

**FIGURE 5:**  
**Top 3 Performing Student Success Initiatives, by Subpopulation-Ethnicity**

<b>Hispanic or Latino... +6.74 PP Overall</b> ACROSS ALL PROGRAMS	
1.	<b>+9.74 Percentage Points...</b> Advising and Degree Planning
2.	<b>+5.41 Percentage Points...</b> Academic Support Services
3.	<b>+3.88 Percentage Points...</b> Student Life and Wellness
<b>Non-Hispanic / Latino... +4.53 PP Overall</b> ACROSS ALL PROGRAMS	
1.	<b>+8.40 Percentage Points...</b> Advising and Degree Planning
2.	<b>+3.69 Percentage Points...</b> Academic Support Services
3.	<b>+3.65 Percentage Points...</b> Student Life and Wellness

Looking specifically at Hispanic or Latino students, advising and degree planning showed the greatest positive impact when compared with results for the Hispanic/Latino and non-Hispanic/Latino populations overall. For this population, the greatest lift in this program category—and, in fact, in the top three student success programs overall—occurred at non-HSIs.

## Success by Subpopulation, Gender:

In reviewing the impact of student success initiatives according to gender, we saw some signal of equitable impact. In other cases, we found notable differences.

There was nearly equal lift for males and females in advising and in academic support services. Student life programs signaled a slightly higher lift for females. Overall, males saw a significantly greater positive outcome from active and engaged learning programs and from automated alerts. It is worth noting, however, that automated alerts indicated broader cause for concern. We will examine this insight later in this report.

**FIGURE 6:**  
**Categories of Student Success Initiatives, by Gender and Impact**

INITIATIVE	GENDER	
Academic Support Services	<b>+4.78 PP</b> For Females	<b>+4.64 PP</b> For Males
Advising and Degree Planning	<b>+9.00 PP</b> For Females	<b>+8.99 PP</b> For Males
Student Life and Wellness	<b>+2.66 PP</b> For Females	<b>+4.07 PP</b> For Males
Active and Engaged Learning	<b>+1.83 PP</b> For Females	<b>+4.09 PP</b> For Males
Automated Alerts and Messages	<b>+1.66 PP</b> For Females	<b>+4.09 PP</b> For Males
<b>Overall</b>	<b>+5.14 PP</b> For Females	<b>+5.34 PP</b> For Males

Note: This report used student-reported demographic data from institutions. One initiative included a gender unknown subpopulation, but that analysis did not establish critical mass for effective analysis within this report.



Where our analysis revealed negative impacts, those tended to be larger for underserved minorities as well. This more-pronounced negative effect is in line with what institutional leaders on the June 2020 Civitas Learning equity panel noted about societal issues: They more profoundly affect marginalized populations, widening equity gaps.<sup>6</sup>

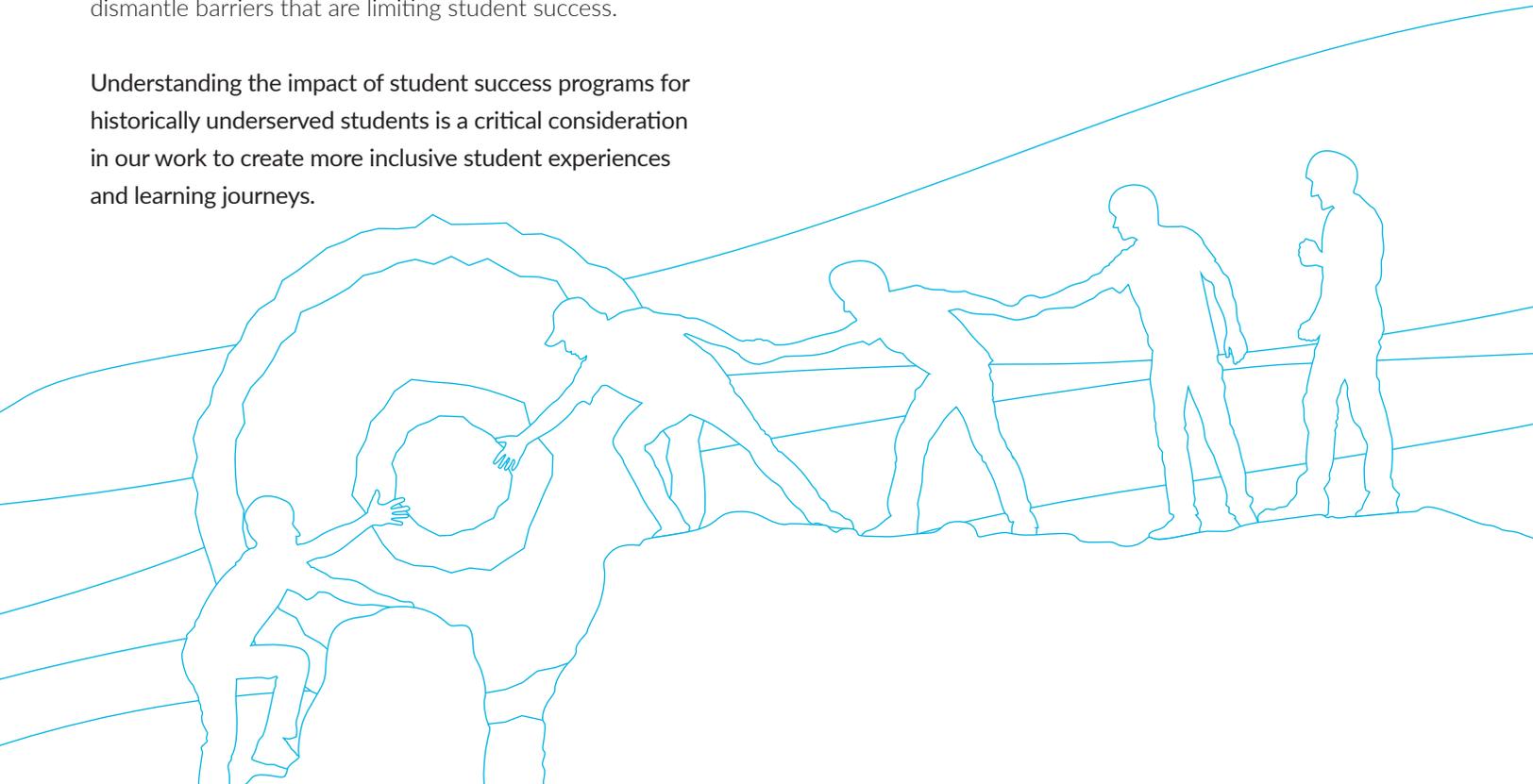
Our analysis suggests that, to improve outcomes for historically underserved and vulnerable populations, colleges and universities should remember that advising moves the needle most consistently. The positive impact for advising outpaced all other types of programs overall. This doesn't mean that institutions must hire more advisors or ask advisors to do more. In fact, most institutions cannot afford to simply hire more advisors, so instead, they make sure their advisors are enabled to do their best work effectively and efficiently. These findings mean that an advisor's relationships with students matters, personalized outreach matters, and proactive attention to student needs matters.

Within the programs analyzed, we see tremendous opportunity to leverage deeper intelligence when working to address equity gaps, challenge unconscious bias, and dismantle barriers that are limiting student success.

**Understanding the impact of student success programs for historically underserved students is a critical consideration in our work to create more inclusive student experiences and learning journeys.**

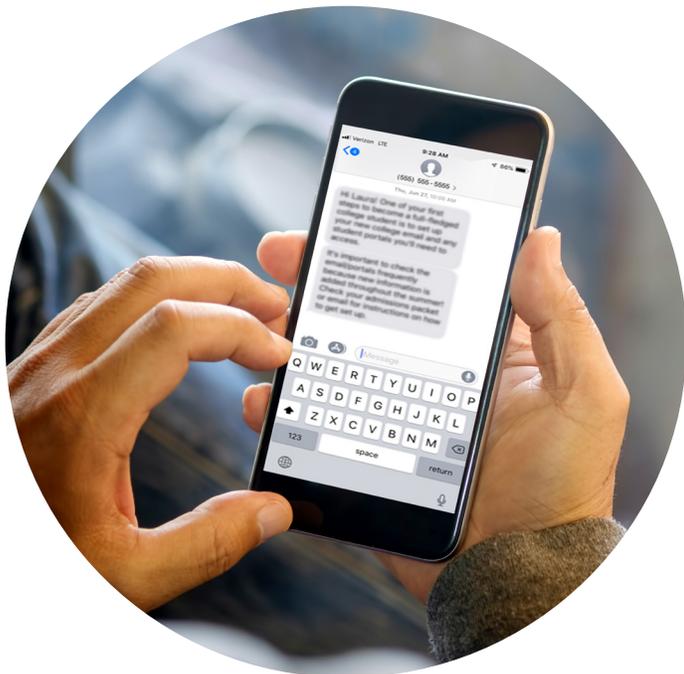
## Key Takeaways:

1. Overall, advising and degree planning yielded the most consistently effective and significant results among program types. Our analysis also showed these programs have little negative impact for students at four-year institutions and no negative impact for those at community colleges.
2. As a general trend, historically under served minority populations see larger positive impact from interventions than do white and Asian students. Pacific Islanders glean the most positive results despite a small N, an encouraging finding considering the results of a 2019 American Council on Education report that cites Pacific Islanders among groups showing gaps in education and labor market outcomes.<sup>5</sup>





## Community Insight 1: Highlighting academic struggle with automated alerts is risky.



### What the Data Say:

Use caution with automation, because 30% of automated alerts don't work.

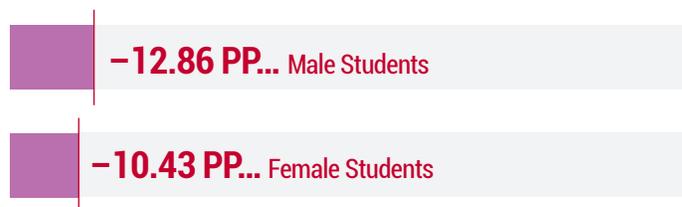
Nearly one in three of these automated alert programs, whether they were kudos or flags, measured a negative or neutral impact on student success.

Automated alerts or flags, intended to scale student outreach and provide early alerts for at-risk students, had the highest percentage of negative or insignificant impact on students among the program categories we analyzed. Overall, automated alerts measured a *moderately* positive lift, bolstered only because of the generally positive impact of “kudos.” But there were concerning and significant differences among subpopulations.

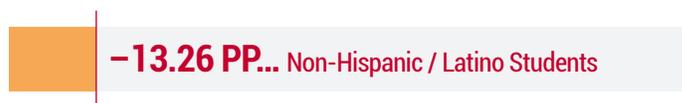
The figure below shows the impact of an automated alert (or flag) program at a community college. Overall, the impact of the program was poor, yielding an 11.67 percentage point negative impact. And the data show those negative impacts were in the double digits for every subpopulation analyzed, with the worst results occurring for white students.

**FIGURE 7:**  
**Automated Alert / Flag Program Impact,  
by Subpopulation**

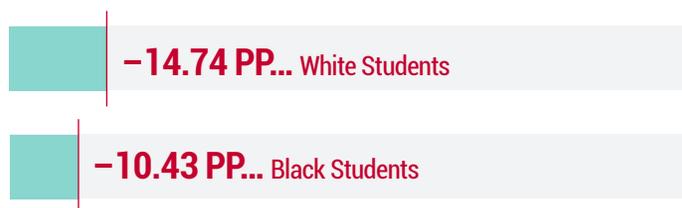
#### GENDER:



#### ETHNICITY:



#### RACE:



For highly vulnerable students, the results were even worse. We reviewed the automated alert program according to predicted student risk and how the initiative affected the institution's most vulnerable population. In fact, for students identified in the bottom quartile of predicted success by the Civitas Learning platform, automated alerts have a negative result of 18.33 percentage points. Students with little to no predicted risk did not fare well, either, with a measured negative effect of 9.60 percentage points for the automated alert campaign.



The good news is that, in nearly all the programs we studied, negative or neutral outcomes weren't worse for historically underserved student subpopulations. In fact, the impact of these initiatives was slightly less negative. But any neutral or negative impact only compounds inequities for minority subpopulations.

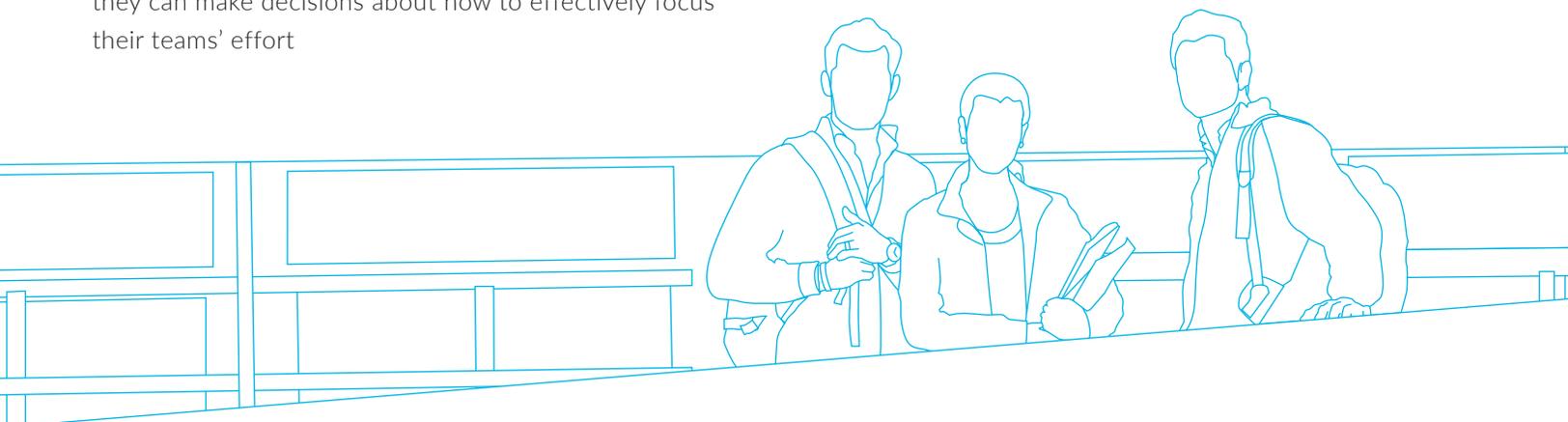
For students who are predicted to be most vulnerable or at risk, doubling down or highlighting their academic struggle may do far more harm than good. No matter what system or process you use to identify academic struggle, highlighting a student's risk through an automated flag or transactional message magnifies their vulnerability. Exercise caution before using this approach for student outreach.

As we examine the effects of these programs, we should bear in mind that students are not one dimensional. They belong to more than one category or subpopulation, which include aspects such as engagement relative to peers and socioeconomic factors. Even when considered through this more intersectional lens, students predicted to be most vulnerable or at risk were more likely to leave as a result of institutional emphasis on their academic struggle.

When student success leaders can monitor student risk throughout a term— including recent relevant behavior/ engagement and socio-economic factors (in addition to demographic information)—they can act on predictive signals early. And when they know what programs are likely to produce positive outcomes for specific students, they can make decisions about how to effectively focus their teams' effort

## Key Takeaways:

1. We should take a do-no-harm approach when connecting with students.
2. When instrumenting well-intended alerts or programs to support struggling students, leaders and practitioners should be mindful of timing, personalization, and messaging around academic struggle.
3. The goal is to keep students on their academic journey, so it is vital to prioritize inclusivity and belonging when supporting students.





## Community Insight 2:

When considering student risk, take a comprehensive look—because intersectionality matters in focusing care and support.



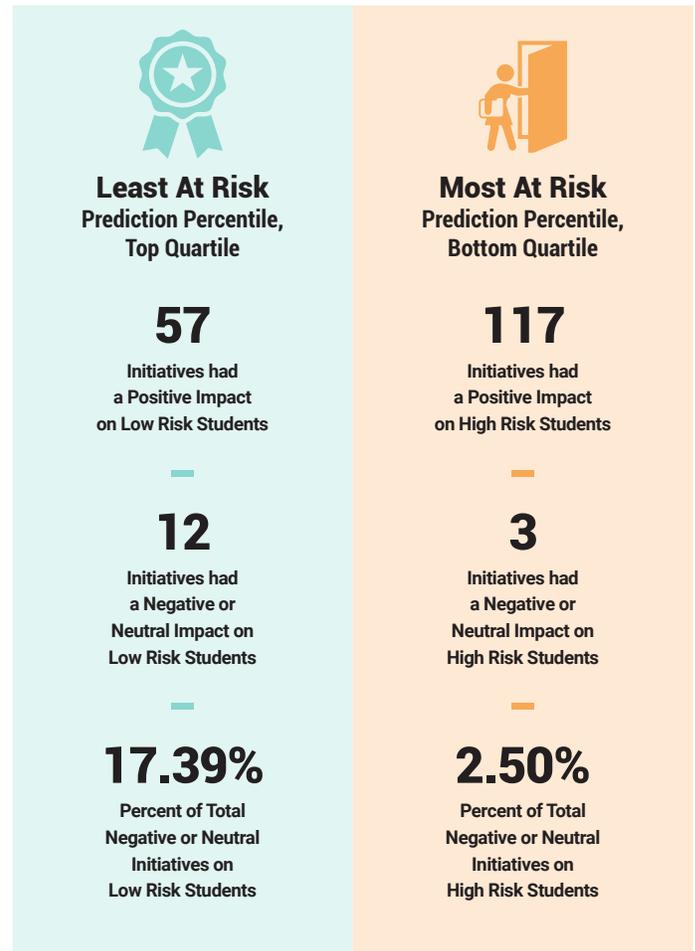
### What the Data Say:

Students predicted to be most at risk or vulnerable derive twice the benefit of student success programs.

When we looked at the effect of initiatives on students who were predicted to have a high likelihood of success, one in five programs showed a negative or neutral impact.

But for students predicted to be most at risk, the picture was much different: Only 2.50% of all programs resulted in a negative or neutral impact. Programs that support these students demonstrate one of the most consistent success rates compared to other measured programs.

**FIGURE 8:**  
Impact of Student Success Initiatives,  
by Predicted Vulnerability or Risk



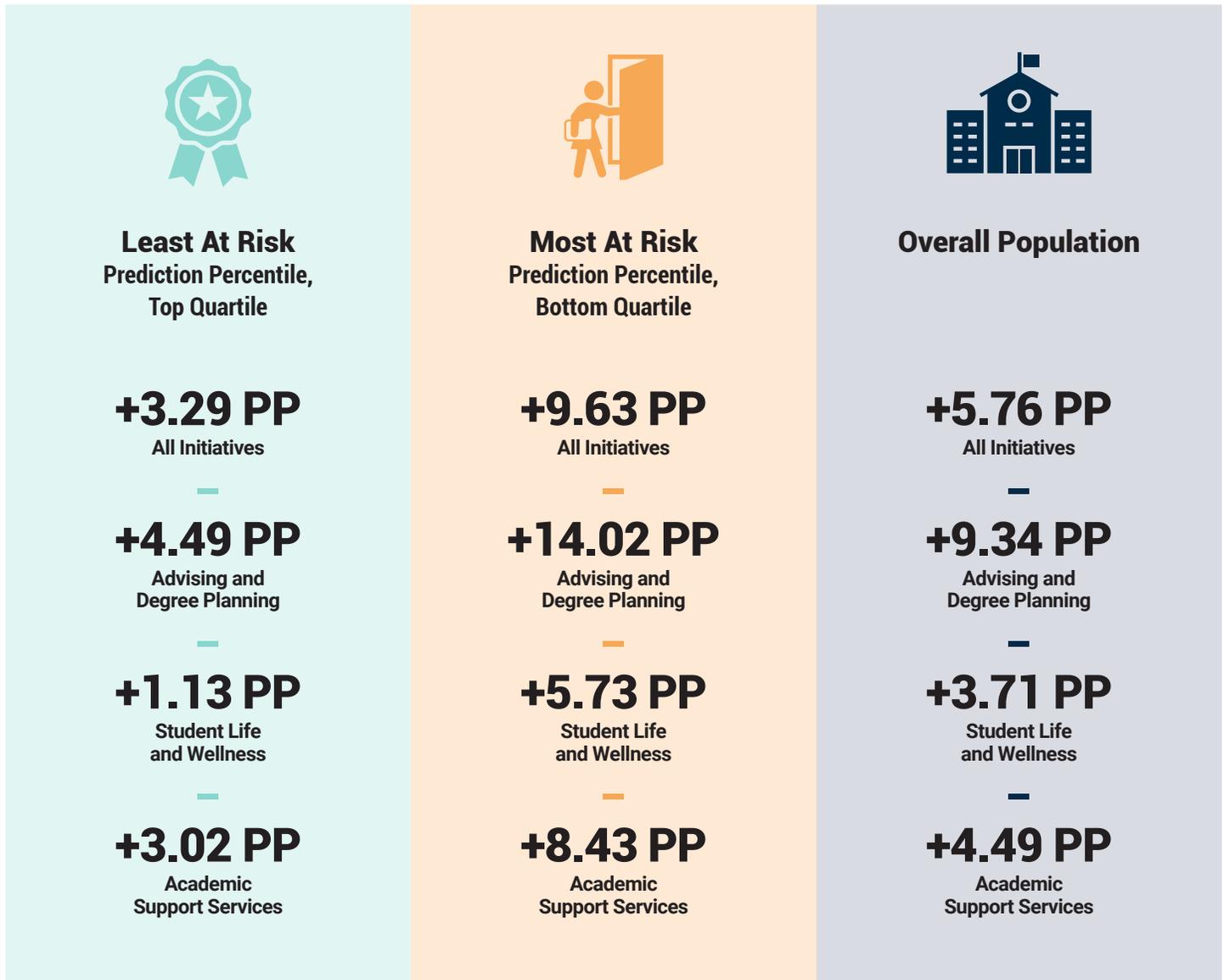
Students who had the highest level of need—those predicted to be most at risk—benefited significantly. Overall, these students saw an average lift of 9.63 percentage points, while the overall average positive impact was 5.76 percentage points.

And students who were considered least at risk saw a positive impact that was slightly below average for all student success initiatives.

The benefit of these programs for students who were predicted to be most at risk was two times greater than the benefit for their peers who were predicted to be at low risk.



**FIGURE 9:**  
**Impact of Student Success Initiatives,**  
**by Level of Predicted Vulnerability or Risk**



Students at greatest risk of not succeeding experienced positive results ranging from 1.91 percentage points to 23.99 percentage points overall; this group is one of three subpopulations whose positive impact measured in double-digit percentage points.

At community colleges, success programs' positive impact on the highest-risk students was 13.88 percent, the largest

average impact among subpopulations. At four-year universities, students most highly at risk averaged a positive impact of 8.31 percentage points, a lower positive effect but still among the top three subpopulations showing positive impact.

In short, the most significant differences in impact were found in whether students were predicted to be vulnerable or at risk—and those differences transcended demographics.



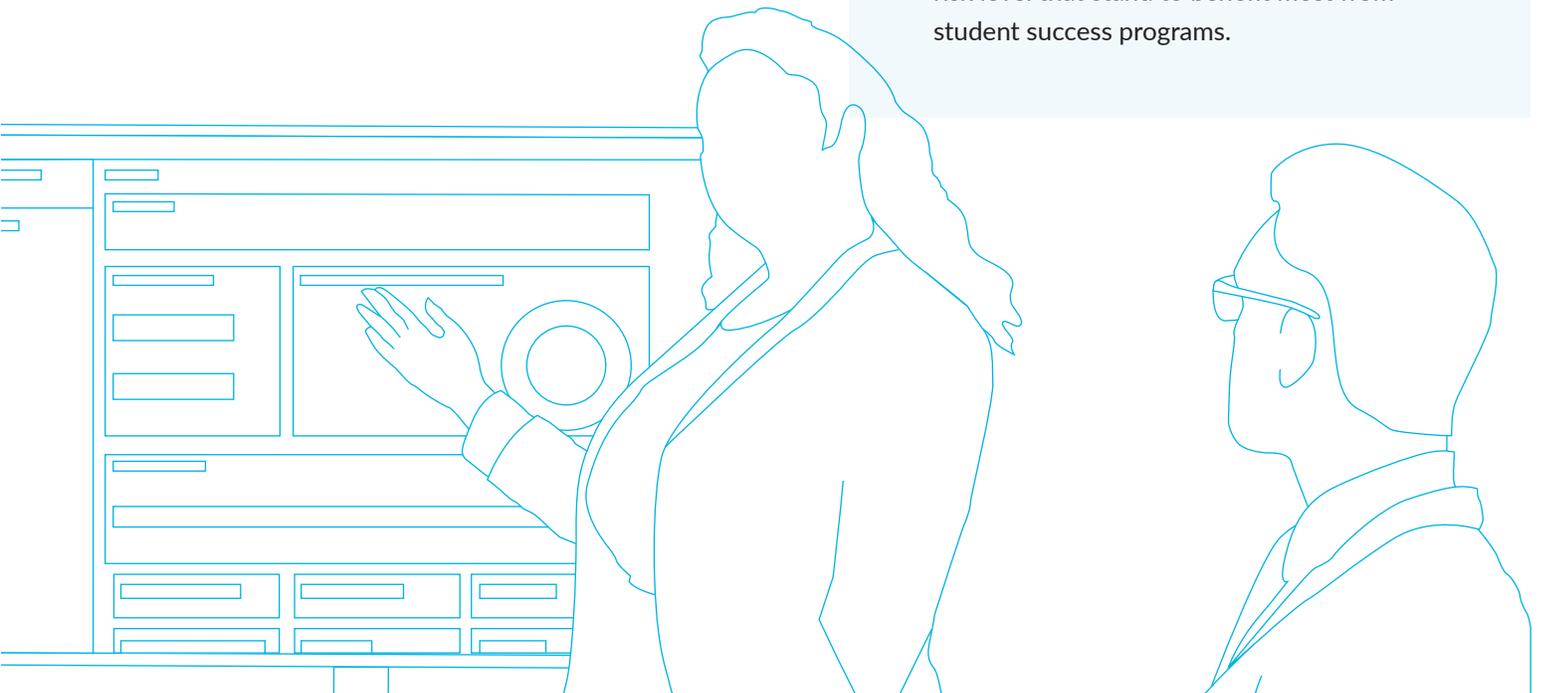
This study did not examine service-level gaps or the use of advising among student subpopulations. We understand that adding that analysis is important in examining a program's equity, especially as it pertains to students who are Black, Indigenous or People of Color.

For this initial report, we looked at whether there was variance among primarily demographic subpopulations for student success programs, and whether those programs were improving equity or limiting it.

These findings can help us remove barriers or redesign programs to ensure we deliver more inclusive experiences for the students we serve.

### Key Takeaways:

1. For the greatest benefit to your students and institution, we recommend looking beyond just demographic breakdowns. Instead, consider who has the highest level of predicted vulnerability or risk among all groups of students.
2. Students who already are performing well do benefit from success initiatives, so institutions should take care to support them. While looking at impact variance according to demographics is important to establish visibility on equity, acting on demographics alone may actually reinforce unconscious bias and stereotypes. Additionally, more robust, timely views of student vulnerability or risk helps avoid reductionist thinking or generalizations about who needs support.
3. With a comprehensive indicator of risk that includes a broader array of student attributes and behavioral data, however, the data show that it's the students with a high predicted risk level that stand to benefit most from student success programs.





## Community Insight 3: Advising and degree planning are almost silver bullets for equity.



### What the Data Say:

96% of advising programs had a positive impact on student success.

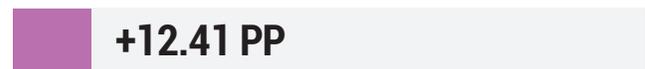
Across all initiatives and subpopulations analyzed, advising and degree planning programs had the greatest and most consistently positive impact on student achievement.

Depending on the subpopulation, this type of student success program yielded positive impact that ranged from 4.49 percentage points to 14.02 percentage points. The average positive impact is an impressive 9.34 percentage points. And, while advising and degree planning programs were among the most-studied initiatives, less than 4% of them showed a neutral or negative impact.

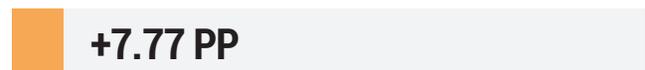
Advising and degree planning, in fact, was the top performing type of student success initiative or investment. Community college students showed higher positive results than did those at four-year institutions. Students at HSIs and non-HSIs showed strong benefits, though those at HSIs showed a greater positive impact: 12.47 percentage points.

**FIGURE 10:**  
Impact of Advising and Degree Planning,  
by Institution Type

#### COMMUNITY COLLEGES:



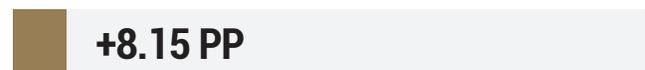
#### UNIVERSITIES:



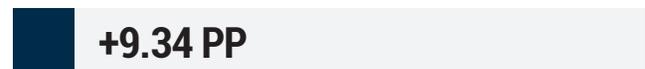
#### HISPANIC-SERVING INSTITUTIONS (HSIs):



#### NON-HSIs:



#### OVERALL IMPACT (ALL STUDENTS & INSTITUTION TYPES):

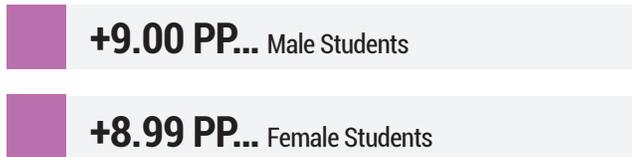


Male and female students showed an equal—and strong—positive outcome. And among different races of students, it was American Indian/Alaskan Native, Pacific Islander and Black students who derived the greatest benefit.



**FIGURE 11:**  
Impact of Advising and Degree Planning,  
by Subpopulation–Demographic

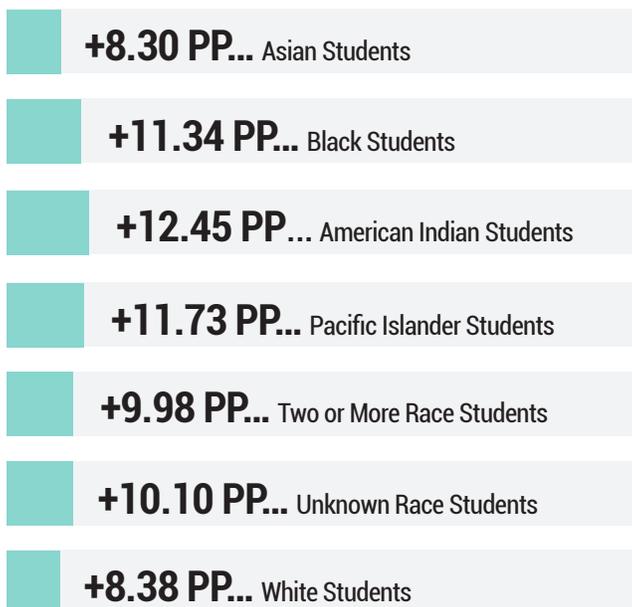
**GENDER:**



**ETHNICITY:**



**RACE:**



As it was with student success programs overall, the benefits of advising and degree planning programs transcended other demographics to make the greatest impact on all students considered to be at high risk of dropping out.

**FIGURE 12:**  
Impact of Advising and Degree Planning,  
by Subpopulation–Level of Predicted Vulnerability or Risk



Beyond demographic information and subpopulations, the greatest lift for students occurred when the most vulnerable students were scaffolded by support from advisors.

In some cases, advising programs were up to three times as helpful for Black students than they were for white students. The figure below reveals what happened for participating students at a four-year research institution.

**FIGURE 13:**  
Program-Specific Advising, by Subpopulation

**GENDER:**



**ETHNICITY:**



**RACE:**





## What Matters Most For Equity: Community Insight 3

In an example at another research institution, students who were considered least at risk according to their persistence prediction effectively saw a neutral impact, or 0.97 percentage points, from meeting with their advisor. Overall, the program had a measurable positive impact. But it had a greater positive impact for students in subpopulations with documented achievement gaps.

While degree planning results are consistently positive for students across demographics, they're even more powerful when considered--and prioritized--in context of a more comprehensive view of predicted student risk or vulnerability.

Advising and degree planning helps our students most. Additionally, this programming is helping some of our historically underserved populations more consistently than any other initiative studied.

**FIGURE 14:**

### Degree Planning, by Subpopulation

Gender
• +3.59 Percentage Points... Female
• +5.11 Percentage Points... Male
Ethnicity
• +4.11 Percentage Points... Hispanic or Latino
• +4.37 Percentage Points... Not Hispanic or Latino
Race
• +6.25 Percentage Points... Black
• +8.75 Percentage Points... American Indian
• +5.36 Percentage Points... Unknown
• +4.25 Percentage Points... White

### Key Takeaways:

1. An increased emphasis on advising makes sense, but, as noted, that emphasis doesn't have to mean more advisors or more work for advisors.
2. Successful advising practices enable advisors do what they do best: *advise*.
3. It means prioritizing relationships with students, personalizing outreach and guidance, and proactively supporting students in their moments of need.

When we looked closer at the impact of degree planning at a community college, we saw precisely how impactful this can be for the students we serve.

**FIGURE 15:**

### Student:Advisor Meeting, by Subpopulation

Gender
• +7.82 Percentage Points... Female
• +5.62 Percentage Points... Male
Ethnicity
• +6.56 Percentage Points... Hispanic or Latino
• +7.29 Percentage Points... Not Hispanic or Latino
Race
• +8.58 Percentage Points... Black
• +6.46 Percentage Points... American Indian
• +6.30 Percentage Points... Unknown
• +7.54 Percentage Points... White



## CONCLUSION

Higher education, at its core, should open both minds to knowledge and doors to opportunity. Yet today, perhaps more than ever, it is imperative that we collectively look closer at our classrooms, programs, and services to ensure we're not subconsciously reinforcing bias or perpetuating inequities. We can—and we must—remove the barriers that limit student success.

More equitable outcomes for the students we serve is within our reach. When we know what's actually working for our students, there is a path to remove the hidden barriers and unintended consequences that limit equity and student success. We know it's not always obvious to know where or how to start the critical work to address disparities, but together, we must start.

For institutions across our community of practice, data is the guide to improved equity. They've identified new perspectives and opportunities to proactively support students and design a more inclusive student experience. Because they've derived signals from their student and institutional data, they are taking action today and improving equity for students now before it's too late. Achievement gaps are shrinking, and more, and more diverse, students are completing their degree.

Equity cannot wait, and when you know what matters most for your students, your students don't have to wait for equity, either.

As we continue to work together, we believe the findings in this report surfaced opportunities for additional discussion and research on success predictions, promising programs, and return on investment.

## Success Predictions Matter:

As a general pattern, we found that the bottom quartile of students—those most at risk—experienced some of the greatest positive impact from interventions. The top quartile, while also benefiting from student success programs, showed a more modest positive impact.

This insight—that success predictors play a valuable role in targeting interventions—merits more discussion and action to bolster student equity.

## Other Programs Show Promise:

The initiatives included in this analysis are necessarily limited to those submitted for impact measurement by Civitas customer institutions. This subset may, therefore, carry an inherent bias toward effectiveness simply due to the fact that these institutions are invested in the use of data to understand and improve intervention efficacy. Many of the 29 institutions represented in this analysis have been engaged in this type of work for multiple years, and have had the opportunity to make data-informed programmatic improvements over time.

That being said, our analysis also points to the need for additional research. Student success initiatives based in comprehensive care, scholarships and aid, and emergency aid showed promising results, but our review did not yet include enough critical mass to establish trends or form community insights. This report represents a snapshot in time and, across a longer timeframe and more institutions, it may be possible to investigate a wider array of interventions and programs. With our community of practice, we intend to look more closely at these types of programs and explore their impact.

## Expand the Lens for Improved Inclusivity:

The demographic information—and other categories of data—included in this analysis reflect data from institutions as reported by students and defined by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.



Acknowledging that it is difficult to improve what is not measured, we encourage institutions to increase the collection and analysis of demographic and socioeconomic data, to help ensure more equitable outcomes and inclusive experiences for all students.

As the global conversation on equity has recently focused on racial justice, we chose to focus our first equity study on demographics—specifically, race, ethnicity, and gender. For future studies, we intend to look more closely at a broader array of demographic, social, structural, and economic factors that contribute to persistent inequities within the communities we serve.

## Equity Has Financial Impacts:

Determining the impact of success initiatives for different subpopulations of students—and developing education equity programs accordingly—is, first and foremost, the right thing to do. But it's also part of our fiduciary responsibility.

While others may believe that some students are too costly to save, we believe that every student can succeed. In fact, our analysis shows that assisting the most vulnerable students with support programs may provide the highest return on institutional investment of funding and time.

And those institutional benefits go beyond tuition. Greater equity also promotes more diversity in a school's student population, an important factor in seeking and retaining funding and in placing higher in college and university rankings. Success among a broader population of students also fuels a more diverse workforce.

Most importantly, however, greater opportunities for all students to succeed helps institutions deliver on the promise of education as the great equalizer. Systematically reproducing student success initiatives that are proven to be ineffective stymies critical efforts to provide equitable opportunities and inclusive learning spaces.

We challenge institutions to look closely at their student success programs and the impact they're having on different populations of students—and then target their investment to what works.

## ABOUT THE REPORT

*Community Insights* is an ongoing research-based project with reports based on collective data from across the Civitas Learning customer base. For this study, we analyzed 302 student success initiatives from August 2019 to August 2020, using the Civitas Learning platform.

### Exploratory Analysis Methodology:

The findings in this study are based on data from 29 institutions, including 14 four-year universities and 15 two-year colleges. Among these institutions, 14 were HSIs, and 15 were non-HSIs. No for-profit institutions were included in this analysis.

### The initiatives analyzed represent eight key categories of work:

1. **Advising and degree planning:** Any advising program, dosage, appointment, modality or academic planning
2. **Student life and wellness:** Recreation, career services, housing, dorms, food, intramurals, athletics, events, Greek life, campus involvement, and auxiliary programs
3. **Scholarships and financial aid:** Standard merit- or need-based programs
4. **Comprehensive care:** Cross-cutting, wraparound support services and care for special populations and/or needs
5. **Academic support services:** Supplemental instruction, coaching, tutoring, living/learning communities, success courses, writing center
6. **Orientation programs:** New/transfer student support to aid transitions to campus
7. **Automated alerts or messages:** Kudos, flags or trigger-based student interactions
8. **Active and engaged learning:** Internships, research, study abroad, and service learning programs

### Subpopulations reviewed within the initiatives include:

- **Institution type:** Two-year, four-year, HSI, and non-HSI
- **Gender:** Female, male, and unknown
- **Ethnicity:** Hispanic and not Hispanic or Latino
- **Race:** Asian, Black, American Indian, Pacific Islander, two or more, unknown, and white
- **Persistence prediction:** Bottom quartile and top quartile



Findings were excluded if the number of students who participated in the program was less than 200 or if the p-value was less than 0.05.

## Persistence Predictions and Key Variables:

For the purposes of this analysis, students were grouped by quartile based on persistence prediction: the top quartile included the 25% of students with highest persistence predictions (most likely to persist), and the bottom quartile included the 25% of students with the lowest persistence predictions (least likely to persist). Persistence predictions are calculated for each enrolled student, using institution-specific models, representing the percentage likelihood that the student will re-enroll for a future term at the institution through the census date, typically 14 days after the start of term.

Variables in our institution-specific prediction models are chosen based on the extent to which they deliver the highest model accuracy for each institution. They include a comprehensive array of student background characteristics, as well as data from the student information system (admissions, academic progress and performance, enrollment, financial aid, and enrollment), and behavioral data such as that in the learning management system.

For more information about the study or how we segment, cluster, and create predictive models, please email [communityinsights@civitaslearning.com](mailto:communityinsights@civitaslearning.com).

## ABOUT OUR PROCESS

**We ingest institutional data from disparate silos, unify the information, and derive meaningful features.**

Ninety-five percent of the predictive power in our platform comes from derived features that inform more than 3,500 predictive models, which are surfaced to support timely decision-making for advisors, faculty, administrators, and students.

Our platform was built to learn. It leverages data from across the institution to find and distribute the strongest signals on the student lifecycle. It powers continuous learning from decisions made, actions taken, and outcomes achieved.

## ABOUT CIVITAS LEARNING

**We help colleges and universities harness the power of their student data to improve student success.**

We embed actionable insights and applied analytics into connected workflow applications to support the student journey. Equipped with our platform, leaders, advisors and faculty have the tools they need to measurably and sustainably improve enrollment, course success, persistence, graduation and equity.

Today, we support more than 400 colleges and universities, reaching nearly 9 million students. Together with our growing community of customers, we are making the most of the world's learning data to help a million more students graduate.

Access previous issues of our *Community Insights Report* at: [civitaslearning.com/resources](https://civitaslearning.com/resources)

Learn more about our findings and work to improve equity at: [civitaslearning.com/equity](https://civitaslearning.com/equity)

## SOURCES CITED

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- <sup>4</sup> Tyton Partners, *Learning Analytics*.
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