DEFINING THE PART-TIME STUDENT AND IDENTIFYING PROMISING PRACTICES

A Scan of Literature, Approaches, and Initiatives

Lena Novak
Claudia Escobar
Noor Amanullah
Makoto Toyoda
Rebekah O'Donoghue

May 2025

mdrc

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

May 2025

An editorial error was discovered in May 2025. On page 7 of this report, the text incorrectly referred to a program at Vance-Granville Community College as the Be Great in 8 initiative. However, the phrase "Be Great in 8" is associated with a different program offered by Isothermal Community College in Spindale, North Carolina. Both programs offer courses in an 8-week format.

Defining the Part-Time Student and Identifying Promising Practices

A Scan of Literature, Approaches, and Initiatives

Lena Novak, Claudia Escobar, Noor Amanullah,
Makoto Toyoda, and Rebekah O'Donoghue

MAY 2025

mdrc
BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

FUNDERS

OVERVIEW

In the United States, many community college students—about 68 percent—enroll part-time, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Unfortunately, graduation rates for part-time students are low. Only 19 percent of people who begin attending community college as part-time students graduate within six years, compared with 36 percent of people who start community college enrolled full-time. Yet there is little information on how to help part-time students stay in college and ultimately graduate. How can higher education better support part-time student success?

To address this knowledge gap, MDRC researchers conducted a multifaceted study in which they identified practices likely to support part-time student success. The research team reviewed relevant research literature, spoke with national and state higher education policy and practitioner experts, and interviewed staff and students from four promising student success initiatives. Takeaways from this report include:

- **Part-time student enrollment status fluctuates.** Students often switch between part-time and full-time attendance over the course of their studies.

- **Part-time students have a range of social identities and backgrounds.** Part-time students often juggle multiple responsibilities such as caregiving for a family member and working a full-time job. The initiatives highlighted in this report serve a disproportionate number of women, adult learners, and Black and Hispanic students.

- **Effective initiatives often incorporate multiple kinds of student support services that address various needs.** The student success initiatives described in this report help address financial limitations, work schedules, and caregiving responsibilities. When students engage in multiple support strategies, they may feel more motivated to succeed in college.

- **The qualitative evidence points to seven initiative practices that may increase outcomes for part-time students.** They are:

  1. Tailor initiatives for a specific student demographic

  2. Develop and sustain collaboration across campus departments

  3. Partner with employers

  4. Cultivate initiative champions

  5. Recognize and value lived experience

  6. Provide comprehensive support services

  7. Facilitate student connection through campus events and social spaces

CONTENTS

LIST OF EXHIBITS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Introduction

In the United States, many community college students — about 68 percent — enroll part-time.[1] Unfortunately, graduation rates for part-time students are low. Only 19 percent of students who initially enroll in community college part-time graduate within six years, compared with 36 percent of community college students who start out enrolled full-time.[2] Nevertheless, part-time student community college enrollment has increased, from 61 percent in 2012 to 68 percent in 2022.[3] Given that two out of three community college students now attend part-time, it is important for higher education institutions and policymakers to invest in evidence-based practices that support part-time students toward academic success and improve degree completion.

Individuals over 25, women, and people of color choose part-time enrollment over full-time enrollment at an even higher rate than other community college students, as shown in Figure 1.[4] (See Appendix A for a display of the share of students belonging to these demographic groups within the part- and full-time student populations as opposed to within demographic groups as shown in Figure 1.) A substantial share of community college students have work and caretaking responsibilities. Approximately 68 percent of part-time students work, compared with 47 percent of full-time students.[5] Moreover, 42 percent of community college students (full- and part-time) pursuing a degree are parents, caregivers to adults, or both.[6] Considering the demographic composition of the part-time community college student population, along with these students' work and caregiving obligations, the low completion rate among part-time students is a pressing issue for higher education institutions across the United States.

---

1. National Center for Education Statistics (2022a).
2. The National Center for Education Statistics defines a full-time undergraduate student as a student enrolled for 12 or more semester credits, 12 or more quarter credits, or 24 or more clock hours a week each term, while a part-time undergraduate student is a student enrolled for either fewer than 12 semester or quarter credits, or fewer than 24 clock hours a week each term; National Center for Education Statistics (2024); National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2020).
3. National Center for Education Statistics (2023).
4. National Center for Education Statistics (2022b).
5. National Center for Education Statistics (2022a).
6. Rothwell (2021).

Figure 1. Part-Time Community College Enrollment Rates Within Various Demographic Groups: United States, Fall 2022
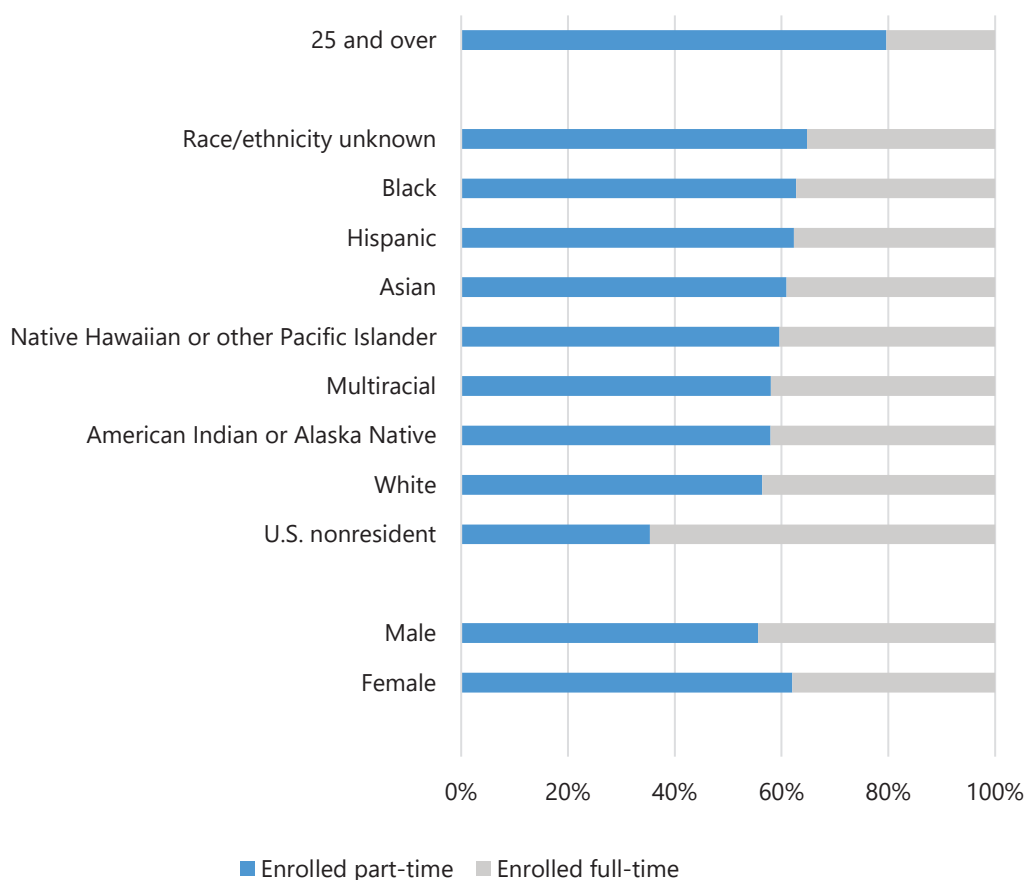
SOURCE: MDRC calculations using data from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS, Fall 2022, 12-Month Enrollment component (provisional data).

NOTE: Data reflect enrollment for degree-seeking students at two-year public institutions. Age-related data reflect all students regardless of degree-seeking status.

STUDY DESCRIPTION

To address the knowledge gap on how to help part-time students stay in college and ultimately graduate, MDRC researchers conducted a multifaceted study to identify practices that evidence suggests are beneficial in supporting part-time student success. First, the researchers conducted a literature review and spoke with national and state higher education policy and practitioner experts to identify practices and programs that may strengthen

part-time student success.[7] Next, the researchers selected four initiatives at community colleges to study in detail. They interviewed staff and students at each initiative about the history and implementation of the initiative and students' experiences, and took note of strategies that staff and students reported were most helpful. Finally, based on findings across all four initiatives, the literature review, and the interviews with higher education experts, the researchers identified seven "promising practices" or strategies that evidence suggests may contribute to supporting part-time student success.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. Which kinds of initiatives and policies can support part-time student success?

    • What strategies and approaches can contribute to student success?

2. How do the specific initiatives studied support part-time student success?

    • Which students participate in these initiatives?

    • What kinds of support are available to students in these initiatives?

    • How do students experience this support?

3. Which practices for supporting part-time student success seem most promising?

ROADMAP TO THE REPORT

The remainder of this report highlights the study findings. Section 1 presents insights about strategies that could strengthen part-time student success, drawn from the review of research literature and relevant websites as well as from interviews with higher education experts. Section 2 describes how four student success initiatives were selected for more in-depth study and includes an overview of the initiatives and their student populations. Section 3 identifies multiple support strategies that are employed by several of the initiatives. Finally, section 4 synthesizes the study's findings into seven promising practices that can support part-time student success.

---

7. For brevity, this report will refer to national and state higher education policy and practitioner experts as "higher education experts."

1

Insights on Student Support Strategies from a Literature and Website Review and Interviews with Higher Education Experts

MDRC researchers spoke to experts from seven higher education organizations and reviewed over 50 resources including research articles, articles from higher education trade presses, and college and higher education organization websites.[8] Of these resources, 31 focused specifically on part-time students, while the rest focused on students who are parents and on adult learners (students ages 25 and older) — populations who tend to attend college part-time. For detailed information on the methodologies used to inform the literature and website review and conversations with higher education experts, see Appendix D.

This research demonstrated that many colleges and their partners are driven to support student success through comprehensive student support initiatives as well as expanded scheduling, cohort programs, and employer partnerships; however, few programs are targeted specifically toward part-time students. Indeed, most of the approaches discussed in this section support all students, not just part-time attendees, though the barriers to success they are designed to address are commonly faced by part-time students.

BENEFITS OF COMPREHENSIVE INITIATIVES AND TEMPORARY FULL-TIME STATUS

Comprehensive initiatives — that is, initiatives that use multiple strategies to address students' academic and nonacademic needs — and those that promote full-time and summer enrollment tend to have larger positive effects on credit accumulation and continued enrollment, compared with programs that lack these features.[9] This has been demonstrated in MDRC's

---

8. Experts identified during the literature review included senior staff members at Achieving the Dream, the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research, and Excelencia in Education. Experts from MDRC's network of state agencies included senior staff members at the Minnesota State Colleges and University System, the Ohio Department of Higher Education, the Success Center for California Community Colleges, and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

9. Scrivener and Weiss (2022); Weiss and Bloom (2022).

randomized controlled trials of full-time comprehensive student support programs and other Comprehensive Approaches to Student Success (CASS) programs.[10] Specifically, the randomized controlled trials conducted by MDRC demonstrated that increased advising and tutoring engagements combined with financial support boost outcomes for program students.[11]

In light of this research, the team reviewed the literature, websites, and interviews for details about colleges offering similar comprehensive initiatives for part-time students. The team found that some colleges have incorporated these kinds of support into part-time programs. For example, the Part-Time Students Accelerating in Learning (SAIL) program at Lorain County Community College in Elyria, Ohio, aims to replicate the success of full-time comprehensive student success programs through advising, career development, and financial support for part-time students.[12] The program was selected as a study initiative and is discussed in depth in later sections of the report.

Research also suggests that full-time status for at least one semester improves part-time student persistence and completion.[13] Attendance patterns are fluid and vary among community college students, and most community college students change their status from full-time to part-time or vice versa at least once. The Center for Community College Student Engagement (2017) has found that students who have full-time status for at least one semester are more likely to complete college than students who always enroll part-time.[14] Consequently, programs that successfully address part-time students' needs and competing priorities so they can attend full-time, even temporarily, may improve student outcomes by doing so.

The Nashville Flex program at Tennessee's Nashville State Community College — identified by the researchers through the website review — highlights strategies for making occasional full-time status more feasible for part-time students. The program, which is specifically intended to support part-time students, offers personalized advising, career development, access to a loaner laptop, and financial support for gas, groceries, and books. College staff reported in an interview with MDRC that in the second semester after the program's launch, over 25 percent of Nashville Flex students unexpectedly switched to full-time course loads after joining the program and engaging in its components.[15]

---

10. Institute for College Access & Success (2021).

11. Scrivener and Weiss (2022); Weiss and Bloom (2022).

12. MDRC (n.d.).

13. Crosta (2014); Center for Community College Student Engagement (2017).

14. Center for Community College Student Engagement (2017).

15. Nashville State Community College (2024).

ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES PRACTICED BY COMMUNITY COLLEGES TO SUPPORT PART-TIME STUDENTS

The researchers identified three additional student support strategies that were discussed widely in the literature and expert interviews: expanded scheduling options, cohort-based programs, and collaboration with employers.

Expanded Scheduling Options

Part-time students often require more flexible scheduling to accommodate their roles as workers, parents, and caregivers. Some colleges aim to address part-time students' scheduling needs by offering courses or entire degree programs on weekends or in the evenings, in online or hybrid formats, and in shortened semesters. For example, Achieving the Dream's research on supporting part-time students highlights the Saturday @ SAC program at Texas's San Antonio College, an opportunity for working adults to earn a two-year degree in a hybrid setting.[16] Students in this program attend class virtually during the week and in person on Saturdays over an eight-week cycle.[17] (An added benefit of the Saturday @ SAC program is the stability of a predictable schedule throughout the two years.)

In an interview with MDRC researchers, staff members at the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research spotlighted Vance-Granville Community College in Henderson, North Carolina, for its approach to scheduling. By transitioning from traditional 16-week semesters to mostly 8-week courses, the college provides increased flexibility in course schedules, offers the opportunity to enroll in courses at the midsemester point, and allows students to focus on fewer subjects at once.[18]

Similarly, the student-centered scheduling approach at Reedley College in Reedley, California, includes several short-term 9-week and night classes. In addition, like many colleges, Reedley offers extended hours for on-campus resources such as libraries and a shuttle bus service.[19] Approaches like these can increase students' ability to use campus resources even if they cannot come to campus during the day.

Cohort-Based Programs

In a cohort-based program, small groups of students take courses together every semester. This approach is designed to foster student community and collaboration.[20] Cohort-based programs typically offer students a defined path to completion by providing clear course

---

16. Lawton and Toner (2020).
17. Alamo Colleges District, San Antonio College (2022).
18. Vance-Granville Community College (2021).
19. Reedley College (2024).
20. Close the Gap Foundation (n.d.).

sequences and prespecified schedules that allow students to align school, work, and family schedules in advance. One example of a cohort-based part-time initiative is the associate's degree program in respiratory care at Ohio's Columbus State Community College, designed for students currently working in a healthcare job while earning a degree.[21] Students are assigned to cohorts of 6 to 10 individuals and attend classes together on a consistent schedule for all eight semesters of the program. The Business FastTrack program at Truckee Meadows Community College in Reno, Nevada, similarly places students in small cohorts. In the fully virtual two-year program, student cohorts take one five-week course at a time.[22] According to the college, the cohort model contributes to an atmosphere in which "students work closely . . . with others who can help them stay driven and accountable."[23]

Partnerships Between Colleges and Employers

Given that 68 percent of part-time students are employed, it is not surprising that engaging with local employers was a frequently mentioned support strategy in the research literature and interviews.[24] An example of this approach is the "earn and learn" apprenticeship program at Metropolitan Community College in Kansas City, Missouri, in which students are matched with a local paid apprenticeship relevant to their degree program, and apprenticeship schedules are coordinated so students can attend college part-time.[25] Columbus State's respiratory care program, mentioned above, provides another example in which part-time study and work are closely coordinated. Both programs encourage students to apply what they learn in the classroom to a professional setting and vice versa.

---

21. Columbus State Community College (2024).

22. Truckee Meadows Community College (2024).

23. Libby (2023).

24. National Center for Education Statistics (2022).

25. Association of American Community Colleges (2021).

2

Selection and Demographics
of Student Initiatives

This section discusses how the researchers selected four initiatives to study in depth and presents an overview of each selected initiative.

STUDY RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION METHODS

The researchers began the study recruitment process with a list of 35 existing student success initiatives at community colleges nationwide, compiled during the literature review and conversations with experts. The list featured a range of program types including student success programs, centers, and campuswide services aimed at reaching student populations with historically lower college completion rates, such as part-time students. While the researchers originally aimed to identify initiatives designed only for part-time students, an illuminating early finding was that few initiatives served part-time students exclusively: only 7 of the 35 initiatives identified were designated as part-time student initiatives. Most initiatives did not limit student participation based on enrollment status, reflecting the fact that students often switch between full-time and part-time enrollment each semester. Many did, however, target student demographics that can overlap with part-time status, such as parents or adult students.

After conducting calls with candidate initiatives, the researchers finalized partnerships with four programs at colleges in four different states. The colleges and initiatives included (1) Houston Community College — TEACH Early Childhood® Texas (TEACH), (2) Lorain County Community College in Lorain, Ohio — Part-Time Students Accelerating in Learning (Part-Time SAIL), (3) Northwest Arkansas Community College in Bentonville — Career Pathways Initiative (CPI), and (4) Pitt Community College in Winterville, North Carolina — Adult Learning Center (ALC). The four initiatives were selected to reflect a variety of approaches used and demographics served, in keeping with the broad scope of the original list of programs. While all four initiatives support students in achieving academic goals, they serve different target populations including childcare workers, Pell-eligible part-time students, low-income parents, and adult learners. For summary information about each initiative, see Table 1. As shown in the table, the share of part-time students served in these programs ranges from roughly 60 to 90 percent. This reflects these programs' commitment to serving their target populations even as — or especially as — students' enrollment status fluctuates over time. For detailed

Table 1. Core Initiative Components

TEACH Early Childhood Texas (TEACH)
Houston Community College (HCC) and 40 other colleges across Texas

325 Students Across Texas
Majority part-time

Target Population
Childcare workers earning $20 or less per hour and pursuing an associate's degree in child development or early childhood education

Key Program Components
- Reenrollment and retention outreach: advertise at childcare centers and early childhood educator conferences
- Career development: full-time employment required for eligibility, collaboration with employers to support professional development
- Student-centered advising: monthly check-ins with assigned scholarship specialist
- Financial support: partial tuition scholarship, travel stipend, and completion awards
- Community partnerships: network of childcare providers and former scholarship recipients

Part-Time Students Accelerating in Learning (Part-Time SAIL)
Lorain County Community College (LCCC) in Ohio

134 Students at LCCC
90% part-time

Target Population
Pell-eligible and part-time students, or short-term certificate program students

Key Program Components
- Reenrollment and retention outreach: targeted phone, mail, and email campaigns
- Career development: engagement with career services through a workshop session or career advisor meeting each semester
- Student-centered advising: monthly meetings with assigned coach
- Financial support: gap tuition scholarships, education expenses, and local chain gas/grocery cards

Career Pathways Initiative (CPI)
Northwest Arkansas Community College (NWACC) and 25 other colleges across Arkansas

62 Students at NWACC
75% part-time

Target Population
Low-income parents, including noncustodial parents

Key Program Components
- Career development: support identifying career interests and creating a career/degree pathway
- Student-centered advising: monthly meetings with assigned case manager
- Financial support: case-by-case tuition assistance, childcare support, education expenses (such as cost of required course materials and certification fees), and gas cards
- Community partnerships: collaboration with off-campus support including childcare services, diaper banks, and food pantries
- Technology support: on-campus computer lab and loaner laptops for schoolwork and free printing services

Adult Learning Center (ALC)
Pitt Community College (PCC) in North Carolina

235 Enrolled and Prospective Students
63% part-time enrolled students

Target Population
Adults over 25, primarily prospective and new students

Key Program Components
- Reenrollment and retention outreach: college application assistance for stop-out students
- Career development: course registration guidance in support of future career
- Student-centered advising: meetings with advisors as needed
- Financial support: guidance on FAFSA requirements and student loans and grants
- Community partnerships: collaboration with off-campus support services including food banks and transportation, housing, and counseling services
- Peer-to-peer connection: connection with other adult students through campus events
- Student workshops: virtual learning and computer skills workshops

information about each initiative, see Appendix C. For more information on the methodology used to inform the study recruitment and selection methods, see Appendix D.

The research team collected information about the four initiatives by conducting staff member and student interviews in the spring of 2024. Initiative staff members and students reviewed the information to confirm accuracy at the time of this report's development, though initiative details may have changed since then.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF PART-TIME STUDENTS AT THE FOUR STUDIED INITIATIVES

Students across the four initiatives attend college part-time rather than full-time for several reasons. Many students interviewed cited the need to work and earn money to pay for basic expenses and college as a primary reason for attending part-time. Most students interviewed reported working full-time jobs, and some were primary caregivers for children, elderly parents, or both. Most were also returning to school after multiple years.

Part-time and full-time student populations at the colleges participating in this study are demographically similar in terms of percentage of people of color. However, compared with their full-time peers, part-time students are more likely to be women and 25 years of age or older, as Figure 2 shows (see black and gray bars representing part-time and full-time students, respectively).[26] Furthermore, as shown in Figure 2, students of color, people ages 25 and over, and women are overrepresented in the population of students served by the initiatives in this study, compared with peers not participating in initiatives.[27] The higher proportion of students from historically underserved groups could suggest that these students are eager to connect with student success initiatives, are being successfully recruited into student success initiatives, or both.

Most student interviewees fluctuated between part-time and full-time enrollment. This fluctuation is consistent with national community college enrollment patterns.[28] Changes in enrollment status were mostly due to financial factors including changes in tuition support received from college initiatives or in financial resources available outside of school. Additionally, some interviewed students reported increasing their course load because support from advisors motivated them to do so.

---

26. Detailed demographic data on TEACH program participants were not available, so only three of the four studied initiatives are displayed in Figure 2.

27. There are exceptions to this broad trend. For example, the Adult Learning Center serves students who are representative of the overall part-time student population with regard to gender and Hispanic ethnicity, while serving a relatively large share of Black students.

28. Crosta (2014); Center for Community College Student Engagement (2017).

Figure 2. Participation of Historically Underserved Groups in Three Support Initiatives Studied
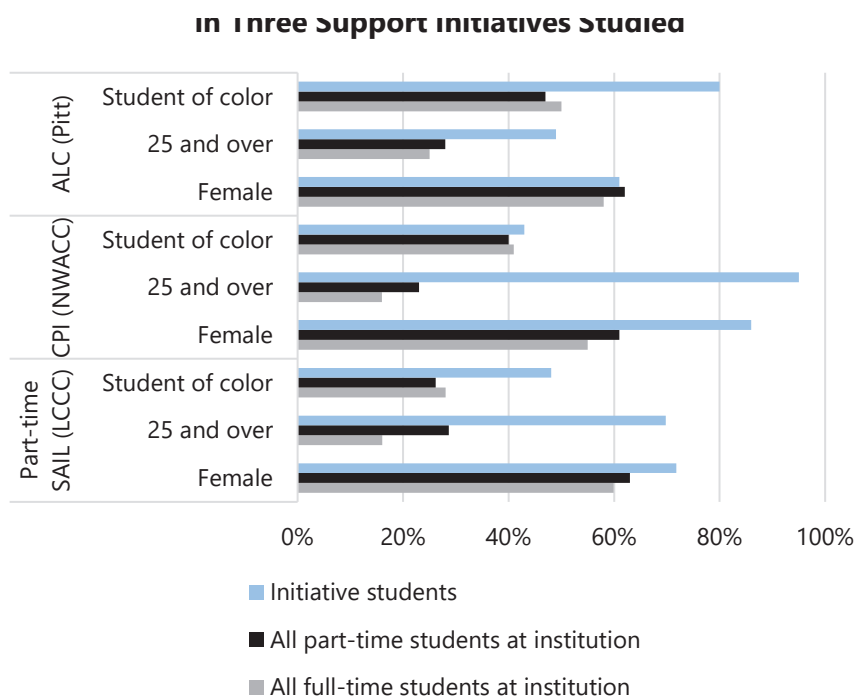
SOURCE: MDRC calculations using college data and data from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS, Fall 2022, 12-Month Enrollment component (provisional data).

NOTES: Data reflect enrollment for degree-seeking students at two-year public institutions. Age-related data reflect all students regardless of degree-seeking status.

Three of the four initiatives studied provided program participation data on historically underserved groups, which is reflected in the figure.

ALC (Pitt) = Adult Learning Center, Pitt Community College; CPI (NWACC) = Career Pathways Initiative, Northwest Arkansas Community College; Part-Time SAIL (LCCC) = Part-Time Students Accelerating in Learning, Lorain County Community College.

In this figure, "institution" refers to the institution hosting the specified initiative.

3

Student Initiative Cross-Site Analysis

The section below highlights qualitative findings from interviews with staff members and students across the four initiatives. For detailed information on the qualitative analysis process, see Appendix D. Findings from the analysis demonstrate that these initiatives seek to reach students through an umbrella of student support services; these include tailored reenrollment strategies, career planning and development efforts, student-centered advising, peer-to-peer connections, and financial support. Each of these strategies was identified by staff members or students in two or more initiatives as having a positive impact on students' ability to stay enrolled and engaged in college.

Some of the strategies described in Section 1, such as cohort-based programs and partnerships with employers, complement the strategies discussed in this section—specifically, peer-to-peer connections and career planning and development efforts, respectively. The literature and website review and conversations with experts informed the development of the initial site selection and therefore indirectly contributed to the findings below.

Although these strategies are presented as individual program components, it should be noted that they may have a stronger effect when used together. The array of support strategies used by any single initiative echoes the importance of comprehensive initiatives, discussed in Section 1. As one administrator explained, "It can be difficult to tell what exact ingredient is moving the needle. It's really the combination and the mixture of all of them. And so, when we were designing the part-time [program], that was something that we had in mind…. We can't just make it about the advising. We can't just make it about . . . the financial resources. But how do we actually take the essence of this program and make it work for a part-time student?"

EFFECTIVE SUPPORT STRATEGIES, ACCORDING TO STAFF AND STUDENTS

All four initiatives used two or more of the student support strategies described below. The strategies used by each initiative are summarized in the right column of Table 1.

Reenrollment Efforts to Target Student Barriers to Completion

As noted in the Introduction, community college completion rates are low, with only 19 percent of part-time community college students graduating within six years.[29] To increase student completion rates, three of the initiatives — Part-Time SAIL, TEACH Early Childhood, and the Adult Learning Center — implement reenrollment efforts aimed at students who left college before finishing their degree. In survey data gathered from community colleges in 2023, students who left school without finishing their degree listed work as the main reason for leaving. They also cited financial concerns such as no longer having the resources to afford college tuition or needing more money or time to care for dependents.[30] Therefore, initiative efforts that offer access to basic need services such as reliable food sources, transportation support, and childcare expenses can make it more viable for students who left school to return. Providing initial college application support and financial aid guidance are also strategies that can help prospective students, many of whom have been out of school for years, return to the classroom.

The Adult Learning Center naturally has a strong focus on reenrollment support, as it was established to support current adult learners and individuals considering returning to college. Staff members assist students with the Pitt Community College application process and completion of FAFSA and residency forms, and connect returning students to campus resources to aid the transition. Meanwhile, at Part-Time SAIL, to encourage reenrollment, staff members message students who have left the college, using mailed program advertisements, email, and phone calls. The recruitment messages and conversations are tailored to incentivize students to return to school by highlighting the program's financial benefits such as support with tuition, gas, and groceries.

The TEACH program provides a pathway for full-time employees to attend school, which allows students to retain a full-time income and employment benefits. As an additional incentive, students receive up to four hours of paid leave from work per week to use for studying and taking care of basic needs. All students MDRC interviewed who were enrolled in TEACH were returning college students. See Box 1 for information about one student's experience as a returning student participating in TEACH.

Career Planning and Development Efforts to Provide Post-College Pathways

Career development opportunities are a component in all four initiatives. The examples highlighted below illustrate how initiatives can influence students' career advancement possibilities.

---

29. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2020).
30. Nguyen and Cheche (2024).

The Career Pathways Initiative was created to boost the earning potential of parenting students with low incomes. It provides support in pursuing a college degree and job training to help students eventually secure employment in high-paying sectors, such as health, business, and law. Some degree-career pathways students pursue through the Career Pathways Initiative include earning an accounting degree to become a CPA, earning a food studies degree as a step toward becoming a chef, or earning a degree in healthcare to pursue occupations such as nurse or therapist.

Adult Learning Center advisors help students identify career interests through individualized coaching sessions, mapping out degree pathways, resume writing, and supporting class selection. For some students interviewed, staff helped them identify career paths they may not have thought of previously; one student decided to pursue a career in college counseling services after discussing her personality, preferences, and desired lifestyle with staff and hearing their recommendations on her career path.

TEACH supports students' professional development by partnering directly with employers. When asked about the program's value, one employer said, "The TEACH scholarship [gives

students] an educational, college experience where they can talk to other people who are in a similar field where they can bounce ideas off each other. I think that's really important for people professionally." While students benefit from financial assistance for tuition and other academic expenses, college-level child development courses, and the potential to advance in their career and earnings, employers also reap benefits from having skilled individuals with teacher certification on staff. Additionally, their partnership with TEACH can serve as a point for staff recruitment and retention. The same employer said, "Building professional relationships with the [Houston Community College] community helps me to hire." When employers experience benefits from employee participation in TEACH, they may be motivated to recommend the initiative to additional staff and other childcare employers in their network, making college degrees more accessible to others in the field.

Student-Centered Coaching to Provide Tailored Support and Connect Students to Resources

Three of the studied initiatives practice student-centered coaching, an approach in which one staff member serves as a primary guide for students in multiple aspects of their college journey and sometimes beyond. [31] Across the three initiatives, coaching is provided by staff members in various roles including scholarship specialists, case managers, and advisors. These individuals serve as students' first line of inquiry, helping them navigate and connect to academic support services, in addition to providing guidance and emotional support on nonacademic matters.

As a part of TEACH, Part-Time SAIL, and the Career Pathways Initiative, students meet with a coach at least once a month or more often if needed. Furthermore, some students continue to speak with their coaches after graduating college to provide updates on life and work events. The program director of TEACH stated that the goal of interactions between coaches and students is to create strong relationships so that students feel comfortable asking for help when needed. Similarly, a TEACH staff member described the role of a coach as "a relationship business." A statement from a TEACH student aligns with these descriptions: "[My coach is] wonderful. She answers all of my silly questions, the questions that I think are silly…. And her emails are wonderful because she sends what we need…. I mean, it's always just so efficient. And she's so patient. Just wonderful!"

Part-Time SAIL students emphasized that their coaches support them in making informed decisions about course enrollment so that they can graduate on time, transfer, or complete their course of study. One student said the following about her coach: "In terms of enrolling for classes, she really will try her best to make sure you have the best class possible, the best instructor possible, the best time for you. She really went out of her way to make sure the classes that I was taking, I would actually succeed in. It definitely was a big support in that she guided me in the right direction."

---

31. Melander (2002).

BOX 2

Meet Melissa, a Career Pathways Initiative Student

Melissa is a 35-year-old student parent attending Northwest Arkansas Community College. She participates in the Career Pathways Initiative and is majoring in food studies to eventually become a chef, or to pursue a related career that connects the younger generation to healthy food. Melissa has three children and currently works five to six hours a week as a culinary associate, running catering events.

As a person who experiences anxiety, Melissa deeply values the case management and counseling component of the Career Pathways Initiative. She regularly works with her Career Pathways Initiative caseworker, a mentor who has helped her navigate college life by connecting her with academic, community, and disability resources. Her advisor has also served as her advocate in conversations with the on-campus financial aid department and helped her confront her fear of talking to people she does not know.

"[Career Pathways Initiative employees] help me with a lot, especially with anxiety," Melissa explained. "I'm scared to talk to people. If I'm having anxiety, I could call my caseworker and she's like, 'Breathe. We're gonna have a good day. Come by the office.' And it's a great environment."

In addition, the emotional support and empowerment Melissa receives from Career Pathways Initiative staff members has greatly enhanced her college experience. She regularly visits the office to speak to program staff. She described her appreciation for "the support, the encouragement, the fuel to keep going and know you have somebody that is fighting for you." "You know I don't really grow up with a good family dynamic," Melissa remarked, "so the support is what drives me, and knowing that people care, and they see you doing good things."

The case management and socioemotional support from the Career Pathways Initiative has helped Melissa stay in school and work toward her dreams of moving up in the food industry. Believing that more students like her would come back to school if they knew about tailored programs like the Career Pathways Initiative, she works to spread awareness of the initiative to fellow student parents.

The fact that students in the initiatives find value in their coaching sessions is evidenced by the reasonably high advising attendance rate. Participation data showed that roughly 55 percent of students in the Career Pathways Initiative and over 70 percent of Part-Time SAIL students met with their coach at least three times both semesters in the 2023-2024 academic year.[32] See Box 2 for information on how a Career Pathways student benefited from her experience with coaching.

---

32. Coaching participation data from the TEACH program, which also includes a coaching component, were not available.

In addition to striving to form strong relationships with students, initiative staff in coaching roles often connect students to an array of community resources such as food pantries, housing stipends, and dental services. Coaches at the Career Pathways Initiative use the program's partnership with the Family Network's Diaper Collective to help parenting students obtain diapers for their children.[33]

Peer-to-Peer Connection to Influence Student Sense of Belonging

Providing opportunities for students to connect with other students who have similar life experiences can influence a student's sense of belonging.[34] This study suggests that initiatives that serve a target population with specific characteristics — adult learners, for instance — may offer a number of these kinds of opportunities through both planned events and interactions that arise organically. Student and staff interviews identified two initiatives, the Adult Learning Center and the Career Pathways Initiative, as fostering these kinds of interactions.

Staff members described the Adult Learning Center as a safe space for adult learners to connect with and encourage one another. The center regularly hosts social events for adult students such as coffee hour at the library and meetups at campus fairs. These events allow adult students to meet one another and feel that they are part of the larger student community, fostering a sense of belonging and camaraderie.

Furthermore, having a central location for a targeted initiative can facilitate organic peer-to-peer connection. For example, in the Career Pathways Initiative, parenting students often meet and talk with one other while picking up their gas reimbursements at the initiative's office; these interactions may help students may feel more integrated on campus. One student expressed how interacting with and relating to other parenting students increased her sense of belonging at the college: "It makes me feel like I'm a part of something. And something great. . . . As adults [it's] kind of hard going in school and you don't want to talk to nobody . . . but then you come to find out that it's people just like you, and that right there bonded us. . . . I was all like in my head thinking, like, 'I'm the only one going through these problems,' and when one person opened up, everybody's like, 'Oh, my God! Me too! Oh, my God! Me too!'"

Financial Support to Influence Student Retention

Financial support can enable students to continue their studies. TEACH, Part-Time SAIL, and the Career Pathways Initiative offer various kinds of financial support, from full tuition coverage to childcare vouchers, gas cards, and other expenses. Students reported that they value the financial support provided, whether big or small.

---

33. Diaper Collective, Family Network Northwest Arkansas (n.d.).

34. Love (2024).

The TEACH program covers full tuition for each semester by awarding renewable, one-year scholarship contracts. Several students highlighted this benefit as a main factor influencing their return to school or their ability to remain in school. One TEACH student had previously participated in another scholarship program that offered tuition support for one class per semester, but this funding was not guaranteed from one semester to the next, which generated anxiety about whether she could stay in school. After having had that experience, she is grateful to continue her education with the TEACH program so that she can enroll in more classes per semester without worrying about future funding, leading to a faster graduation timeline.

Some initiatives also provide financial support in the form of stipends to subsidize school-related travel expenses. The Career Pathways Initiative provides gas reimbursement benefits for travel to clinicals and class. As one student explained, "They reimburse me for my mileage with a gas card which has been very helpful because some of my clinical sites have been one way about 80 miles from my house, so 160 miles twice a week." By enabling students to travel to class and other required activities, subsidized travel expenses can contribute to students' continued college success.

CHALLENGES INITIATIVES FACE

In addition to using many of the same student support strategies, the four initiatives reported facing some similar challenges, outlined below.

Challenges Securing Future Funding

Most of the initiatives studied are predominately grant-funded and must repeatedly apply for state or federal grants to maintain services. This obligation can make achieving long-term sustainability difficult and tie up resources that would otherwise be dedicated to initiative implementation, innovation, or expansion efforts. The TEACH program and the Career Pathways Initiative are particularly affected by this challenge as they are funded on a yearly rather than a multiyear basis.

Initiatives supported by federal pandemic recovery funding such as TEACH and the Adult Learning Center have also had to search for new funding sources as this aid expires. Pandemic recovery funding allowed TEACH to boost participation rates from employers by compensating employers at higher rates for students' academic-related paid leave; as pandemic funding ends, the initiative may not be able to sustain this component. The Adult Learning Center was similarly funded through the federal Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund during the pandemic; however, the center now sustains funding through a combination of the Underserved Population Grant and state institutional funds.

Even when funding has been secured, there may be restrictions on how the funds can be spent, which can limit initiatives' attempts to expand or to address a wider range of student

needs. For example, state funding for the Career Pathways Initiative could not be used toward certain efforts staff members hoped to implement to improve the student experience, such as providing food, financial support for everyday bills, and gifts for students' children around the holidays.

Some initiatives, such as Part-Time SAIL, have a more diversified funding strategy, with funds coming from a combination of institutional funds, foundation support, and donors. Receiving funding from multiple avenues can enhance sustainability. Even at Part-Time SAIL, though, staff members expressed a desire for more predictable long-term funding to better support their initiative now and in the future.

Challenges Reaching and Engaging Part-Time Students

Initiative staff members also have difficulty recruiting part-time students to participate in the initiative and engaging students in initiative activities throughout the academic year. Part-Time SAIL staff members noted that recruiting part-time students may present increased challenges, compared with recruiting full-time students, because part-time students tend to spend less time on campus; also, part-time students may not be enrolled in courses every semester and are less likely to check email or online classroom platforms when not enrolled. The program has attempted to address student recruitment challenges by involving an additional staff member in recruitment efforts and developing new outreach language, but reaching interested students remains a struggle.

In addition, three initiatives identified ensuring consistent student engagement and participation as a challenge. Some initiatives reported students engaged in only one or two initiative components despite the availability of a variety of services. They also found that some students stopped responding to initiative staff or participating in engagement efforts as the semester progressed. A lack of student engagement could indicate that students are not regularly receiving the support they need, that initiatives are not effectively supporting students, or that students are not interested in receiving help. Unfortunately, low engagement can also lead to decreases in funding, making it harder for the programs to meet students' needs. Further investigation as to why students may not engage in various initiative components may be needed to effectively serve and support this population.

4

Promising Practices

Based on all sources of qualitative data discussed in this study (the literature and website review, conversations with higher education experts, and interviews with students and staff members at four initiatives), the researchers identified seven practices that are especially promising in their ability to support part-time students. These practices, listed below, highlight patterns discussed across the data sources and provide areas for future inquiry and study on what programmatic aspects can most effectively support part-time student success. For more details on the sources contributing to the promising practices, see Appendix B.

In the list below, the practices are organized across a continuum starting with program development and concluding with implementation, allowing readers to locate practices based on program needs. The list includes descriptions and examples for each strategy.

PROMISING PRACTICE 1: Tailor initiatives for a specific student demographic

ABOUT THIS PRACTICE: Creating initiatives that are tailored for a specific student demographic rather than based on part-time status can support students long-term, as part-time enrollment status often fluctuates. A targeted program design can help an initiative establish clear program branding and communication methods for recruitment and engagement.

EXAMPLES:

- The Career Pathways Initiative focuses on supporting parenting students; it provides monthly diapers through a partnership with a local diaper bank and childcare payment support.

- TEACH, designed for current childcare staff members, offers paid release time from work and scholarship specialists who liaise between students and their employers.

PROMISING PRACTICE 2: Develop and sustain collaboration across campus departments

ABOUT THIS PRACTICE: Part-time students hold a wealth of identities. Cross-department collaboration can improve access to different kinds of support and expand an initiative's

capacity to provide a coordinated, tailored support plan for each student. This strategy provides part-time students with multiple touchpoints and resources.

EXAMPLES:

- A case study by Green (2021), highlighted in the literature review, recommends bringing staff and faculty together to create an effective support plan for part-time students.[35]

- At the Career Pathways Initiative, Part-Time SAIL, and the Adult Learning Center, staff members collaborate with other institutional departments in charge of adult education, advising, careers, and accessibility to increase awareness about their initiative. These initiatives also connect students to additional on-campus services for counseling, tutoring, and financial aid.

- See Box 3 for more information on how the Adult Learning Center connected one student to other campus resources.

PROMISING PRACTICE 3: Partner with employers

ABOUT THIS PRACTICE: Partnerships with employers can help prepare students for the workforce, provide new avenues for student recruitment, and demonstrate the relevance of coursework to students' area of employment. Partnering with employers is especially sensible given that many students who enroll part-time do so in order to work while in school.

EXAMPLES:

- An article by Mangan (2023), included in the literature review, describes students and faculty members traveling to offices to learn more about career environments and addressing this knowledge in the classroom as part of the Adams Earn & Learn Program at Amarillo College in Amarillo, Texas.[36]

- Higher education experts highlighted the importance of institutions collaborating with employers to support students who are job searching upon completing their degrees.

- TEACH maintains relationships with early childcare providers across Texas who market the program to their employees.

- See Box 4 for more information on Part-Time SAIL's role in supporting one student's career aspirations.

---

35. Green (2021).
36. Mangan (2023).

Meet Emily, an Adult Learning Center Student

Emily is a 40-year-old student parent attending Pitt Community College, working 56 hours a week as a medical assistant and caregiver for her mother. She receives services from the Adult Learning Center and is majoring in nursing science. Emily aspires to earn her bachelor's degree in registered nursing and to eventually become a certified registered nurse anesthetist with additional schooling after graduating from Pitt.

While highly self-motivated and driven, Emily was concerned about returning to school. The Adult Learning Center staff recognized this concern and referred her to tutoring to help her build her time management skills and academic confidence.

"[The Adult Learning Center] actually put me in touch with the tutoring center and introduced me to the tutors and everything," Emily said. "We forget how to study, so [the tutoring center is] able to like, teach us, and remind us of things, the ways to study or ways to retain the information that we haven't thought about since high school."

Adult Learning Center staff members have also advocated for Emily throughout her time at Pitt Community College. When her mother was being discharged from the hospital, staff members were there to listen and offered to manage communication with her professors. Knowing that staff would handle communication with her professors if something went wrong allowed Emily to feel that someone at Pitt was looking out for her. The Adult Learning Center's tailored support, campus referrals, and advocacy have allowed Emily to return to school and get closer to her long-term goal of becoming a certified registered nurse anesthetist.

PROMISING PRACTICE 4: Cultivate initiative champions

ABOUT THIS PRACTICE: Initiative champions can be students, faculty members, or other college staff members — who may or may not be directly involved with the initiative — who are knowledgeable about the initiative and have opportunities to inform others about it. Cultivating initiative champions can increase awareness and enhance student recruitment among part-time students. Initiative champions can help identify part-time students in classes, refer them to tailored forms of support, and expand the reach of part-time initiative staff.

Examples:

- Students at Clark State Community College present their success stories during college board meetings to help guide administrative priorities; this strategy was highlighted in an American Association of Community Colleges report included in the literature search.[37]

---

37. American Association of Community Colleges (2018).

> **BOX 4**
>
> **Meet Avery, a Part-Time SAIL Student**
>
> Avery is a 20-year-old student who enrolled part-time in Lorain County Community College's web development associate's program after attending Lorain as a dual enrollment high school student. Lorain's vice president of enrollment management and student services describes students like Avery as the "new part-time students," who are younger and pursuing job development opportunities, in line with Ohio's statewide emphasis on workforce development. Avery is a participant in the Part-Time SAIL program, and navigates college while balancing a job, internship, and family responsibilities.
>
> Support from her Part-Time SAIL advisor and the program's career services component exposed Avery to on-campus career opportunities, eventually leading her to an internship in web development. This opportunity enabled her to leave her job in the retail sector and get paid while focusing on her professional aspirations. Avery explained, "I've learned a ton in that internship, and I wouldn't have gotten an opportunity like that if it wasn't for [Lorain] and also for the SAIL program, because my advisor was the one who encouraged me to go to the career services place at [Lorain] and it's like a requirement in the program where you have to meet with a career advisor."
>
> Avery is excited and ready to enter the workforce as a web developer.

- At Pitt Community College, a faculty member serves as the Director of the Adult Learning Center and helps connect adult students to the center.

- Career Pathways Initiative staff members routinely educate other college staff about the initiative's offerings and benefits during annual "Celebrate Learning" faculty meetings. Based on responses to surveys sent out following these meetings, the initiative provides additional informational resources and conducts classroom visits as needed.

PROMISING PRACTICE 5: Recognize and value lived experience

ABOUT THIS PRACTICE: Building a team that includes staff members with lived experience similar to that of part-time students can help promote students' trust, sense of belonging, and academic success. Furthermore, initiatives can train all staff members to recognize and respond appropriately to students' lived experience.

EXAMPLES:

- Several advisors at Part-Time SAIL and the Adult Learning Center have had part-time or nontraditional college experiences that parallel those of initiative participants, and this

informs their advising approach. Advisors may discuss their own experiences to provide emotional support, motivate students to persist, and serve as an example of success.

- As reported in the research literature by Varty (2022), underrepresented minority students in STEM often seek mentorship and advice from faculty who are in underrepresented groups. Varty found that underrepresented minority students are more likely to perform better when an underrepresented minority faculty member teaches them.[38]

- Houston Community College faculty understand that many students in TEACH belong to multigenerational families and have caregiving responsibilities that may take precedence over school assignments. For instance, the chair of the college's child development department emphasizes the importance of communicating with students about their personal wellbeing in class and by email, encouraging students to "reach out before you drop out," and accommodating student schedules by offering flexible deadlines for coursework.

PROMISING PRACTICE 6: Provide comprehensive support services

ABOUT THIS PRACTICE: Programmatic interventions that use multiple strategies to address students' academic and nonacademic needs can help students overcome challenges that may interfere with their ability to attend and thrive at college.

EXAMPLES:

- All four initiatives studied connect students to a variety of appropriate campus and community resources based on individual student needs such as help with mental health challenges or family responsibilities. For example, the Career Pathways Initiative provides childcare support and parenting resources, while the Adult Learning Center offers technology support and soft skill development.

- Financial benefits such as tuition support, course material stipends, childcare payment support, and gas and grocery reimbursement are offered by three of the four initiatives studied.

- Examples of comprehensive part-time models such as Nashville Community College's Nashville Flex and Lorain's Part-Time SAIL were identified through the literature and website review. Students in both programs often increase their course loads over time.

---

38. Varty (2022).

PROMISING PRACTICE 7: Facilitate student connection through campus events and social spaces

ABOUT THIS PRACTICE: Facilitating student connection through campus events and social spaces for students with similar life experiences, needs, and challenges can increase sense of belonging among part-time students.

EXAMPLES:

- As noted in the research literature by Libby (2023) and others, small program cohort models can allow for student engagement, connection, and accountability among part-time students.[39]

- The importance of creating opportunities for part-time students to interact outside of the classroom was reflected in conversations with higher education experts.

- Adult Learning Center staff members foster community for adult students by hosting a table at campus events and inviting students to attend; these events often lead to student connection and knowledge sharing.

- Participants in the Career Pathways Initiative have informal opportunities to meet one another when they pick up their gas cards at the initiative's office.

---

39. Libby (2023).

Conclusion

Based on findings from a review of research literature, interviews with higher education experts, and interviews with students and staff members at four community college initiatives, the research team identified promising practices for supporting part-time students. These include the following: (1) Tailor initiatives for a specific student demographic, (2) Develop and sustain collaboration across campus departments, (3) Partner with employers, (4) Cultivate initiative champions, (5) Recognize and value lived experience, (6) Provide comprehensive support services, and (7) Facilitate student connection through campus events and social spaces. The practices identified here can guide practitioners implementing current and future initiatives as well as researchers looking to evaluate which programmatic aspects can most effectively support part-time student success.

When MDRC first conceptualized this project, the researchers expected to find several initiatives tailored to support part-time students. Many of MDRC's college partners have emphasized that full-time attendance is not realistic for a large proportion of their students, leading to the development of MDRC's randomized controlled trial of Part-Time SAIL, with findings forthcoming in spring 2029. MDRC's researchers thus theorized that other community colleges would be following a similar approach of expressly supporting part-time students. However, on reviewing the literature and interviewing experts, the researchers identified only a handful of initiatives designed specifically for part-time students. Meanwhile, they found a variety of initiatives designed to support populations such as full-time workers, adult learners, and parenting students — that is, populations of students who predominantly attend college part-time due to other responsibilities and priorities.

Moreover, the research showed that while most community college students attend college part-time, student enrollment status can fluctuate from semester to semester. Therefore, the promising practices presented in this report should be considered in the context of supporting students regardless of their part-time status.

APPENDIX A

Demographic Characteristics of Part- and Full-Time Students

Appendix Table A.1. Demographics of Part- and Full-Time U.S. Community College Students

Characteristic	All Students	Full-Time Students	Part-Time Students
Gender (%)			
Female	58	54	61
Male	42	46	39
Race/Ethnicity (%)			
Hispanic	28	26	30
White	41	44	39
Black	14	13	15
Asian	6	6	6
Multiracial	4	4	4
Unknown	3	3	3
Another identity	3	3	2
Age (%)			
25 and over	33	16	44
Number of students	3,280,724	1,335,320	1,945,404

SOURCE: MDRC calculations using data from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS, Fall 2022, 12-Month Enrollment component (provisional data).

NOTES: Data reflect enrollment for degree-seeking students at two-year public institutions. Age-related data reflect all students regardless of degree-seeking status.

APPENDIX B

Support for Promising Practices

Table B.1 summarizes where the researchers identified evidence in support of each promising practice.

Table B.1. Summary of Evidence in Support of Promising Practices

Promising Practice	Literature	Expert(s)	TEACH Early Childhood	Part-Time SAIL	Career Pathways Initiative	Adult Learning Center
1 Tailor initiatives for a specific student demographic	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
2 Develop and sustain collaboration across campus departments	✓			✓	✓	✓
3 Partner with employers	✓	✓	✓			
4 Cultivate initiative champions	✓		✓		✓	✓
5 Recognize and value lived experience	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6 Provide comprehensive support services	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7 Facilitate student connection through campus events and social spaces	✓	✓			✓	✓

APPENDIX C

Initiative Profiles

This appendix provides additional detail about the four initiatives studied in this report. Information was reviewed for accuracy by staff members and students at the time of report development. Initiative details may have changed since then.

TEACH EARLY CHILDHOOD TEXAS (TEACH) AT HOUSTON COMMUNITY COLLEGE (HCC)

Initiative History and Motivation

For the past 12 years, the Texas Association for the Education of Young Children (TXAEYC) has worked in collaboration with 40 community colleges, 22 universities, and 265 childcare centers throughout the state of Texas to operate the TEACH Early Childhood (TEACH) program.[1] Established at HCC over 10 years ago, the program aims to improve the overall quality of early childhood education by providing childcare workers the opportunity to pursue an education while working full-time. Its mission contributes to a higher-paid and well-qualified childhood education workforce. To be eligible for the program, students must be Texas residents employed at a licensed childcare center in Texas, working at least 30 hours a week and earning 20 dollars or less an hour.

Initiative Structure

Working collaboratively with colleges such as HCC and childcare center providers, TXAEYC supports student enrollment and retention efforts. The staffing structure includes the TEACH program director, who oversees the program throughout the state of Texas, and a student success manager, who oversees scholarship specialists and quality control. Scholarship specialists communicate with students and employers about program activities and requirements and collaborate with HCC faculty who promote the program and support student success in the classroom.

Initiative Components

1. Career Development Opportunities: Employers communicate with scholarship specialists to support employee participation in the program. TEACH reimburses employers for providing up to four hours of release time per week to participating employees. Additionally, employers offer their employees up to a 3.5 percent raise after an additional year-long commitment period following the completion of a TEACH contract.

2. Student-Centered Advising: All students are assigned to a scholarship specialist. The scholarship specialist checks in with students monthly to talk about academic and personal successes and provide support or resources as needed. The goal of the check-ins is to create a relationship with the student to encourage asking for help when needed.

---

1. TEACH Early Childhood Texas (2024).

3. Financial Support: TEACH funds 100 percent of tuition, eligible fees, and textbook costs, in addition to covering 95 percent of the fee for the Child Development Associate (CDA) Assessment or CDA Renewal.[2] Potential bonuses include 250 dollars after completion of a 6-month commitment period to the employer, following receipt of an initial CDA, and 500 dollars after a 12-month commitment period, following successful completion of a 12-month TEACH Associate contract.[3] The goal of this financial support is to alleviate some financial barriers and sustain retention efforts.

PART-TIME STUDENTS ACCELERATING IN LEARNING (PART-TIME SAIL) AT LORAIN COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE (LCCC)

Initiative History and Motivation

Part-Time Students Accelerating in Learning (Part-Time SAIL) was established at Lorain County Community College (LCCC) in 2022 upon the success of a similar program for full-time students.[4] This student support program aims to improve graduation rates and time to degree among part-time and reconnected stopped-out students through academic advising, career development, and financial incentives.

To be eligible for Part-Time SAIL, students must be Pell eligible and enroll in and complete six credits per semester. Through Fast-Track, Lorain students in noncredit, short-term certificate programs are also eligible for Part-Time SAIL.[5]

Initiative Structure

The Part-Time SAIL staffing structure includes the manager of student success programs, who leads the Part-Time SAIL program, and a staff assistant, who handles communication with students, scheduling, and data collection. Additionally, two advisors meet with their

---

2. The Child Development Associate (CDA) credential is a desirable and sometimes required credential for many early childhood educator roles. Initial credential assessment can cost up to $500 and must be renewed (at no cost) every three years. See Council for Professional Recognition (2024).

3. Updated details of the TEACH Early Childhood Associate's scholarship can be found on the TXAEYC website.

4. The full-time SAIL program piloted in 2015 during the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) Ohio demonstration introduced a comprehensive program model based closely on the City University of New York's ASAP programs. Three- and six-year follow-up studies showed positive impacts on graduation rates, as discussed in Hill, Sommo, and Warner (2023).

5. The Fast-Track programs offer a collection of specific certificates aligned to high-demand industries, designed for completion in as little as 16 weeks and at low or no cost to students. See Lorain County Community College (n.d.).

assigned student advisees at least once a month to provide academic guidance and make referrals to resources across campus.

Initiative Components

1. Career Development Opportunities: Students are required to complete one activity with LCCC's career services center each semester, such as attending a professional development workshop or meeting with a career advisor. The goal of the career development component is to connect students to the college's career planning and job search services.

2. Student-Centered Advising: Students meet monthly with the same assigned advisor to discuss academic pathways and course selection. Advisors also provide transfer support and career planning based on student needs and interests and check in with students about personal challenges. Advisors' schedules are flexible to accommodate students and can support students before or after work hours. The goal of advising is to address students' needs — whether they involve motivation, academic guidance, or targeted referrals — so that students can successfully complete their program or degree.

3. Financial Support: Students who attend monthly advisor meetings and fulfill credit requirements receive a monthly gift card for 50 dollars, which can be used at designated local retailers for buying gas, groceries, and necessities. Students also receive 150 dollars in credit at the LCCC bookstore for textbooks and school supplies every semester. Students have access to gap tuition scholarships for tuition costs not covered by Pell grants or other financial aid.

CAREER PATHWAYS INITIATIVE (CPI) AT NORTHWEST ARKANSAS COMMUNITY COLLEGE (NWACC)

Initiative History and Motivation

Northwest Arkansas Community College (NWACC) is one of 25 colleges participating in the Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative (CPI). CPI was established at NWACC in 2007 to improve academic persistence and graduation rates among student parents. CPI seeks to boost the earning potential of low-income, TANF-eligible parenting students by supporting students working toward a degree or certificate for a career in a high-wage, high-demand sectors (such as respiratory therapy, health management, nursing, business, and paralegal services).[6]

---

6. Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative (2023); "TANF-eligible" refers to students who are eligible to receive assistance through the federally funded program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, which helps families with low-incomes and children "achieve economic self-sufficiency." See U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2022).

To be eligible for the program, students must be Arkansas residents and U.S. citizens or legal residents eligible to work in the United States. Students must also be a parent of a child under the age of 21, meet income qualifications, and not have a bachelor's degree at the time of joining CPI.[7]

Initiative Structure

The CPI staffing structure includes a program director who manages the initiative and ensures compliance with state and federal grant goals, a CPI case manager who serves as a point of contact for parenting students, and an administrative specialist who manages paperwork and distribution of gas cards and other resources to CPI students.

Initiative Components

1. Student-Centered Advising: All CPI students work with a case manager. This individual helps students identify career interests and develop class schedules and a degree pathway. Case managers support CPI students by connecting them to tutors and helping them weigh the potential impacts of academic and financial decisions.

2. Financial Support: Students may receive payment assistance for school tuition, textbooks, and other direct educational expenses in addition to indirect educational expenses such as transportation and childcare.

3. Technology Support: CPI has an on-campus computer lab where parenting students can complete their homework and access free printing services. There are also laptops and wi-fi hotspots available for loan.

ADULT LEARNING CENTER (ALC) AT PITT COMMUNITY COLLEGE (PCC)

Initiative History and Motivation

The Adult Learning Center (ALC) was established in 2021 at Pitt Community College (PCC). It provides tailored, centralized support for adult and stop-out students, helping them reenroll and complete degrees or certifications aligned with their career goals. When PCC returned to in-person learning after the COVID-19 pandemic, the college transitioned its virtual student

---

7. Students who meet income qualifications are those who receive services under Transitional Employment Assistance, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, ArKids, or have a household income of less than 250 percent of the federal poverty level.

hotline that connected students to campus services to an in-person support center for adult learners with the assistance of the North Carolina Reconnect Grant.[8]

The center is targeted at students 25 years of age or older who attend Pitt Community College. However, the ALC will assist any student at the college who is interested in using its services.

Initiative Structure

The ALC staffing structure includes an assistant vice president of enrollment services who manages and supports ALC staff, and a faculty interim director who recruits adult students and collaborates with other colleges on strategies for reaching adult learners. It also includes advisors who meet with students, offer intake form assistance, and connect students to the appropriate campus or community resources, as well as assistants who guide ALC students through the intake process, identify student goals and needs, and ensure students' concerns are addressed through follow-up outreach.

Initiative Components

ALC staff use an intake form to assess student needs and connect students to areas on campus such as counseling services, academic support, food assistance, and more, in addition to community resources as needed. Once students have completed the intake process, they are connected to one or more of the services below.

1. Reenrollment Efforts: ALC employees offer reenrollment support, helping students complete the application for admission and/or the residency determination form.

2. Financial Support: ALC staff members support students in filling out the federal financial aid application (FAFSA), and guide students through grant and loan options to help them make informed decisions as part of reenrollment efforts.

3. Course Registration Assistance: Once a student is enrolled at PCC, ALC advisors help students identify their career interests and the degree or certificate that is the right fit. ALC advisors then connect students with a college advisor who helps them select appropriate classes and register.

4. Individualized Coaching: Once students are attending classes, ALC staff continue to provide financial aid and course registration assistance through personalized coaching

---

8. North Carolina Reconnect is a grant initiative created through a partnership between North Carolina State University's Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research and the John M. Belk Endowment that aims to engage adult learners and improve their student retention in North Carolina. PCC was one of five "pilot schools" to launch NC Reconnect. See North Carolina State University (n.d.).

and may offer additional support including technology assistance and socioemotional guidance tailored to each student's needs.

5. Extended Hours: The center operates under extended hours, opening as early as 7:30 a.m. and closing at 6 p.m. to support student schedules.

APPENDIX D

Methods

SECTION 1: INSIGHTS ON STUDENT SUPPORT STRATEGIES FROM A LITERATURE AND WEBSITE REVIEW AND INTERVIEWS WITH HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERTS

To conduct the literature scan, MDRC researchers surveyed research literature on part-time student populations and on programs, policies, and approaches that support part-time students across the United States. To find relevant literature, the researchers used the search phrase "community college [student group] [support type]," with student groups including "part-time students," "adult learners," and "student parents," and support types including "programs," "policies," and "approaches." After finding limited academic literature on support for part-time students, MDRC researchers expanded the search to include "gray literature," including dissertations and research reports from nonprofits and governmental organizations.[1] The search spanned MDRC's library of education research journals, higher education trade presses, and higher education advocacy and research organizations.[2] As the scan was ongoing, the research team identified potential higher education experts to interview by contacting organizations that authored reports or supported initiatives found during the search. Other experts were identified through MDRC's network of state college systems and higher education organizations. Through conversations with experts, the researchers learned about existing initiatives supporting part-time students. Experts shared best practices from colleges in their networks and recommended additional research that the team then included in the literature review. Appendix Table D.1 shows all higher education experts, organizations, and state systems consulted during this process.

Finally, the researchers conducted a web search to identify active student support programs, policies, and approaches at colleges across the United States that were understudied or did not appear in the research literature. Using the same search terms used in the literature scan, the team identified and browsed college and program websites and added relevant initiatives to the list of initiatives that emerged from research literature and interviews with experts.

SECTION 2: SELECTION AND DEMOGRAPHICS OF STUDENT INITIATIVES

The researchers first examined the inventory of 35 student success initiatives compiled during the literature and website review and conversations with experts to select 10 initiatives representing a variety of states and geographical settings, target student populations, and program models. Of the 10 selected programs, 4 had an explicit mission to support part-

---

1. Paez (2017).

2. Higher education trade presses included The Chronicle of Higher Education, Community College Daily, Diverse Issues in Higher Education, The Hechinger Report, and Inside Higher Ed. Organizations included Achieving the Dream, American Association of Community Colleges, Aspen Institute, Complete College America, Higher Learning Advocates, and National College Attainment Network.

Table D.1. Higher Education Experts

Affiliation	Expert	Title
Achieving the Dream	Monica Trent	Chief Program and Network Officer
Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research	Audrey Jaeger	Executive Director
	Holley Nichols	Associate Director of Research and Evaluation
	Emily VanZoest	Research Associate
	Greyson Norcoss	Research Associate
Excelencia in Education	Emily Labandera	Director of Research
Minnesota State Colleges and Universities	Shawn Anderson	System Director for Development and Student Success
Ohio Department of Higher Education	Thomas Sudkamp	Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs
	Christopher Kacir	Associate Vice Chancellor for Student Success
Success Center for California Community Colleges	Michelle Stricker	Senior Project Manager for Strategic Projects and Initiatives
Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board	Keylan Morgan	Assistant Director, Data Management and Research
	Lisa Paiz	Student Success Grant Manager
	Cheryl McWilliams	Program Specialist

time students, 3 were available to the entire college population, and 3 supported adult or parenting students, a majority of whom were enrolled part-time. The 10 initiatives utilized a variety of student support strategies including cohort-based structures, partnerships with employers, student-centered advising, financial support, expanding scheduling options, and basic need support. These characteristics are comparable to the strategies found in the initiatives on the initial list of 35 programs.

The research team then conducted initial screening calls with the 10 selected initiatives to determine study alignment; researchers learned more about each program and gathered information about initiative data availability, student target populations, and interest in study

participation.[3] Based on these criteria, the researchers finalized a research partnership with 4 student success initiatives.

SECTION 3: STUDENT INITIATIVE CROSS-SITE ANALYSIS

After identifying initiatives to study, the team collected and analyzed in-depth qualitative data from each program. More specifically, for each initiative, the research team interviewed five staff members and five part-time student participants affiliated with the initiative.[4] All interviews were conducted remotely by video or phone. To identify interviewees, the research team collaborated with their main college contact to determine which individuals could best speak to various initiative components. For example, due to TEACH's collaboration with student employers, a childcare center employer was interviewed. Staff members interviewed included initiative directors, case managers, faculty members, college administrators and financial aid assistants. Additionally, the researchers' point of contact helped to identify and coordinate interviews with student participants. Student interviewees differed in college enrollment history, major, and age. After conducting the interviews, the researchers compiled all qualitative data sources for each initiative and analyzed findings using deductive and inductive coding processes. The team then reviewed findings across all four initiatives and discerned cross-site strategies. These strategies represented the most prominent strategies discussed and used by two or more initiatives.

Furthermore, one student from each initiative reviewed the student interview protocol and this report. The research team sought the perspective of student advisors as initiative participants and current part-time students during interview protocol development. Student advisors commented on the clarity and relevance of interview questions and flagged additional topics for MDRC to consider. They also reviewed the description of their initiative included in this appendix to ensure alignment with students' experiences. Student advisors were compensated appropriately for each of their interactions with MDRC.

SECTION 4: PROMISING PRACTICES

To identify promising practices that support part-time students, the research team analyzed qualitative interview data across the four sites for initiative components students commonly described as helpful, lessons from staff on what works when serving part-time students, and themes that echoed those from the literature review and conversations with experts.

---

3. Some sites were unable to participate in the project due to a variety of factors including limited staff capacity, recently participating in another external research project, and program termination. Based on these caveats, the researchers did their best to work with sites that embodied the diverse array of programs found during the initial program scan.

4. At one site, researchers were only able to interview three students due to student response rates.

After compiling all examples of initiative practices that reflected the above criteria, the research team condensed the list down to 25 practices that are implemented by at least one initiative, with many practices often being implemented across multiple initiatives. Next, the team returned to the literature review and conversations with experts to determine which practices were supported by literature or reflected in initiatives and policies at colleges other than the study sites. The researchers then finalized a list of seven practices, each of which appeared in at least two of the data sources (the literature review, expert interviews, and studied initiatives).

REFERENCES

Alamo Colleges District, San Antonio College. 2022. "Saturdays @ SAC." Website: https://www.alamo.edu/sac/academics/saturday-sac-legacy-2022/.

American Association of Community Colleges. 2018. "Five Innovative Community Colleges Named Awards of Excellence Winners." Website: https://www.aacc.nche.edu/2018/04/30/five-innovative-community-colleges-named-awards-of-excellence-winners/.

Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative. 2023. "About." Website: https://arpathways.com/.

Association of American Community Colleges. 2021. "Promising Practices: Metropolitan Community College (Missouri)." Website: https://www.aacc.nche.edu/programs/workforce-economic-development/expanding-community-college-apprenticeships/intro-virtual-apprenticeship-network/implementing-a-registered-apprenticeship-program/calculating-return-on-investment-for-the-college/promising-practices-metropolitan-community-college-missouri.

Ault, Brian. 2022. "FTEIC Retention Into Spring: Predictive Factors & a Spotlight on Encounters Documented with Counseling and Advising Faculty." Montgomery College.

Center for Community College Student Engagement. 2017. "Even One Semester: Full-Time Enrollment and Student Success." The University of Texas at Austin, College of Education, Department of Educational Administration, Program in Higher Education Leadership.

Close the Gap Foundation. n.d. "Cohort-Based Learning." Accessed April 5, 2025. Website: https://www.closethegapfoundation.org/glossary/cohort-based-learning#:~:text=What%20is%20Cohort-Based%20Learning,student%20set%20by%20the%20instructor.

Columbus State Community College. 2024. "Respiratory Care, Part-Time Cohort." Website: https://www.cscc.edu/academics/departments/respiratory-care/part-time-cohort.shtml.

Council for Professional Recognition. 2024. "About the CDA®." Website: https://www.cdacouncil.org/en/about/learn-about-the-cda/.

Crosta, Peter, M. 2014. "Intensity and Attachment: How the Chaotic Enrollment Patterns of Community College Students Relate to Educational Outcomes." *Community College Review* 42, 2: 118–142. Website: https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552113518233.

Diaper Collective, Family Network Northwest Arkansas. n.d. "Partner Agencies." Accessed April 5, 2025. Website: https://www.familynetworknwa.com/our-partners.

Green, Janelle M. 2021. "Part-Time Enrolled Community College Students: A Case Study Examining the Experiences of the Invisible Majority." Dissertations, Abilene Christian University. https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/etd/425/.

Hill, Colin, Colleen Sommo, and Kayla Warner. 2023. "From Degrees to Dollars: Six-Year Findings from the ASAP Ohio Demonstration." MDRC.

Institute for College Access & Success. 2021. "Comprehensive Approaches to Student Success (CASS) Programs." Website: https://ticas.org/college-completion/comprehensive-approaches-to-student-success-design-principles/.

Lawton, Julia and Mark Toner. 2020. "Supporting the Success of Students Enrolled Part-Time." Achieving the Dream.

Libby, Jared. 2023. "On the Fast Track to Graduation." AACC 21st Century Center. Website: https://www.aacc21stcenturycenter.org/article/on-the-fast-track-to-graduation/.

Lorain County Community College. n.d. "Fast-Track Programs." Accessed April 5, 2025. Website: https://www.lorainccc.edu/programs-and-careers/fast-track/.

Love, Kelly Elizabeth. 2024. "Is This My Place? Contributing Factors to Community College Students' Longitudinal Sense of Belonging and the Connection of Sense of Belonging to Student Success." Dissertation, Portland State University. Website: https://doi.org/10.15760/etd.3752.

Mangan, Katherine. 2023. "Two Community Colleges That Reimagined the Student Experience Share the Top Aspen Prize." *The Chronicle of Higher Education.* Website: https://www.chronicle.com/article/two-community-colleges-that-reimagined-the-student-experience-share-the-top-aspen-prize?sra=true.

MDRC. n.d. "Evaluation of Part-Time Students Accelerating in Learning (SAIL), a Replication of CUNY's ASAP Program." Accessed April 5, 2025. Website: https://www.mdrc.org/work/projects/evaluation-part-time-students-accelerating-learning-sail-replication-cunys-asap.

Melander, E.R. 2002. "The Meaning of 'Student-Centered' Advising: Challenges to the Advising Learning Community." Pennsylvania State University.

Nashville State Community College. 2024. "Nashville Flex." Website: https://www.nscc.edu/tuition-and-aid/types-of-financial-aid/nashville-flex.php.

National Center for Education Statistics. 2022a. College Student Employment. *Condition of Education.* U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Website: https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/ssa.

National Center for Education Statistics. 2022b. "Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2022, Fall Enrollment component." U.S. Department of Education.

National Center for Education Statistics. 2023. "Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Fall Enrollment component final data (2002 - 2022) and provisional data (2023)." U.S. Department of Education.

National Center for Education Statistics. 2024. "Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Winter 2023–24, Outcome Measures component (provisional data)." U.S. Department of Education.

National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. 2020. "Yearly Success and Progress Rates."

Nguyen, Sophie, and Olivia Cheche. 2024. "Enrollment at Community Colleges Might Improve, but Challenges Remain for Students." New America (blog). https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/enrollment-improve-but-challenges-remain.

North Carolina State University Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research. n.d. "NC Reconnect." Accessed April 5, 2025. Website: https://belk-center.ced.ncsu.edu/partnerships-and-convenings/nc-reconnect/.

Paez, Arsenio. 2017. "Gray Literature: An Important Resource in Systematic Reviews." *Journal of Evidence-Based Medicine* 10, 3:233-240. https://doi: 10.1111/jebm.12266.

Reedley College. 2024. "Basic Needs Resources." Website: https://www.reedleycollege.edu/student-services/reedley-college-basic-needs-resources.html.

Rothwell, Jonathan. 2021. "College Student Caregivers More Likely to Stop Classes." *Gallup Blog*. Website: https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/328970/college-student-caregivers-likely-stop-classes.aspx.

Scrivener, Susan, and Michael J. Weiss. 2022. "Findings and Lessons from a Synthesis of MDRC's Postsecondary Education Research." MDRC.

TEACH Early Childhood Texas. 2024. "2023 Annual Report." Texas Association for the Education of Young Children.

Texas Association for the Education of Young Children. 2024. "Associate Degree Scholarship." Website: https://texasaeyc.org/program-resources/t-e-a-c-h/associate-degree-scholarship/

Truckee Meadows Community College. 2024. "Business FastTrack Program." Website: https://www.tmcc.edu/business/business-fasttrack.

U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Office of Family Assistance. 2022. "Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)." Website: https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/programs/temporary-assistance-needy-families-tanf.

Vance-Granville Community College. 2021. "Be Great In 8." Website: https://www.vgcc.edu/be-great-in-8/.

Varty, Alison K. 2022. "Promoting Achievement for Community College STEM Students Through Equity-Minded Practices." *CBE—Life Sciences Education 21*, 2. https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.21-09-0237.

Weiss, Michael J., and Howard S. Bloom. 2022. "What Works for Community College Students? A Brief Synthesis of 20 Years of MDRC's Randomized Controlled Trials." MDRC.

ABOUT MDRC

MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization, is committed to finding solutions to some of the most difficult problems facing the nation. We aim to reduce poverty and bolster economic mobility; improve early child development, public education, and pathways from high school to college completion and careers; and reduce inequities in the criminal justice system. Our partners include public agencies and school systems, nonprofit and community-based organizations, private philanthropies, and others who are creating opportunity for individuals, families, and communities.

Founded in 1974, MDRC builds and applies evidence about changes in policy and practice that can improve the well-being of people who are economically disadvantaged. In service of this goal, we work alongside our programmatic partners and the people they serve to identify and design more effective and equitable approaches. We work with them to strengthen the impact of those approaches. And we work with them to evaluate policies or practices using the highest research standards. Our staff members have an unusual combination of research and organizational experience, with expertise in the latest qualitative and quantitative research methods, data science, behavioral science, culturally responsive practices, and collaborative design and program improvement processes. To disseminate what we learn, we actively engage with policymakers, practitioners, public and private funders, and others to apply the best evidence available to the decisions they are making.

MDRC works in almost every state and all the nation's largest cities, with offices in New York City; Oakland, California; and Washington, DC.