

# Raising College Attainment: A National Proposal to Scale Student Success Strategies

## INTRODUCTION

***“[This program] is what made me realize: you’re going to finish. One way or the other, we’re going to help you do this.”***  
 - Kimberly Blanco, CUNY ASAP student, 2017

Increasing postsecondary attainment offers tremendous promise for increasing social mobility, tackling poverty, and reducing racial and income inequality. In addition to the pride students feel upon graduating, those with a bachelor’s degree earn on average 134<sup>1</sup> percent more annually than those with only a high school diploma, and those with an associate’s degree earn 30 percent more than those with a high school diploma.<sup>2</sup> Communities with higher proportions of residents with college degrees also benefit from greater innovation, improved health and welfare, reduced crime rates, higher civic engagement, and lower reliance on public benefits<sup>3</sup> and countries as a whole experience higher productivity and GDP when college completion rates are higher.

Yet for too many policymakers and practitioners, the clear path to growing postsecondary attainment levels for all students has been elusive. The U.S. has made steady progress in increasing college-going rates, but its success in increasing the proportion of Americans with college degrees has been more measured and inequitable. Completion rates are lower among Black and Latinx students than white students,<sup>4</sup> and among community college students than those attending four-year institutions. There is also wide variation between schools, even between colleges with similar levels of funding and student populations.<sup>5</sup> In sum, the economic and social benefits of a college degree are well documented and substantial, but those benefits accrue disproportionately to students from middle and high-income households.<sup>6</sup> The very students for whom a college degree could be a life-changing event are still left out of the college earnings premium.<sup>7</sup>

This landscape suggests that institutional action – specifically, the choices state policymakers and college leaders make with respect to how resources are deployed – are key to raising attainment levels and promoting racial and economic justice and socio-economic mobility.

Until relatively recently, policymakers have focused largely on improving college affordability through increased investment in public institutions and need-based student aid programs, with a particular emphasis on closing racial and ethnic gaps in college persistence and attainment. More recently, colleges and non-profit organizations across the country have pioneered new and more comprehensive ways to help their students succeed in completing a degree or credential. CUNY ASAP, for example, which provides comprehensive support to community college students on nine campuses throughout New York City, has doubled graduation rates for participants. InsideTrack, who has coached over 2.4M students and serves 4,000 programs across the country, increased the persistence of Pell-eligible students by 15 percent in one year.

Central to these comprehensive approaches to student support, or CASS, programs is advising, coaching, or case management. Students have customized support, usually accompanied by financial help through tuition waivers, or scholarships. Most of these approaches have been shown, through rigorous evaluation, to substantially improve student success.<sup>8</sup>

Now more than ever, these programs are critical for students of color and those from lower socioeconomic groups. Students of color and students from low-income families have been disproportionately impacted by the global pandemic. They have faced higher levels of unemployment, have contracted COVID-19 at disproportionate rates, and their cases have been more acute than other groups. As a result, students from low-income families are enrolling and re-enrolling in college at significantly lower rates than in years past, and relative to their more affluent peers.<sup>9</sup> Immediate college enrollment this fall dropped substantially with

the largest declines among graduates of high schools with substantial populations of students living in poverty, those receiving free and reduced-price lunch, and those with large minority populations.<sup>10</sup> According to a randomized study by the Community College Center, 40 percent of prospective community college students are canceling their plans.<sup>11</sup>

## CONTEXT

Throughout 2020, TICAS partnered with LEO to analyze and highlight six evidence-based programs: CUNY ASAP, InsideTrack, MAAPS, One Million Degrees, Project QUEST, and Stay the Course™. Practitioners, researchers, policy professionals, funders, and students convened in July and September of 2020 to better understand the lessons learned from these comprehensive student success programs. Clear consensus emerged:

1. CASS initiatives can help students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, first generation and other vulnerable and marginalized students attain a postsecondary degree or a credential at much higher rates than they do currently.
2. Comprehensive student success initiatives offer a clear formula for policymakers to use to scale these approaches.

This policy brief builds on what we know about CASS programs and proposes a new, evidence-based approach to scaling these models. In this brief, we propose a new federal initiative – the Comprehensive Approaches to Student Success (CASS) program – modeled after the successful and evidence-based, federal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program – to put a serious and sustainable national effort behind models shown to help students complete college.

### The CASS program would:

- **Provide formula grants to states:** Provide \$1 billion in formula grants to states, based on their enrollment of low-income students at community colleges and regional public universities. Grants would support the implementation of a CASS program that has been identified as evidence-based by the U.S. Department of Education.
- **Enable successful programs to provide technical assistance to emerging programs:** Enable and empower non-profit organizations that have proven successful at increasing postsecondary completion rates for students from low-income communities and have the capacity to provide technical assistance, to help other institutions replicate their models.

## Comprehensive Approaches to Student Success Convening: September 9-10, 2020

### Key Takeaways

- Too many students enter higher education facing multiple barriers to completion that extend beyond academic and financial.
- Comprehensive approaches to student success offer a proven path to completion.
- Replicating these programs takes resources and planning; we are learning from replication efforts currently underway.
- Scaling nationally requires sustainable funding, organizational capacity, and commitment.
- The federal government can leverage what we've learned by funding evidence-based programs. It can also spur more innovation and research to generate additional models and evidence to improve student success.
- States can play a key role in scaling and supporting programs.

- **Fund competitive grants to help emerging CASS programs to grow:** Reserve 10 percent of the funds for competitive grants to collaborations between non-profits and institutions that are developing, growing, and improving emerging CASS models to drive continued learning about what works and to fund rigorous evaluation of their impact.

## WHAT IS A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO STUDENT SUCCESS (CASS)?

All CASS programs combine academic, non-academic, and employment advising with some combination of tuition waivers, other financial assistance, as well as referrals for help identifying childcare, housing, food assistance, transportation, or more.<sup>12</sup> They have all been implemented in the past decade and all aim to increase postsecondary completion rates.<sup>13</sup> The best-known CASS effort is CUNY ASAP, launched at the City University of New York and since replicated at seven sites across five states. The other programs highlighted here include InsideTrack, MAAPS, One Million Degrees, Project QUEST, and Stay the Course™.

The programs are centered around providing individualized support to students through an advisor, mentor, coach, or case manager. Caseloads vary, with some programs operating at a ratio of 1:150 students and others at 1:35. Some programs work with students at community colleges, others at four-year institutions, and some at both. All programs work within the college setting; for some programs, services are delivered via partnering non-profits.

All these programs, to varying degrees, have been shown through rigorous evaluation to substantially improve student success, including higher rates of graduation, retention, job placement, and/or student earnings. There are other examples too, such as Ohio ASAP and the Detroit Promise Path, and institutional leaders are increasingly coalescing around CASS approaches in order to address the vexing problem of low completion rates.

## Comprehensive Approaches to Student Success Convening: September 9-10, 2020

*Answers from Program Leads to the question:  
What is core to your program's success?*

### CUNY ASAP:

*"ASAP's comprehensive model and deep commitment to a very intentional advisement approach, is rooted in a culture of data use and iterative improvement that always considers what more we can do to increase student success."*

### INSIDE TRACK:

*"over the years we've adapted our methodology – adopting new technologies and multiple communication channels – to offer a scalable model which enables us to reach students where they are and at the cadence they need from their coach."*

### MAAPS:

*"through daily tracking of students and immediate interventions when students went off path, underserved students had both a coach and a map to guide them."*

### ONE MILLION DEGREES:

*"a deep devotion to our scholars and an unrelenting focus on their needs and their success."*

### PROJECT QUEST:

*"...our strong workforce collaborations and proven wrap-around service model is what leads to participant success."*

### STAY THE COURSE™:

*"holistic, wrap-around services, fundamental belief in our students..."*

## RESEARCH DEMONSTRATING THE SUCCESS OF THE CASS MODELS IN OUR PROJECT <sup>14</sup>

<b>Programs substantially improve postsecondary persistence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Four of the programs – <b>CUNY ASAP</b>, <b>Stay the Course™</b>, <b>InsideTrack</b>, and <b>One Million Degrees</b> – produced statistically significant positive effects on persistence after at least one year.</li> <li>• Students in <b>Stay the Course™</b> were twice as likely to stay in school, and female students were almost four times more likely to stay in school compared to the comparison group.</li> <li>• <b>InsideTrack</b> saw a 15% increase in retention rates of Pell-eligible students in one year.</li> <li>• Participants in One Million Degrees were 47% more likely to persist to the next term in the first year of their program.<sup>15</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Degree and certificate completion</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 25% of female <b>Stay the Course™</b> students completed a degree or certificate after three years, compared to almost no one in the comparison group.</li> <li>• <b>InsideTrack</b> yielded a 13% increase in completion rates.</li> <li>• <b>CUNY ASAP</b> doubled the graduation rate for participants over 6 years.</li> <li>• Students who received MAAPS advisement at one institution had four-year graduation rates that were higher than their counterparts by 5 percentage points.*</li> </ul>
<b>Student earnings</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Project QUEST</b> participants' earnings grew from an average of \$11,722 to \$33,644. Program graduates moved out of poverty and into the middle class, earning an average of \$46,580 in the final year of the study.</li> </ul>
<b>Return on investment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>InsideTrack</b> saw a return on investment to the community of \$19.32 per \$1 invested in the program.</li> <li>• For each \$1 invested in <b>CUNY ASAP</b> by taxpayers, the projected ROI is between \$3 and \$4.</li> </ul>

\*Private communication with independent researcher conducting forthcoming evaluation

## SUSTAINABILITY, GROWTH, AND RETURN ON INVESTMENT

For comprehensive interventions to have a significant and sustained impact on college completion nationally, there needs to be a way to fund these efforts at scale. There is no 'one-size fits all' approach to financing evidence-based programs, and all rely on philanthropic grants and/or modest state or local investments. State funding fluctuates each year, which limits the ability of institutional leaders to plan for sustainability

Premised on sustained person-to-person interaction, comprehensive programs can initially seem relatively expensive.<sup>16</sup> While CUNY ASAP initially cost \$14,000 over three years, once replicated the cost fell to \$3,000.<sup>17</sup> These programs may pay for themselves over time, however, because they increase retention costs, enabling colleges to recoup much of their initial investment. Metropolitan State University of Denver, for example, which runs Pathways to Possible<sup>18</sup>, a student success initiative that cultivates high school students and supports them through college, uses the increased tuition and state and federal student aid it gains from larger preceding cohorts to fund subsequent cohorts. This approach creates a targeted revenue stream that covers the institution's annual investment while also yielding substantial returns for participating students, local communities, and broader society, and decreasing pressure on the institution to identify new students. Higher graduation rates might also improve a college's reputation, attracting more applicants and encouraging state and local policymakers to increase their funding. For states, investing in these efforts will yield greater levels of civic engagement, better health outcomes, higher tax revenue, as well as decreased reliance on public benefits<sup>19</sup>.

## Key Lessons for Sustainability

1

Obtain institutional buy-in, as evidenced by documented representation in the institution's strategic plan and budget, and when possible, prominence in accreditation artifacts. The commitment must be long-term.

2

Expand, and where necessary, redesign and reenvision colleges' advising departments to integrate them tightly with students' challenges, both on-campus and off, using the lessons learned from effective non-profit CASS programs.

3

Incorporate a significant planning period that includes building investment among institutional staff and leadership and exploring long-term funding opportunities.

## WHY USE THE MATERNAL, INFANT, AND EARLY CHILDHOOD HOME VISITING (MIECHV) PROGRAM AS A MODEL?

The proposal in this brief is based on and inspired by the Maternal Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program, MIECHV, which is a leading model for how to apply evidence at scale, for several reasons. First, MIECHV was designed to scale programs with a strong evidence base. Past federal efforts to increase college persistence and completion have focused on building the evidence base, but leaders in the field now believe the evidence is robust enough to move to scaling the practices and interventions that work. Second, MIECHV provides ongoing, rather than one-time funding, enabling proven programs to thrive and grow. Third, the MIECHV approach is working. Recent research shows that the number of home visits has grown by nearly 500 percent as a result of MIECHV, and the home visiting model appears to "have produced sizable reduction in the number of Medicaid-paid child emergency department visits, and a modest reduction in likelihood of a Medicaid-paid health care encounter for injury or ingestion."<sup>20</sup>

There are also similarities between the MIECHV and CASS approaches. Like home visiting, comprehensive student support programs share some essential elements, but vary in the specifics and are tailored to their context. Like home visiting, student support is centered around a human connection, and aimed at helping vulnerable individuals navigate complicated situations by leveraging the resources and supports likely to work best for them.

By prioritizing programs with a record of success - as determined with rigorous evaluations - while also allowing for innovation and demanding results, home visiting offers a unique and valuable model for federal policymakers to grow the return on investment of taxpayer dollars while making a meaningful impact on the lives of the most vulnerable.<sup>21</sup>

# POLICY PROPOSAL

TICAS proposes a new federal program to expand programs shown to improve the proportion of students who persist and graduate from college.

## KEY PROGRAM ELEMENTS

### HOW MUCH FUNDING WILL THIS PROGRAM PROVIDE AND HOW WILL THESE FUNDS BE DISTRIBUTED?

This program will be authorized at \$1 billion annually and most of it will be distributed to states on a formula basis. Fifteen percent will be set aside for HBCUs and other minority-serving institutions. Ten percent of the funds each year will be used to fund promising approaches that, if they meet the evidence standard, will be able to be funded by the formula funds in future years. Five percent will be set aside for training, technical assistance, data capacity, and a program evaluation at the national level.

### WHAT WILL IT TAKE FOR CASS PROGRAMS TO BE DESIGNATED AS PROVEN MODELS?

To receive funding from the formula grant, institutions must implement a model that meets the highest standard of evidence within the What Works Clearinghouse or the criteria for receiving a scaling grant from the Education Innovation and Research program (EIR). These standards require a rigorous evaluation, either randomized control trial or quasi-experimental study, that produced sizable, important impacts on key program goals, such as college persistence and completion, and is ready for replication. Some of the five percent of federal funds set aside for technical assistance may be used by the Institute for Education Sciences to expedite reviews of evaluations of CASS models to determine whether more programs meet the standard of a proven model. Ten percent of the total funds, or \$100 million, will be distributed competitively to CASS programs with a record of success that doesn't yet meet the evidence standard for proven programs. The U.S. Department of Education will conduct a national evaluation of all programs funded through this competitive fund to assess the impact of each approach and determine whether other programs meet the evidence standard.

### HOW WILL STATES AND INSTITUTIONS RECEIVE SUPPORT IN GROWING CASS PROGRAMS?

A portion of the funds should be used to hire intermediaries with a proven record of providing technical assistance to states and institutions to help them scale CASS models. These intermediaries will be hired to provide technical assistance and support, or facilitate, the cross-network communities of practice within each state, and nationally, in order to ensure cohesion between, and among, programs and institutions. States and colleges could benefit greatly from well-structured and targeted technical assistance on establishing and implementing plans to scale up evidence-based practices, building capacity within their system, integrating measurement of success within their existing framework, and disseminating best practices. This planned and targeted support would allow institutions and programs to receive meaningful assistance through applied learning to achieve their goals around student success. Funding will also support an annual, national conference for grantees.

States will be permitted to set-aside up to 5 percent of their funding to build capacity to implement and administer the program, including running communities of practice to connect grantees and enable them to share learnings and resources, and supporting institutions as they implement and expand these initiatives.

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## PROPOSAL-IN-BRIEF

- **\$1 billion to expand proven CASS models**
  - **Programs must meet evidence standard to receive funding**
  - **Funds distributed to states based on enrollment of low-income students**
  - **15% set aside for HBCUs and MSIs**
  - **10% for emerging CASS models**
  - **5% for technical assistance for states and institutions**
  - **National evaluation**
- 

### WHICH ENTITY WILL ADMINISTER THE PROGRAM IN STATES?

Funding will be distributed to a lead state agency as designated by the state. If no state agency is designated, a non-profit organization or other public agency may apply to be the state recipient. In order to receive the funds, states or non-profit organizations must apply and submit a needs assessment that includes: persistence and completion rates by demographic group at all public institutions statewide, an analysis of the challenges confronting the state in its effort to raise completion and persistence rates, the strategy and actions the state has pursued (if any) to address the problems identified, including the number of students currently receiving support through a proven CASS model. The state will also have to describe a strategy to scale proven CASS programs that includes a plan to increase the number of eligible students receiving CASS integrate, and align CASS goals with institutional strategies and goals. States will not be permitted to supplant other funding for comprehensive student support with this funding. The funding from this program must also be additive to any state higher education funding.

### HOW WILL THE FORMULA GRANTS BE ALLOCATED FROM THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT TO STATES?

The formula to states will be determined by the proportion of students from low-income families, defined as those from families earning less than \$40,000 enrolled at two- and four-year public institutions. No state or entity's annual award will fall more than 7.5 percent below what it was the prior fiscal year to ensure stability in program operations.

### HOW WILL THE PROGRESS AND PERFORMANCE OF STATE GRANTS BE MEASURED?

States will be required to set ambitious and achievable goals for increasing the number of students receiving CASS services through this program. Since the models that will be expanded through this program have already been shown to increase college persistence and completion and/or student earnings, this effort is focused on reaching more qualifying students with these services. To ensure that programs are expanded with fidelity, states must also develop a plan for overseeing grantees that includes investing in enhanced data capacity, and conducting site visits and regular touchpoints with grantees to ensure that they:

- employ well-trained and competent staff
- maintain high-quality supervision of grantees
- demonstrate strong organizational commitment to implement the activities
- integrate and align the CASS program's goals with institutional goals
- participate in a community of practice along with other institutions within each state to create a forum for practitioners to learn from one another
- establish appropriate linkages and referral networks to other community resources safety net programs, and supports for eligible students and
- monitor grantees to ensure that services are implemented with fidelity to the model.

To increase states' commitment to these efforts, increase the number of students reached by these effective models, and help integrate CASS approaches into state college attainment plans, states will also be required to match 10 percent of program costs in the first year, 20 percent of the costs in the second year, 30 percent in year three, rising to 50 percent by the fifth year and in all future years. If states fail to meet these standards, they will receive technical assistance and ultimately their grants may be put at risk.

States, or designated state entities, will also be required to establish a process for distributing funds to institutions that meets the goals of the program. Specifically, these processes will have to:

- be aligned with the strategy and goals for increasing postsecondary persistence and completion
- give priority for receiving funding to institutions serving concentrations of students from low-income backgrounds
- provide a minimum award of \$1 million to ensure that institutions have the resources needed to implement and administer high-quality, effective, human-capital intensive programs.
- limit funds to institutions that demonstrate that they are, or will be, implementing one of the proven models for comprehensive student success as determined by the Department of Education's Institute for Education Sciences (IES).
- require institutions that are receiving the grant to contribute cash from non-federal sources in increments of 20 percent starting the 2nd year of the grant period through the 5th year.

Funds may only be used to support existing CASS programs, or to expand proven models, to serve more students or operate on new campuses. States may provide grantees with a planning grant that enables them to seek out the perspective of all key stakeholders, including students, to ensure that the whole community understands and is supportive of the approach and plan. Participation in these programs must be free and optional for students though institutions may ask students for a commitment to the program. At least seventy-five percent of the funds must be spent serving students. Programs serving high levels and concentrations of students from low-income households should receive priority for funding and support.

## CONCLUSION

Evidence-based comprehensive approaches to student success offer great promise for increasing postsecondary completion rates by helping students of color and students from low-income households to attain degrees and certificates at higher rates. In turn, postsecondary degrees help reduce poverty, increase social mobility, reduce crime, and reliance on social services, and expand economic prosperity. Therefore, a federal investment in these programs, modeled after the federal home visiting program, would not only yield substantial benefits for individuals, but it would also generate economic and social returns for communities, states, and our nation. By targeting the funding to proven models, while providing a small fund for promising programs, this approach fosters innovation. Designed as a state-federal partnership, it has the added benefit of helping to bolster state postsecondary attainment strategies by encouraging a cooperative, research-based strategic approach. In sum, a federal investment in CASS programs is warranted and would be impactful.

## Appendix: MIECHV at-a-Glance

The Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) was first enacted in 2010 to improve infant, child, and family well-being. Funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and administered by states, MIECHV sends trained staff to visit at risk pregnant women in their homes to offer a range of support. From encouraging healthy prenatal practices, to helping parents understand the value of reading to their newborns, to teaching parents about healthy discipline practices, and much more, home visiting programs have been shown to reduce premature births, child abuse and neglect, domestic violence, and juvenile delinquency while improving school readiness, family economic self-sufficiency, and referrals for community resources and support.

The MIECHV program allocates funds based on formula to support evidence-based practices. MIECHV allows nurses and other professionals to make regular visits to the homes of vulnerable families with young children to improve maternal and child health. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) delivers funds to states, tribal entities and U.S. territories by formula. States must spend the majority of these funds to support one of the 17 models proven effective, as determined by HHS. Grantees are required to improve on key benchmarks on a systematic basis (not for program evaluation).

### Use of Funds

- States and tribal communities develop unique plans to target funding to communities identified through needs assessments.
- Each state or tribal community can opt to use one or more evidence-based home visiting models (identified through the Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness (HomVEE)) to serve families in those communities. One of those models is the Early Head Start Home Visiting Model, based on the Early Head Start home-based option. The typical grantees are Early Head Start programs, local early childhood education coalitions, and county health departments.

### Funding

- In FY2019, \$351 million was awarded to 56 eligible entities.
- State and territory grantees must spend the majority of their grants to implement evidence-based home visiting models. Up to 25 percent is available to implement promising practices that will undergo rigorous evaluation.

### Measuring Success

- Grantees must demonstrate measurable improvement in at least four of the six following benchmark domains:
  - Improvement in mental and newborn health
  - Reduction in child injuries, abuse, and neglect
  - Improved school readiness and achievement
  - Reduction in crime or domestic violence
  - Improved family economic self-sufficiency
  - Improved coordination and referral for other community resources and supports

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