



BRIDGE TO FINISH

Helping low-income college students succeed

Fall 2020

COLLEGE COMPLETION AMIDST AN ECONOMIC CRISIS

Even before this economic crisis, food and housing insecurity were already impacting as many as half of all community college students—and was often the reason they were not completing their degree or credential.

The COVID-19 economic crisis has shown us the importance of a college education in weathering this type of economic storm. Since March, the unemployment rate for those with just a high school diploma has been roughly twice that of those with a bachelors degree, flattening out in September at 9% and 4.8% respectively.

It is widely acknowledged that education is the best way to break the cycle of poverty. Yet, living in poverty makes staying in college tough. Because of systemic racism, poverty and the high cost of a post-secondary education, college completion is difficult to attain.

United Way’s Bridge to Finish program is helping break the cycle of poverty by helping students persist and complete their degree or credential. Students are connected with financial resources, food, housing, and other essentials in order to stay in school.

WHAT THE DATA TELLS US

Why are completion rates so much lower than more traditional 4-year colleges? Community college students are facing more economic hardship than at other schools:

- **Many college students are homeless and hungry.** One out of five community college students in Washington state report being homeless in the last year and 51% report not knowing where their next meal will come from.ⁱ Making ends meet is a constant tension: 71% of students who drop out of community college do it to earn money.
- **20% are parents.**ⁱⁱ Community colleges enroll the largest share of student parents. Studies show that the added demands of parenting take a toll: only 27% of single-parent students attain a degree or certificate within 6 years, compared with 56% of dependent students.
- **43% are people of color.**ⁱⁱⁱ On average, white students earn a college-level credential at a rate about 20 percentage points higher than Hispanic and Black students do. Students of color experience systemic challenges. The makeup of teachers is less diverse than the student body—so role models are limited. Students of color report feeling less academically prepared than their white peers.
- **Many are the first in their family to attend college.** Research shows significant differences in completion between students whose parents have graduated college vs. whose parents who have not.^v Navigating the financial aid system, pressure to contribute to family expenses, and not having support and encouragement to persist are some of the challenges.

• **King County won’t have enough graduates to fill our jobs.**

In 2024, more than 54,000 new jobs in King County will require a postsecondary credential—and only 9,000 King County students will complete a credential that same year. This is a persistence challenge. Statewide, 59 percent of high school graduates enroll in college, including apprenticeship, technical college and four-year universities. However, by age 26, fewer than half finish. This means that employers likely will have to recruit workers from other states or countries to fill high-demand jobs, especially those that pay well in the science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields. Statewide, one-third of STEM baccalaureate degree holders started at a community or technical college.^{vi}

► **The more you learn, the more you earn.**

A Georgetown University study shows that the lifetime wages of college graduates are \$1 million higher than high school graduates with no college.

TYPE OF DEGREES BEING PURSUED	MEDIAN WAGES IN WA STATE
Auto Body Technician	\$27K
Aviation Maintenance.....	\$45.7K
Carpenter	\$35.2K
Dental Hygienist.....	\$92.3K
Machinist Trainee.....	\$27.2K
Software Engineer	\$110.5K

PUBLIC POLICY AND THE PIVOT TO VIRTUAL

Our approach continues to be twofold: encompassing both the current needs of students today and working toward policy change to create more universally equitable college completion tomorrow. By pairing a policy agenda with our coordinated, onsite delivery of services, workshops and coaching, Bridge to Finish is looking toward ensuring that, regardless of where someone might go to school, services are consistent and pathways are solidified that support student success across the region.

Virtual program delivery

The program was originally built around on-campus presence: our team being highly visible, meeting students where they are. That approach has been turned on its head with all schools moving to virtual learning.

Still, the components of the program remain the same:

- **One-time emergency grants.** We saw needs skyrocket in March. UW Bothell/Cascadia had the same number of students apply for one-time emergency grants in spring quarter as they did all of last school year. More than **1,150** students received emergency grants last year. The average grant was **\$803** and there are two different types:
 - Homelessness prevention. We provide grants for rental assistance, move-in costs and utility payments to help students establish or maintain housing. These grants are up to **\$2,500**.
 - Life happens. Many students are faced with the choice of paying for a car repair, keeping food on the table or their tuition. These grants can be a game changer for low-income students and are up to **\$1,000**.
- **Easy access—remotely.** Since spring quarter, we’ve been working with administrators and students online to connect with those who are struggling to stay enrolled.
- **Relatable staff.** The program is staffed by 44 VISTA and AmeriCorps members who reflect the diversity of the student body. Services are offered in multiple languages and we work closely with our core nonprofit partners: Neighborhood House, Legal Counsel for Youth and Children and American Financial Services.
- **Variety of services, with financial tools as a foundation.** Depending on the campus, the food pantry may be what draws students in—or the financial workshops. All of the services are being offered remotely. The food pantry has pivoted to a drop-in and delivery model. For longer term support, the team is raising awareness around the SNAP program (formerly food stamps) with an online screening tool.

TYPE OF FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

One-time emergency grants
Homelessness prevention
Legal services & mental health services
Financial aid (FAFSA) application support
Access to public benefits like SNAP
Financial coaching
Free Tax Prep

Systems change

The local landscape of community colleges is quite varied, but there are some consistencies: they recognize the need, have made some efforts to address it and don’t have the capacity or skill set to take it to scale.

The inconsistencies are vast. There is a wide range of intervention strategies, access and speed of delivery. For example, schools that do offer emergency grants to meet students’ basic needs often have limited dollars so they don’t promote it. When a student does learn about it, it is often not available quickly enough to be helpful (i.e. avoid an eviction).

Our funding comes with specific requirements that are already impacting change at the college system level. We require that colleges:

- Provide an online application that makes the process equitable
- Promote the program widely
- Trust students (the application is self-reporting)
- Make decisions rapidly (within 48 hours)
- Track completion rates

Our team is also raising awareness of the child care benefit that comes with financial aid. This is a highly untapped resource and can often be the difference between making it to completion or dropping out.

At the state and federal level, we’re meeting with legislators to influence flexibility for SNAP eligibility. California has made the most progress in this area. Students can meet the 20 hours of work/week requirement through work-study programs, qualify if they’re a full-time student with a child, etc.

TAKING IT TO SCALE: LOCAL AND NATIONAL ATTENTION

The initial success of the program has gained both local and national attention. We are leveraging this interest by:

Improving measurement.

- Locally, we're working with the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) to measure persistence and completion rates of students participants. This data helps us understand which interventions are working best, assess the effectiveness of our program model and understand how the program is or isn't impacting racial disparities.
- Nationally, we're working with Sara Goldrick-Rab, founder of the Hope Center for College Community and Justice in Philadelphia and Professor of Higher Education and Sociology at Temple University.
- With funding from Arnold Ventures, the Hope Center will explore how United Way's efforts work in partnership with the colleges. We'll look at whether the partnership increases students' use of public benefits programs and boosts academic performance.
- United Way of King County is one of six projects funded by ECMC Foundation to test, evaluate and share best practices for meetings basic needs for college students.

Influencing public policy. Our scale has attracted attention from providers across the country and we're combining best practices. For example, we're working with counterparts in California to learn from their experience influencing their SNAP eligibility for college students. We anticipate that our public policy agenda for the next full session in 2021 will include expansion of SNAP eligibility, child care subsidies and funding for emergency grants.

Recognized nationally for "Best AmeriCorps Program." The AmeriCorps program allows us to leverage federal dollars to recruit a passionate, energetic team to reach even more college students. In September, United Way of King County was recognized nationally with the "Outstanding Service Program" of the year.

RESULTS TO DATE

In the 2019/2020 school year, 6,939 students received support with 18,200 interventions.

Thanks to our partnership with the State Board for Community & Technical Colleges (SBCTC), we know that in summer and fall quarters of last year:

- On average, students who accessed Bridge to Finish services last year persisted at a 9% higher rate than other students.
- Students of color persisted at a 12% higher rate.
- More than 60% of students who accessed Bridge to Finish services were students of color.
- On average students accessed three interventions through Bridge to Finish.

A FOCUS ON PUBLIC POLICY

With several federal policies in place to help communities recover from this economic crisis, we are working hard to prioritize low-income college students. From tax credits to food benefits, safety net programs are currently too difficult for students to access.

NEXT UP

Piloting technology to provide consistent access. Given that colleges are working with students so differently, we will partner with multiple colleges this year to test the impact of user-friendly technology. Edquity for College is an app that helps students manage their money and connect with services. We look forward to seeing what we can learn.

Incorporating mental health support. We know that navigating college when you're in poverty is tough—and undoubtedly has mental health implications for some students. United Way has received a pilot grant to test strategies to meet the mental health needs of students. The grant includes training the entire team on trauma-informed practices and a needs analysis for how colleges support students.

YOU + UNITED WAY = BASIC NEEDS ARE NOT A BARRIER TO COMPLETION

With your support, we can create a level playing field for college students. Choosing between child care, rent—or education—will no longer be an issue. With donor support, we can serve more than 10,000 students each year.

Raising \$15 million will allow us to continue to build partnerships with colleges, increase the number of emergency grants made to students so that they can persist—and focus on meeting the housing, food and financial needs of students of color, first generation students and working parents. Your dollars allow us to leverage the power of on-the-ground full-time National Service members through AmeriCorps to promote and deliver the program in a way that has already proven successful. Bridge to Finish is a signature anti-poverty strategy in our community and we hope you'll join us.

\$15M raised = **10,000+** students served each year, **10+** schools

COST AREA	FY 19	FY 20	FY 21	FY 22	FY 23	TOTAL
Service Providers: Legal, Financial Emp., Housing, Childcare, Food	\$85,000	\$380,000	\$425,000	\$375,000	\$375,000	\$1,640,000
Emergency Grants, Homeless Prevention & Other Assistance	\$730,000	\$1,325,000	\$1,800,000	\$1,850,000	\$1,550,000	\$7,305,000
Outreach	\$10,000	\$55,000	\$65,000	\$55,000	\$45,000	\$230,000
Staff, AmeriCorps, VISTA, Fellows	\$265,000	\$770,500	\$1,106,500	\$1,141,500	\$718,150	\$4,001,150
Supplies	\$10,000	\$30,000	\$35,000	\$35,000	\$30,000	\$140,000
Trainings/Mileage/Orca	\$32,000	\$33,500	\$33,850	\$34,235	\$34,659	\$168,244
Evaluation	\$0	\$50,000	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$275,000
Contingency Planning	\$0	\$10,000	\$20,000	\$10,000	\$10,000	\$50,000
Program Administration	\$113,200	\$265,350	\$361,035	\$357,574	\$283,781	\$1,380,939
PROJECTED TOTAL	\$1,245,200	\$2,918,850	\$3,971,385	\$3,933,309	\$3,121,589	\$15,190,333

PARTNER COLLEGES

Bellevue College
 Cascadia College
 Green River College
 Highline College
 North Seattle College
 Seattle Central College
 (limited services)
 Shoreline College
 South Seattle College
 UW Bothell
 Renton Technical College

“ People genuinely do care and United Way has exemplified that tenfold. Seriously, without the assistance, I doubt very much that I would still be in college.”

—Highline College student who received emergency funds for transportation and move-in costs

i The Hope Center, Temple University, Washington State Community and Technical Colleges #RealCollege Survey <https://hope4college.com/washington-state-community-and-technical-colleges-realcollege-survey/>

ii Seattle Colleges Fact Sheet <http://seattlecolleges.edu/district/district/facts.aspx>

iii Seattle Colleges Fact Sheet <http://seattlecolleges.edu/district/district/facts.aspx>

v Postsecondary National Policy Institute, September 2018

vi Spotlight on the Seattle Community Colleges, 2013