



BRIDGE TO FINISH

Helping low-income college students succeed

BACKGROUND

It's widely acknowledged that education is the best way to break the cycle of poverty. Yet, living in poverty makes being in college tough. At community college—where more than half of students are low-income—it can be especially challenging to stay in school.

Food and housing insecurity affect as many as half of all college students—and is often the reason they don't complete their education. Assistance like one-time emergency grants can be the difference between dropping out and persisting.

The national dialogue around college is focused on access and affordability. Both of those things are important, but they shouldn't overshadow the alarmingly low college completion rates for low-income students and students of color.

WHAT THE DATA TELLS US

Poverty makes staying in school tough. Community colleges are the most affordable way for low-income people to complete their education, yet fewer than half of community college students earn a credential.ⁱ

Why are completion rates so much lower than more traditional 4-year colleges? It starts with who is attending:

- **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.
- **44% 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 Caucasian peers.
- **Making ends meet is a constant tension.** One in nine community college students report being homeless in the last year and 42% report not knowing where their next meal will come from.^{iv} Seventy-one percent of students who drop out of community college do it to earn money.
- **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

DESIGNING A SOLUTION

With so many low-income college students struggling, we're connecting them to services to help them stay in school and complete their education. We've combed the country for best practices, surveyed students, met with college leaders and piloted a program in four colleges. The result is a program with these key components:

- **One-time emergency grants.** From eviction prevention to car repair, we're offering grants of up to \$2,000 that help students stay in school. These grants are coordinated with other financial assistance and resources to ensure this one-time help supports long-term success.
- **Easy access.** We make this a one-stop experience for students. We're on campus in prominent, convenient locations—and open a variety of hours.
- **On-site staff.** The program is staffed by a variety of professional staff, AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps VISTA members and other direct service providers. This group reflects the diversity of the student body; services are offered in multiple languages.
- **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. Students can access coaching, assistance with financial aid, public benefit enrollment, and much more. The variety is resonating with students and word-of-mouth has helped drive participation.

TAKING IT TO SCALE

This college completion work has expanded from a pilot program on four campuses serving 400 students to nine campuses serving 4,000 low-income students. We've seen how 1:1 connections with staff and one-time financial support allows students to overcome the barriers they're facing and stay in school.

College administrators are excited about the progress they've seen and have been proactive in promoting the program and supporting expansion efforts. Our team is working with colleges and other partners to:

- **Influence public policy.** With so many students struggling with hunger and homelessness, we are advocating for all community college students to have the financial resources they need to persist and complete. This includes access to food, housing, and emergency grants. United Way advocated for the recent passing of the senate bill for wraparound services for homeless college students; removing barriers so students can persist.
- **Measure results.** We're working with the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) to track completion rates of participants.

TYPE OF FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

One-time emergency grants
Homelessness prevention
Matched savings programs
Financial aid (FAFSA) application support
Access to public benefits like SNAP
Financial coaching
Free Tax Prep

HOW DOES THIS FIT WITH COLLEGE PROMISE PROGRAMS?

College access is improving with taxpayer support. In addition to the partially implemented [Seattle Promise](#) for all students in Seattle Public Schools, Washington State recently passed the Workforce Education Investment Act. When fully implemented in fall of 2020, low- and median-income students in Washington State will have no-wait lists for Financial Aid and will receive significant help with tuition and fees.

That said, the low completion rates at our community colleges are proof that even low-income college students who receive paid tuition and pell grants struggle to make ends meet—and stay in school. For students who are the first in their family to go to college, the barriers are especially high. Tuition may be paid for, but immediate needs often outweigh the long-term benefits of staying in school. With a full-load of studies, earning an income you can live on—often while raising a family and working more than one low-paying job—is challenging.

Bridge to Finish will change that outcome. Along with state-funded tuition, this program built around one-time emergency grants, access to public benefits, and support in meeting basic needs will improve completion rates. We will be on campus to help raise awareness of the promise opportunities, help students navigate the challenges of everyday life while earning an education and provide the tools to be financially stable.

YOU + UNITED WAY

With your 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, **9+** schools, **20%** improvement in completion rate

COST AREA	FY 19	FY 20	FY 21	FY 22	FY 23	TOTAL
Service Providers: Legal, Financial Emp., Housing, Childcare, Food	\$650,000	\$750,000	\$750,000	\$750,000	\$750,000	\$3,000,000
Emergency Grants & Other Assistance	\$400,000	\$1,000,000	\$1,800,000	\$1,800,000	\$1,800,000	\$6,400,000
Outreach	\$65,000	\$75,000	\$80,000	\$80,000	\$80,000	\$315,000
Staff, AmeriCorps, VISTA, Fellows	\$495,000	\$657,500	\$761,750	\$792,925	\$826,218	\$3,038,393
Supplies	\$60,000	\$85,000	\$91,500	\$98,650	\$106,515	\$381,665
Trainings/Mileage/Orca	\$48,500	\$53,350	\$57,035	\$62,739	\$69,012	\$242,136
Evaluation	\$30,000	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$35,000.00	\$260,000
Program Administration	\$174,850	\$269,585	\$361,528.50	\$365,931.35	\$366,674.49	\$1,363,719
PROJECTED TOTAL	\$1,923,350	\$2,965,435	\$3,976,814	\$4,025,245	\$4,033,419	\$15,000,913

PARTNER COLLEGES

Bellevue College
 Cascadia College
 Green River College
 Highline College
 North Seattle College
 Seattle Central College
 Shoreline College
 South Seattle College
 UW Bothell

“Partnering with United Way helps Green River College students meet their goals. By providing essential wrap around services, Benefits Hub contributes to the college’s ability to bring much needed supports to students with diverse needs to achieve equitable student success and completion. United Way Benefits Hub is a valuable, innovative and impactful partnership with community colleges committed to student success.”

—Dr. Suzanne Johnson, President, Green River College

i College Board Research, Trends in Community Colleges, April 2016

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

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

iv Wisconsin HOPE Lab, Follow Up Report on Food and Housing Insecurities, May 2018

v Postsecondary National Policy Institute, September 2018

vi Spotlight on the Seattle Community Colleges, 2013

THE NATIONAL CONVERSATION AROUND COLLEGE COMPLETION

