



BRIDGE TO FINISH

Helping low-income college students succeed

March 2020

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 should not overshadow the alarmingly low college completion rates for low-income students and students of color.

In 2018 we launched a pilot program to disrupt the cycle of poverty by connecting students with services to help them persist and earn their college degree or certificate. We work with colleges to provide students easy-to-access services that include emergency grants, homelessness prevention funds, matched savings programs and financial aid application and support. We've learned a lot, modified the program and are now delivering it at a scale that no other community is doing. The need on campuses is great and the early impact on persistence and completion rates is impressive.

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.

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.
- **47% 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.
- **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.

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

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}

DESIGNING A SOLUTION

Our approach is 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.

Onsite delivery

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 learned from our pilot in four colleges. The result is a program with these key components:

- **One-time emergency grants.** We offer two types of emergency grants:
 - 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.** We're on campus in prominent, convenient locations—and open a variety of hours.
- **On-site staff.** The program is staffed by AmeriCorps members who reflect the diversity of the student body. Services are offered in multiple languages and staffed by on-site coordinators, community service providers and AmeriCorps members. We also work closely with our core nonprofit partners: WithinReach, Neighborhood House and Sound Outreach.
- **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.

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

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 skillset 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 student's 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 on campus work in partnership with the colleges. We'll look at whether the partnership increases students' use of public benefits programs and boosts academic performance.

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.

RESULTS TO DATE

The program is off to a strong start. In 2019 alone, 5,347 students received support with 17,875 interventions.

Thanks to our partnership with the State Board for Community & Technical Colleges, 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.

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.

NEXT UP

Expanding to 10 colleges. This spring we'll start providing services at Renton Technical College. With their Advanced Manufacturing program and Culinary Arts program, it's a great addition for students being served by Bridge to Finish.

Piloting technology to provide consistent access. Given that colleges are working with students so differently, we will partner with Bellevue College next 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
 (coming Spring 2020)

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 Times, Washington community-college leader wants to double completion rates—while closing big racial equity gaps, February 23, 2020](#)
 v [Postsecondary National Policy Institute](#), September 2018
 vi Spotlight on the Seattle Community Colleges, [2013](#)