

The Clear Connections Project

Policy Brief

Building Illinois' Workforce of the Future: Recommendations for a Student Support System That Works

Today, earning family-sustaining wages is harder than ever without educational credentials beyond a high school diploma. In Illinois, a growing number of families earn too little to meet basic needs despite working full-time.¹ Their earning power could be substantially improved by career or technical certificates and college degrees.² Yet 42 percent of adults in Illinois have not completed any college coursework.³ Fourteen percent of Illinois adults lack a high school diploma.⁴

Currently, more than half of all postsecondary students are independent adults, over half attend college less than full-time, nearly 40 percent work part-time, and 27 percent are parents.⁵ The majority of these “non-traditional” students are female and attend community colleges, which are affordable and accessible in many communities.⁶ In Illinois, community college enrollments have risen as the economy declines.

The convergence of personal barriers, institutional challenges, and underfunding makes it difficult for low-income workers to complete community college programs. Many of the risk factors identified by the U.S. Department of Education as barriers to college completion are also characteristics of non-traditional students, including attending school part-time, being financially independent, delaying college enrollment, and caring for children.⁷ Many must work full-time or nearly full-time to support children or extended families, a major reason that students delay or abandon their degree plans.⁸ They must juggle

The Clear Connections Project (CCP)

Thousands of Illinois' low-income workers enroll in college each year to find a better way to support their families. But non-traditional, working college students often have challenges that make it difficult for them to complete certificate or degree programs. With a myriad of competing obligations and personal and financial barriers, these students need a comprehensive suite of coordinated services to help them access and complete college programs.

The Clear Connections Project (CCP) was launched by Women Employed in 2007 to help more low-income working students connect with the services they need to complete college certificates and degrees. Through CCP, Women Employed works with community colleges and community-based organizations to develop innovations and to spread promising practices in academic and support services. Women Employed staff provide free consultations to member colleges to identify individual strategies for improving access to and quality of student services. CCP member organizations work together to promote policy reforms and establish Illinois as a leader in student supports for low-income adults.

Learn more at www.womenemployed.org.



Women Employed's mission is to improve women's economic status and remove barriers to economic equity. We promote fair workplace practices, increase access to training and education, and provide women with innovative tools and information to move into careers paying family-supporting wages.

unpredictable work schedules and competing family and school demands.⁹ As first-generation students, many are unfamiliar with college systems and procedures. Financial aid may be a mystery, processes such as registration may be unclear or unwelcoming, and students may not hear about important support services until it is too late to access them.¹⁰ Furthermore, many college systems and higher education policies are designed for younger students with fewer obligations, and so older students with more work and life responsibilities may find it harder to access student services and financial aid. As a result, three years after enrolling, nearly half of the nation's non-traditional students have left college without a degree or certificate.¹¹ Other low-income workers never get past the adult education system and into college certificate or degree programs.

Illinois has led the nation in addressing some of these issues with financial aid and student support innovations for low-income, non-traditional students. Illinois was a pioneer in allowing grant aid for less-than-half-time students to help more of those who must work and care for families complete degrees. Prior to state cuts, the Student Success Grant was also a national model that influenced federal policy initiatives. These grants provided colleges with funding to offer tailored support services based on the needs of their disadvantaged student populations.

Illinois is one of five midwestern states chosen by the Joyce Foundation to participate in Shifting Gears, a policy initiative that helps states promote economic growth through systemic change and innovations in education and skills training.* The initiative has helped to strengthen connections between adult education and postsecondary education, and has turned to strengthening student supports to help more participants complete adult education programs successfully and transition into college level programs.

However, successive years of higher education cuts have seriously tarnished Illinois' track record and made it more difficult to improve college completion rates. Funding increases in Illinois' Monetary Award Program (MAP), one of the nation's largest state need-based financial aid programs, have not been sufficient to keep up with the demand for higher education or offset the tuition and fee increases occurring after years of cuts to community college funding. As a result, even at the community college level, Illinois' college affordability has been undermined. The state is now using six-year-old tuition and fee figures to determine grants. Even after financial aid, poor and working-class families are expected to use 37 percent or more of their annual income to pay for tuition and fees at a two-year college.¹²

Illinois invests much less in support services to ensure that students who enter college programs can complete certificates and degrees. Community colleges no longer receive funding for the support services their students need to graduate, so funding for these services is completely discretionary. Colleges are required to provide career services, but not funded to provide them. Even basic services like academic advisement and counseling have suffered. Advisor to student ratios in parts of Illinois can be as high as 1:1200.¹³ It should come as no surprise that a large survey of community college students found that 46 percent had taken a course they later found out they did not need, causing many to waste precious financial aid dollars.¹⁴

The math simply does not add up. Illinois invests the least in the students who form the core of our state workforce. Community colleges are open-door institutions serving high numbers of students. Nine out of every ten Illinois community college students stay and work in Illinois.¹⁵ Community colleges educate 75 percent of our state's college students, yet receive less than 18 percent of state higher education dollars.¹⁶ This is despite the fact that many of these students need the most assistance. For Illinois to build the workforce employers need and to help low-income workers advance,

* For more information, see <http://www.shifting-gears.org>.

we must make a significant investment in effective supports so that more students complete programs leading to good jobs in growing sectors.

Through the Clear Connections Project (CCP), Women Employed collaborates with community colleges and related community-based organizations to develop and disseminate promising student support practices that help colleges make the most of existing resources, while advocating for improvements in state policy that will expand needed services and deliver them effectively. Through our technical assistance consultations and other activities, we help colleges evaluate what works and determine areas for improvement, and we use these findings and national research to help shape state policies.

Improving Certificate and Degree Completion Rates

CCP strategies are based on a growing national body of research that has begun providing solutions for states and community colleges working to improve the completion rates of low-income students. Over the last few years, several large research projects have provided insights on how to design an effective student support service system that will help more low-income workers complete certificates and degrees. Research now suggests:

- Engaging students early is essential. Students who complete the equivalent of the first semester (12-15 credit hours) are more likely to return for subsequent semesters, complete important required courses, and earn certificates and degrees.¹⁷
- Students simply do not always know about key services and resources that could help them complete certificates or degrees.¹⁸
- Many low-income, non-traditional students are the first in their families to go to college, and, as a result, have little exposure to the higher education system. Clear, simple application and registration processes, as

The Illinois Public Agenda for College and Career Success

The Illinois Board of Higher Education has developed a visionary, long-term plan that includes four state goals to improve college access and completion rates in Illinois and make Illinois one of the top five states for economic growth and vitality. The Clear Connections Project student services model aligns with several recommendations and action steps focused on helping more non-traditional students successfully complete college programs, including:

- Improving financial aid opportunities for part-time adult students.
- Ensuring place-bound students have career development, academic, and support services.
- Increasing targeted funding to raise the number of degrees in high-demand careers.

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well as early, pro-active guidance is important for helping these students register and avoid taking unnecessary classes or switching majors.¹⁹ Early guidance is particularly important for completion because it can help keep low-income students from exhausting their financial aid before they finish their programs.

- Instead of receiving only basic advice on choosing classes, students need help evaluating career options and then creating a realistic plan for degree completion.²⁰ Research suggests that instituting early, mandatory career and graduation planning within the first semester can produce better student outcomes.²¹
- In an intensive advisement model, advisors are pro-active, coming into the classroom to introduce themselves and working with professors to follow up with students when they miss classes or are doing poorly. Intensive advisement that includes regular meetings with an assigned advisor and financial aid counselor to address academic progress, financial need, and other issues that might affect

progress can lead to improved course completion and retention. Advisors are able to refer students to college and community services that can help students address issues before they cause students to drop out. As a result, students can address barriers to course completion with their advisors and complete more credits, which helps reduce time to graduation.²²

- One of the most conclusive studies shows that low-income single mothers are much more likely to complete college courses leading to a degree if they receive performance-based scholarships that hold them accountable for maintaining a specified grade point average (GPA) and that are combined with enhanced support services, such as regular meetings with the same advisor or counselor.²³
- Low-income students who receive intensive support services are more likely to persist in school if they participate in a blend of instructional courses and peer tutoring that is part of a larger support service network on campus.²⁴ Students' GPA and retention rates increased when exposed to a coordinated network of services such as academic counseling, progress monitoring, study groups, success workshops, and referrals to personal counseling.²⁵
- Emergency grants can keep small emergencies such as car trouble or a child's illness manageable so low-income students can continue their studies.²⁶

Models from Other States

Capital IDEA²⁷

Based in Austin, Capital IDEA partners with central Texas businesses to prepare low-income participants for high-demand, well-paid careers. The program works with participants at any level, including those who dropped out of high school or need to learn English. Capital IDEA is based on an intensive case management model that includes weekly visits with an assigned career counselor. With their counselors, participants create long-term personal, educational, and career

plans, and receive childcare, transportation, and emergency assistance so that they can focus on their education. Participants also attend student success workshops on study skills, financial management, employment skills, and other topics relevant to participants' education and future careers. Students must attend weekly peer support groups and counselor meetings. Counselors work with participants to ensure that any educational path they enter will reliably lead to a job that offers \$15 an hour or more, benefits, and opportunities for advancement.

The Capital IDEA model requires substantial funding, but has a high return on investment. Nearly 60 percent of participants complete certificates or associate's degrees and after completion, participants have average starting wages of \$37,752—triple the average wage of entering participants. Annual studies commissioned by Capital IDEA indicate that **taxpayers save \$296,379 per graduate based on new taxes and public assistance savings, and receive a 481 percent net return on investment.**

Washington State Opportunity Grants²⁸

Washington State has developed an effective model that pairs grants for tuition, fees, and books with enhanced support services for low-income workers studying in approved certificate programs in high-demand fields. Individualized student support services are an essential part of the program and may include personalized counseling, tutoring, career advisement, college success classes, emergency childcare, and emergency transportation. Staff members work with students to ensure they receive all available federal and state financial aid and to help address barriers to program completion before they arise. Students receive "last-dollar" grants that pay the difference between existing financial aid and remaining need to cover tuition and fees for up to 45 credits and up to \$1,000 for books and supplies each academic year.

In the pilot year (2006-2007), 843 students participated in 10 programs in community colleges around the state. Nearly half were students of color, and 63 percent were parents juggling work and family demands. The average household income was \$11,160, similar to that of Capital IDEA students. The program was highly successful, with 73 percent retained for a full year or completing their program successfully. Notably, completion rates for part-time students were nearly the same as completion rates for full-time students. In 2007, the legislature approved \$11.5 million per year to expand the program to all 34 community and technical colleges. The program served almost 5,000 full- and part-time students in 2008.

Recommendations

Developing an effective system of student supports will require time and investment from colleges, state agencies, and policymakers. **Our state cannot compete economically if half of the low-income workers who enter college programs drop out.**

Colleges need to work to improve access to and quality of student supports, while state agencies and policymakers must make sufficient funding for student supports and the removal of policy barriers core goals. Adopting the following recommendations will require Illinois to reevaluate its funding priorities to invest in policies that improve program completion rates and meet workforce needs. **Each of the improvements mentioned below must serve part-time as well as full-time students to improve the success rates of low-income working adults.**

Improve application and registration processes

Colleges should:

- Develop clear application and registration processes and make application and registration checklists readily available in paper form and on-line. Ensure

all staff know about each step in the process and pro-actively help students progress. *Leader: Elgin Community College*

- Increase outreach to non-traditional students, including unemployed and incumbent workers. Provide information on and support for application and enrollment, including financial aid and student services, at times and places that are accessible to working adults. *Leader: Shawnee Community College*
- Cross-train staff so that each department knows about services available to students and actively refers students to services early in the application process. Adult education staff should be included in this process. *Leaders: Moraine Valley Community College, Joliet Junior College, and Kankakee Community College*
- Increase coordination between adult education, career and technical education, and college-level staff. For example, have admissions staff or advisors visit adult education courses to talk about financial aid and career options available by pursuing certificates or degrees. *Leaders: Truman College and John A. Logan College*

State agencies and policymakers should:

- Create a financial aid calculator for the Illinois Student Assistance Commission's CollegeZone website to help workers who wish to enroll in school assess their potential financial aid awards.
- Develop a tool for college admissions and advising staff that helps them work with potential students to evaluate their financial situation, tap into all available financial aid, access needed outside resources, and develop a realistic plan to pay for college.[†] Make sure admissions and advisement teams receive training on using the tool.

[†] For an example, see the WASC web tool referenced in Betsy L. Tessler and David Seith, *From Getting By to Getting Ahead: Navigating Career Advancement for Low-wage Workers* (New York: MDRC, 2007).

Identify at-risk students, provide combined advising and career planning to them as early as possible, and continue intensive advising until graduation

Colleges should:

- Ask students to identify potential risk factors, such as first-generation or part-time status, on student information or application forms.
- Invest in software that allows staff to quickly assess student needs and make referrals to the advisors or counselors who can best help them. *Leader: Lincoln Land Community College*
- Target career and degree planning to students with two or more risk factors, undecided students, and those in adult education or remedial courses. Make services available at times and places convenient to non-traditional students. *Leader: Harper College*
- Integrate career and degree planning into adult, remedial, or general education classes. *Leaders: Prairie State College and Malcolm X College*
- Include information on available careers by education level in each major/concentration description in the college catalog. *Leader: Southeastern Illinois College*
- Develop mandatory orientations specifically for part-time degree seekers or other non-traditional students, including adult education students transitioning into credit courses. Integrate degree and career planning into orientation. Consider developing an on-line option for busy students, but couple it with intensive advising. *Leader: John A. Logan College*
- Develop college success courses or workshops, including degree and career planning and study skills, targeted to students with multiple risk factors, such as remedial, part-time, and transitioning adult education students. Work with staff and faculty to ensure that students are pro-actively referred to these courses or workshops.

- Invest in technologies that can improve degree and career planning and access to needed services such as advising and counseling. Widely advertise the availability of these technologies to students and provide in-depth training to staff. *Leaders: Lincoln Land Community College, Kankakee Community College, and Southeastern Illinois College*
- Require students in developmental courses, those receiving financial aid, or those with two or more risk factors to meet with an advisor and complete a plan for improvement when they receive a failing grade on a midterm exam. *Leader: Illinois Valley Community College*

State agencies and policymakers should:

- Set statewide standards for academic advisement that include degree and career planning as an integral component. Standards should include an acceptable student to advisor ratio.
- Develop easy-to-use career and graduation plan templates and career pathway maps for colleges to adapt to their specific programs.
- Require and fund statewide professional development for advisors and/or counselors that includes training in degree and career planning.
- Work with colleges to ensure effective tracking systems are in place to flag when students with multiple risk factors are having trouble in their courses and should be required to meet with an advisor.
- Create a dedicated student services funding stream that allows colleges to support intensive advisement and career counseling. Funding should be flexible enough to allow colleges to address the unique needs of their students.

Ensure the availability of high-quality student support services, including childcare, tutoring, and crisis counseling

Colleges should:

- Develop referral partnerships with local community organizations to provide reduced-cost counseling, to assist with finding childcare or housing, or to fill other urgent needs. Ensure staff and faculty have a list of partners and the services they provide. *Leader: Elgin Community College*
- Reserve childcare slots for students, and ensure that students and staff are aware of the childcare center and childcare state subsidies. Partner with local childcare providers to develop more comprehensive childcare centers. *Leader: Highland Community College*

State agencies and policymakers should:

- Ensure colleges have sufficient funding to provide tutoring and other support services for students with multiple risk factors, in developmental courses, or those receiving MAP grants or other financial aid.
- Invest in improving completion rates by creating funding formulas that recognize the needs of under-prepared and low-income students and incentivize improved completion rates.
- Create dedicated funding to provide college outreach and support services to adult education students. Enable colleges to hire transition coordinators to increase the number of students successfully transitioning from adult education programs to certificate or degree programs.²⁹
- Develop standards for adult education transition coordinators based on the results from the Shifting Gears evaluation.³⁰

Change financial aid practices to ensure success as well as access

State agencies and policymakers should:

- Work with colleges to ensure effective tracking systems are in place for students receiving financial aid. Students having trouble in their courses would be required to meet with an advisor or counselor to develop improvement plans and connect with resources they need to address needs.
- Develop a “last-dollar” competitive state grant similar to the Washington State Opportunity Grants, aimed at high-demand careers identified by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity. Last-dollar grants would take into account existing financial aid and a realistic student contribution, and then cover remaining need.

Use data to link academic and support service usage to outcomes so that colleges and policymakers know what works

State agencies should:

- Include measures to evaluate the effectiveness of academic and support service usage in Illinois Board of Higher Education longitudinal studies.

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