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# **A Guide for the Biden-Harris Administration to Ensure Student Success in Higher Education**

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## About America Forward

America Forward is New Profit's nonpartisan policy initiative. America Forward unites social entrepreneurs with policymakers to transform local impact into national systemic change. Our Coalition of over 100 organizations advocates for public policies that advance equity, foster innovation, and reward results, and to date we have leveraged \$1.7 billion for social innovation. Our members work in over 15,000 communities across America, touching over 9 million lives every year.

## About MDRC

MDRC is a nonpartisan education and social policy research organization dedicated to finding solutions to some of the most difficult problems facing the

nation—from reducing poverty and bolstering economic self-sufficiency to improving public education and college graduation rates.

## About Results for America

Results for America is helping decision-makers at all levels of government harness the power of evidence and data to solve our world's greatest challenges. Our mission is to make investing in what works the "new normal," so that when policymakers make decisions, they start by seeking the best evidence and data available, then use what they find to get better results.

## About New America

We are dedicated to renewing the promise of America by continuing the quest to realize our nation's highest ideals, honestly confronting the challenges caused by rapid technological and social change, and seizing the opportunities those changes create.

## About Education Policy

We use original research and policy analysis to help solve the nation's critical education problems, crafting objective analyses and suggesting new ideas for policymakers, educators, and the public at large.

## About Higher Education

New America's higher education program works to make higher education more accessible, innovative, student-centered, outcomes-focused, and equitable.

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# Understand What Works in Postsecondary Education

*Authored by Alexander Mayer, MDRC, and Kate Tromble, Results for America*

A college degree remains critical to unlocking opportunity and to accessing America's middle class, yet millions of students who pursue higher education never earn degrees. At community colleges, which disproportionately serve low-income students and students of color, **only a third of students** earn a two-year degree within three years. At four-year universities, **only half of low-income students** graduate within six years. The rising costs of college are one factor. These include not only tuition, but also transportation, textbooks, housing, and food, which together often exceed tuition. Academics are another factor. **Two-thirds of entering freshmen in community colleges** are identified as academically underprepared and are required to take remedial courses that do not count toward a degree. Most never graduate. These students face other barriers too, including balancing work and family, lack of information, lack of social and family resources to navigate college, and institutional policies and practices that create obstacles—all of which have been exacerbated by COVID-19.

This memo draws lessons and policy implications from two decades of rigorous research in postsecondary institutions focused on these problems. The students who participated in this research were primarily low-income students and many were students of color. All of the studies referenced here used randomized controlled trials, **the highest standard of evidence** recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and the scientific research community. Despite the barriers that many students face, the findings discussed here demonstrate the growing and impressive evidence base on what can be done to help low-income students and students of color succeed in college.

## Key Lessons for Higher Education

**Lesson 1: Frequent, proactive advising tied to financial support is highly effective, improving credit accumulation and persistence, and in some cases driving large improvements in graduation.**

By themselves, short-term interventions like financial awards and enhanced advising have small effects. When these strategies are combined in more comprehensive programs, however, they can drive large improvements in graduation. The City University of New York's (CUNY) **Accelerated Study in Associate Programs** (ASAP) is among the most effective and comprehensive

programs that have been studied. CUNY ASAP is a three-year program. It requires students to enroll full time and frequently meet with advisors who have small caseloads. Students must also participate in tutoring, enhanced career services, and block-scheduled courses for the first year. They receive a tuition waiver to fill any gap between financial aid and tuition and fees, free MetroCards for public transportation, and free use of textbooks. **ASAP nearly doubled graduation rates** in an independent evaluation at CUNY, with consistent results across racial groups. ASAP also doubled graduation rates again when it was **replicated and tested in three Ohio colleges**.

Other studies reinforce the importance of multi-year programs that combine advising with additional financial aid. Short-term advising and coaching programs can help students make academic progress (e.g., **InsideTrack**; or **Opening Doors**, which also included small stipends) but do not always produce measurable gains (e.g., **Monitoring Advising Analytics to Promote Success** and **iPASS**). Additional financial aid can also improve outcomes, but impacts are smaller than combined programs (see below). Evidence about comprehensive programs that combine frequent advising and additional financial aid, however, is accumulating, especially for studies at early stages and for short-term outcomes. These include rigorous studies on the **Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement**, **Bottom Line**, **One Million Degrees**, and the **Detroit Promise Path**, which all show positive short term impacts. Positive findings are also being seen in rigorous studies of programs that provide counseling or advising and additional financial support, with a focus on certain employment sectors, such as **Project Quest**, **Year Up**, **I-BEST**, **Health Careers for All**, and **Bridge to Employment in Healthcare**.

Implementing comprehensive, multi-year advising programs, however, can be costly. Most of the evidence cited above comes from programs operating at community colleges, which tend to be resource-constrained and are likely to remain so throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath.

## **Lesson 2: Additional financial aid can help low-income students succeed, but decisions about how the program is designed are important.**

Increased financial aid (on top of Pell Grants and other aid) in the form of scholarships and grants is an important component of the most successful strategies that have been tested so far. Although many studies attempt to determine the causal effects of grant aid independent of other factors, far fewer **use randomized controlled trials** (RCT) to provide the most reliable estimates. The strongest research available in the U.S. includes large evaluations in nine states: privately-funded grants to **Nebraska high school students** to attend in-state public postsecondary institutions; privately-funded grants to **Pell-eligible Wisconsin residents** who were already enrolled at four-year public

institutions; performance-based scholarships for low-income parents attending **community colleges in Louisiana**, in which a portion of each grant was conditioned on the student's performance in the semester; and a large-scale demonstration project to replicate and adapt the **Louisiana** performance-based scholarships with a diverse range of low-income students in **Arizona, California, Florida, New Mexico, New York, and Ohio**. These studies demonstrate that grants of different **designs** and **amounts** can improve college access and progress towards graduation, and in some cases they can modestly improve completion.

Increasing financial aid, however, does not always work. The Wisconsin program described above included a similar scholarship for students at Wisconsin community colleges, also tested in an RCT. The community college scholarship did not measurably improve student outcomes, a result that **the authors attribute** partially to small complexities in implementation that created barriers for students, and partially to negative effects the offer appeared to generate for a subsample of students who turned out to be ineligible for the award. Likewise, the **promise of a scholarship worth up to \$12,000** to students who graduate from Milwaukee public high schools has not produced demonstrably positive impacts on college enrollment, potentially related to program design decisions like high school performance requirements and insufficient attention to school culture and resources to catalyze student interest. When they are well-designed and meet the needs of the target student population, scholarships and grants can be important strategies to help students succeed.

### **Lesson 3: Developmental or remedial education reforms can help more students succeed in college-level courses.**

Millions of college students are required to pass developmental or remedial classes before they can enroll in credit-bearing courses at the college level, but most never graduate. Rigorous research studies conducted at **seven colleges in New York** and **five colleges in Minnesota and Wisconsin**, however, show that simply using better data to determine college readiness, such as students' high school GPA, can help many students skip remedial courses altogether and still succeed in college-level courses. Intensive instruction and support programs can also help students with multiple remedial needs in reading, writing and math. **CUNY Start**, for example, substantially increases the proportion of students who complete developmental education. CUNY Start condenses the time students spend preparing for college English and math into one semester, before formal matriculation; integrates content areas like reading and writing using engaging instructional practices; includes student supports like tutoring and skills seminars during classroom time; and provides intensive professional development for faculty.

Other instructional reforms are improving outcomes as well. The Dana Center's Mathematics Pathways (DCMP) **improved the proportion of students who passed** developmental and college-level math courses in a study at four community colleges in Texas. DCMP is a major instructional reform of developmental or remedial math. Instead of teaching algebra to all students, the program offers statistics and quantitative pathways that align with students' majors. Instructors also avoid lecturing and focus on more interactive forms of student learning.

Evidence is also growing around corequisite remediation, in which students enroll directly in college-level courses, in addition to courses that provide concurrent support for developmental or remedial needs. A rigorous study of corequisite remediation in English at five Texas community colleges found **large gains in the percentage of students who passed college-level English**, with consistently positive impacts for traditionally underrepresented groups. In math, CUNY created a program that combined features of math pathways and corequisite remediation: instead of developmental algebra, students took college-level statistics with corequisite remediation. A rigorous study found that the program not only **improved college-level math completion, but also improved graduation**. Measurable increases in graduation, however, are rare for developmental or remedial education reforms. In general, the reforms discussed here can help more students pass college-level courses and advance towards graduation, but most likely need to be paired with other strategies to substantially improve completion.

#### **Lesson 4: Behavioral strategies can increase participation in activities that promote student success.**

Insights from behavioral science can help identify and develop strategies to overcome barriers that may prevent student success. One **prominent study** demonstrated that simply providing people with personalized help to fill out the federal Free Application for Financial Student Aid (FAFSA) increased the percentage of low-income families who submitted the FAFSA, increased the amount of financial aid their students received, and impacted college access and persistence. Strategies that include simple adjustments to present information more clearly or more saliently—or simple reminders to complete required documents—can also boost the number of students who engage in activities associated with college completion. In **one study**, students who received emails and mailings about summer enrollment took summer classes at higher rates and earned more credits, with results that were even larger when paired with a modest amount of additional financial aid. Research has also found that simply changing default loan offers **from \$0 to any nonzero amount**, or **providing information about federal student loans**, can change student behavior and increase borrowing.

On the other hand, behavioral messages will not achieve their desired effect if they are not appropriately tailored to the target population or do not resonate with students. **Two large-scale studies** of messages that were designed to help students apply for financial aid, for example, did not increase FAFSA submission rates. Similarly, although **an initial study** found that customized information can help high-achieving, low-income students apply to and enroll in academically stronger institutions, **large scale follow-up research** did not confirm these results. When behavioral messages are **well-designed** for the target population, however, they can be compelling approaches for colleges to adopt or pair with other strategies. Moreover, they usually cost very little, so even small effects on enrollment can produce increases in tuition revenue that more than cover the cost of the intervention.

## Policy Implications

- 1. Combine proven strategies like frequent, proactive advising and additional financial support.** Programs that, in isolation, have small short-term effects can still dramatically improve outcomes when combined with other effective programs. Frequent, proactive advising combined with financial support are central to the most effective programs that have been rigorously evaluated. Programs sometimes include other supports like tutoring or career counseling. Sustaining these programs over multiple years is also a key factor contributing to their success, and behavioral strategies can help ensure students participate in important activities. For policymakers, this means encouraging and incentivizing institutions to implement a comprehensive, evidence-based approach to supporting students.
- 2. Prioritize equity in completion efforts.** Low graduation rates are a problem of national urgency, concentrated predominantly among low-income students and students of color. The programs included in this memo were all evaluated in independent, rigorous evaluations and tended to work for diverse student populations. Giving substantially more students of color and low-income students access to the most effective programs could dramatically reduce equity gaps in the U.S.
- 3. Provide additional federal resources to finance proven strategies.** Implementing proven programs costs money. Community colleges, in particular, tend to be resource-constrained and are likely to remain so throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. Few have budgets for resource-intensive programs, even those that have been shown to positively impact student success. Solving the college completion problem will require additional governmental support tied to rigorously tested interventions that are demonstrated to improve outcomes for low-income students and students of color.

# Design a Rigorous Postsecondary Learning Agenda

*Authored by Clare McCann, New America*

A well-designed learning agenda can help to drive policy throughout an agency, promote the development and use of evidence by agency officials, and ensure the research and policy arms of the agency are rowing in the same direction. The Education Department’s learning agenda should reflect Department priorities, identify major gaps in existing research that can be filled by the Department, and inform policy iteration within the agency.

Learning agendas are also required under the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (the Evidence Act), legislation designed to act on some of the foundational recommendations of the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking and led in the Senate by Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee Ranking Member Patty Murray. Along with the assignment of key personnel to implement evidence-driven policies (e.g., a Chief Data Officer) and the creation of evaluation and open data plans, it is the first stage of implementation of the Evidence Act. Agencies are already **underway** in designing their learning agendas. Higher education must be a key part of the Education Department’s agenda.

Postsecondary education is facing critical problems. The postsecondary learning agenda proposed below seeks to identify key areas where new research could help drive important improvements and inform the basis of future policymaking. It highlights existing deficiencies and gaps in available data, insufficient research and evidence about how best to help students, and unanswered questions that—with more and better research behind them—could drive greater student success. In particular, it seeks to identify where additional evidence can inform an agenda of an accessible, affordable, and equitable postsecondary education that places a premium on student success.

## Postsecondary Learning Agenda

This proposed learning agenda addresses some of the biggest challenges and problems the U.S. faces in postsecondary education: access to higher education is inequitable; college is increasingly unaffordable, particularly for low-income students; students (particularly students of color) often struggle to succeed in higher education; and institutions too often fail to meet their students’ needs or leave students without credentials of value. Already, we know that students of color are drastically less likely to go to college at all, or to go to a college that gives them a good chance of success. Low-income students face significant challenges

—financial and otherwise—in completing college, or completing on time. Black students are particularly burdened by student loan debt, as are students who leave school with debt and no degree. Outcomes and return on investment vary drastically across institutions and programs, and across student subgroups within those programs.

Yet past attempts to solve these problems, including through grants that seed innovation and accountability measures that raise expectations for institutions, have often been disjointed and short-lived, falling short of what is needed to ameliorate these urgent national problems. A well-designed learning agenda can help identify workable solutions, addressing different perspectives when answering questions, and inform how best to use resources.

To begin developing the postsecondary agenda, first and foremost, the Department should seek to tap the expertise of researchers in the evidence and higher education communities, as well as determine the types of evidence that the Department will seek to build (including tapping the most-rigorous randomized control trials, but also allowing for different types of research to contribute to answering these questions). The Department should marshal the evidence that is already available with respect to each of these research areas and assess where the research is deficient or insufficiently nuanced to inform policy and practice. Outreach to engaged stakeholders like philanthropic foundations that are invested in building evidence and improving outcomes can help to invite informed input, align the field around these critical issues, and marshal the resources necessary to bring it to fruition, even in the absence of sufficient federal resources. Finally, the Department should identify a strategy for investing in evidence-building for each of these areas through its own work, both at IES and within the agency more broadly.

This learning agenda is divided into nine separate research questions across those four categories: access, affordability, student success, and institutional outcomes. The research questions are designed to answer critical questions about postsecondary success, including through access to data held by the U.S. Department of Education that have not been published or extensively mined for insights, as well as by inviting creative thinking about outside sources of data that can help to fill other gaps in existing research, with a particular emphasis on equity. Research areas like these will help the Department to understand the extent and nature of the problem, identify the evidence that exists and that is missing, identify opportunities for improvement, establish best practices for institutions seeking to improve their students' odds of success, drive future policy change, and improve the management of taxpayer-funded student financial aid programs.

- **Access to higher education is inequitable.** Access to higher education has improved significantly over the decades, with nearly **70 percent** of recent high school graduates now enrolling in college (compared with 45

percent in 1960), and millions of **working adults** returning to postsecondary education. Yet that access is far from evenly spread. Students of color are **less likely** to attend institutions and enroll in programs that offer them the greatest returns. For instance, while 35 percent of white adults had completed a bachelor's degree in 2016, far **fewer** Black (21 percent) and Hispanic (15 percent) adults had.

- What does the evidence indicate are the characteristics of effective college-access programs, particularly for people of color and low-income people?

• **College is increasingly unaffordable, particularly for low-income students.** In the decades since the federal government began awarding aid to help students attend college, the average tuition and fees of institutions have **increased** substantially, growing at well beyond the rate of inflation, while federal student aid has **not kept pace**. At the same time, many states have **failed** to invest adequately in public higher education; costs have been shifted onto students and their families; and much of the gap in costs has been **borne** through student debt.

- How do student financial grants, particularly federal need-based grants—including the knowledge of those grants' existence—affect indebtedness, access, attendance patterns (such as sector, intensity, and stop-out periods), retention, and completion?
- To what extent are student loan impacts on access, retention, completion, repayment, and household financial stability different across student financial circumstances, race/ethnicity, gender, and repayment plans?
- What strategies are effective in helping students to avoid unaffordable debt and avoid default on their loans, and to resolve delinquencies and defaults quickly with minimal negative impact on borrowers' finances?
- To what extent do long-standing disparities in family wealth and income relate to college debt, including intergenerational debt and private education loans?

• **Students (particularly students of color) often struggle to succeed in higher education.** Millions of students who pursue higher education never pursue a degree; many leave school with debt anyway. At community colleges, which disproportionately serve low-income students and students of color, **only a third of students** earn a two-year degree

within three years. At four-year universities, **only half of low-income students** graduate within six years. While there is some evidence about the types of programs that are most effective in helping students with financial issues, academic challenges (like developmental education programs), and other non-academic supports (like advising), greater research is needed into how to knit effective reforms together into a holistic approach to supporting students and expanding those reforms to more institutions and student populations.

- What strategies (including non-financial interventions) does the evidence indicate are effective, and in what contexts, in supporting college completion, particularly for low-income students, students of color, and academically underprepared students?
- What are distinguishing characteristics of institutions and programs that have successfully promoted improvement in student outcomes, particularly in closing gaps in performance across student subgroups?
- To what extent are different types of credentials and programs, including similar programs across different institutions, associated with positive labor market outcomes, including employment, earnings, and improvements in institutional earnings?

• **Institutions too often fail to meet their students' needs or leave students without credentials of value.** Taxpayers fund more than 5,000 institutions of higher education across the nation, spanning a substantial diversity of size, program offerings, effectiveness, modality, and more. Yet many of those colleges leave students with poor outcomes, where a significant percentage of students drop out and/or wind up in low-wage jobs, no better off than if they had not enrolled in college in the first place. Some colleges wind up wasting taxpayer dollars; and in recent years, hundreds of campuses have closed down, often without notice to students. Department policies provide too little incentive for institutions to meet a minimum bar of quality or to improve.

- How effectively do various metrics of financial viability, student outcomes, and other elements of risk identify institutions at risk of closure, low-value education, and/or other liabilities for taxpayers?

## Establish a Tiered Evidence Fund for Innovation and Expansion

*Authored by Roger Low and Karen Quarles, America Forward, and Kate Tromble, Results for America*

Today's postsecondary students are as varied as our nation, encompassing individuals just out of high school and older, working (full or part time) adults. **Thirty-one percent** are at or below the poverty line, only **46 percent** live on campus, and **nearly 30 percent** have children of their own. Furthermore, these students are increasingly **likely** to come from Black and brown communities, and often face **systemic barriers** that make it harder to complete their postsecondary degrees, compared with many of their peers.

Each year 1.2 million low-income or first-generation students enroll in college, but **only a quarter of them** will leave with a job related to their studies or enter graduate school. Children who have never lived in poverty **are ten times more likely** to complete a college degree by age 25, compared with children who grow up persistently poor. Even at the most affordable community colleges, only **about one-third** of students graduate within one-and-a-half times the length of the program.

Well before the COVID-19 crisis brought about new challenges for students, it was clear that empowering students to succeed in postsecondary education and beyond was critical to increasing equitable economic mobility. With the spread of COVID-19, and the disparate impacts it has wrought on Black, brown and low-income communities across the country, the need for reform is more urgent than ever.

If we want to make higher education truly an **engine of opportunity** for low-income students and students of color<sup>1</sup> we need to ensure that colleges across the country are adopting evidence-based strategies to improve results. This requires multiple strategies. We need institutions to come up with new interventions and supports, and evaluate them to see if they work. Ideas with some evidentiary base should be evaluated in multiple contexts and settings to ensure they work in different environments. And those ideas that have been proven time and again to work need a path to adoption on a national scale.

The Department of Education can play a key role in facilitating the development and spread of innovative practices by adopting a tiered grant competition. In 2009, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) was enacted to address the economic fallout from the Great Recession. The law went further though, encouraging and supporting innovation in education through the evidence-based **Investing in Innovation (I<sup>3</sup>) Fund** and its successor, the **Education, Innovation and Research (EIR)** program at the same time it

addressed immediate economic needs.<sup>2</sup> Several years later, the First in the World (FITW) program was created with the goal of developing, replicating, and disseminating innovative solutions and evidence for what works in addressing persistent and widespread challenges in postsecondary education for vulnerable students. Given the burden the current pandemic is placing on our Black, brown and low-income communities in particular, the next Administration should build on these programs by prioritizing the proposed college completion grants, based on levels of evidence, in its first budget proposal.<sup>3</sup>

## Invest In and Scale Up Effective Approaches

In recent years, a handful of interventions or approaches in the higher education domain have been rigorously evaluated, replicated, and shown to be effective at measurably improving student postsecondary degree attainment, particularly for low-income students and students of color. For instance:

- **City University of New York (CUNY) Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP):** The **intervention** is “a comprehensive set of supports that include financial assistance, advising and career counseling, tutoring, training in study skills, and reformed remedial courses,” aimed at first-time students, students of color, students in or near poverty, and students with high risk factors. A **rigorous 2015 MDRC** evaluation found that within three years, ASAP nearly doubled graduation rates, from 22 percent to 40 percent. The program was expanded to community colleges in Ohio; a **second randomized evaluation** from Ohio, equally rigorous, released in early 2020, shows equally positive results, with robust and comparable effects across white students and students of color.
- **Bottom Line:** Like CUNY ASAP, Bottom Line provides intensive, individualized guidance and support for low-income, first-generation students. **Results for America** found that a **well-conducted randomized trial** showed that students offered Bottom Line advising were substantially more likely to be enrolled in college at the three-year follow up with robust and comparable effects across white students and students of color.
- **Project Quest:** QUEST **provides** comprehensive supports for low-income individuals to enroll “full-time in occupational training programs at local community colleges, complete the training, pass certification exams, and enter well-paying careers in high-growth sectors of the local economy” (such as for instance the healthcare sector). This program also requires full-time enrollment, and includes “weekly group or individual counseling sessions, financial assistance for tuition and other school-related expenses, and remedial instruction for those requiring it.” A

rigorous randomized trial **found** Quest “increased average annual earnings by \$5,490, or 20 percent, nine years after program entry.”

- **I-Best** and Other Classroom-Based Interventions: The Washington State Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) program “aims to increase access to and completion of college-level occupational training in a variety of in-demand occupational areas. Its signature feature is team teaching by a basic skills instructor and an occupational instructor during at least 50 percent of occupational training class time.” A rigorous randomized evaluation **found** that the I-BEST programs at the three technical and community colleges “increased participation in college level courses, number of credits earned and credential attainment.” In addition, certain other remedial education programs, such as CUNY Start’s remedial program, successfully increased student passage of gateway English and math courses in their first two years, according to a **study** with a matched comparison group.
- Additional Promising Programs: These include the **Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement (VIDA)**, which combines career counseling, case management, and soft skills training; **Detroit Promise Path**, which combines a last dollar scholarship and advising; and **Stay the Course**, which combines comprehensive case management with emergency financial assistance. These programs take different but aligned approaches to ASAP. Notably, they also require full-time enrollment. **VIDA** and **DPP** have shown preliminary but promising results.

Other Evidence-Building And Evidence-Scaling Efforts: A number of other interventions and organizations offer a related comprehensive set of holistic supports for higher education students, including **Braven**, **College Forward**, **One Million Degrees**, **uAspire**, **Year Up**, **Health Careers for All**, **Bridge to Employment in Healthcare**, and **Single Stop**. These programs are in varying stages of the evidence-building continuum from some promising programs that have not yet been rigorously evaluated, to strong early evidence (for instance, One Million Degrees) to **established strong evidence** (for instance, Year Up).

There are no guarantees that interventions will succeed when it comes to something as complex as changing the trajectory of a student’s life. Different communities present different challenges. Demonstrating outcomes over one or even multiple evaluations is no guarantee of future success. Implementation matters. Community buy-in matters. Leadership and personnel matter. Any number of variables can **complicate the scaling** of even the most rigorously evaluated approaches — inadequate funds, fragmentation of the social innovation “ecosystem,” or gaps in the talent needed to scale, to name just a few.

With all of these caveats, the approaches summarized above, while intensive and expensive on the front end (ranging from \$700 to \$16,000 per participant per year), have demonstrated (or are in the process of seeking to demonstrate) a **substantial** return on investment (**ROI**) to the public sector and society in the long run. They offer hope that we can empower many more individuals to graduate from college and achieve greater economic security. And yet, although a handful of public and community colleges have funded these interventions, with impressive results, the vast majority of jurisdictions are not deploying public dollars to expand the supports identified by rigorous research as most effective at helping students with the highest barriers to successfully reach the collegiate finish line.

In a **2019 report**, New America observed: “the research on what works to improve students’ odds of success in higher education remains limited. Only a handful of organizations and researchers even conduct such evaluations... and there has been a lack of coordination by the federal government to solve the research problems or tackle the challenges of increasing college completion rates and other problems. Moreover, even when promising interventions have been identified, colleges have few incentives to apply that research. Many of these interventions require significant upfront costs, and the benefits and savings to campuses, which are often realized through increased retention and graduation rates, may take a long time to achieve. Federal policy requires only that colleges avoid extremely high default rates and comply with federal rules and regulations, few of which are based on outcomes. Federal dollars to support improvement and quality assurance are limited... As a result, practitioners often lack the resources—or incentive—they need to implement such practices.”

Finally, as noted, today’s students are not the “traditional” college students that label calls to mind. They hold jobs, live off campus, face acute economic, housing, and transportation challenges, and have young children of their own. These students are also disproportionately not white, and they urgently need additional support. Yet, we have remarkably little rigorous evidence on approaches that successfully move the needle on degree attainment outcomes for part-time students.

## Tiered Innovation Fund

- **A revised and expanded version of the FINISH Act fund located in an Office of Evidence-Based Practices**, a competitive evidence-based innovation and replication grant program focused on increasing completion rates. Based at the U.S. Department of Education, the fund should start with an \$800 million federal investment and be overseen by an Office of Evidence-Based Practices. The Department currently maintains an evidence-based practices team within the Office of

Elementary and Secondary Education. That team should be converted into an office serving both K-12 and postsecondary education and reporting directly to the Deputy Secretary.

- **Tap the right talent:** In addition, we urge the office to assemble a mix of permanent experienced full-time staff, supplemented with targeted outside experts in the evaluation, evidence, higher education and social innovation fields. The Department could draw this talent into the newly constituted office via a combination of direct hire authorities and extended fellowships, including Intergovernmental Personnel Act (IPA) partnerships, leveraging authorities available to the Secretary under current law (additional information on these authorities is available [here](#)).
  
- **A well-structured fund:** Theoretically, this fund could be placed within the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), following the model of the FITW program. Our concern with adding dollars to FIPSE or the pre-existing FITW fund is three-fold:
  - *First*, those programs lack the intensive focus on college completion that we envision.
  
  - *Second*, they funded one-off, individual projects at institutions and nonprofit organizations, creating a myriad of pilots. More impact can be achieved by funding states working across their institutions in coordination and collaboration with nonprofit partners.
  
  - *Third*, and perhaps most importantly, in some respects, FITW may have been ahead of its time. At the time FITW grants were awarded, there simply were not many interventions in the higher education space that had convincingly reached a top evidence tier. While FITW helped spur innovation, in hindsight, its grant awards arguably were inadequate and insufficiently targeted toward moving the most promising evidence-based programs further along an evidence continuum. Since the FITW grant awards, a range of compelling higher education interventions summarized above have made exciting strides, with the release of a new tranche of randomized and quasi-experimental studies. We believe the field has advanced rapidly in the last six years, and the time is now ripe for a major federal investment in expanding these programs, and building evidence for a new cohort of innovative approaches, leveraging the important lessons learned. In short, we think starting fresh, given how much the field has advanced and how much we have learned from evidence-based programs over the last decade, will offer a better chance for success.

#### 4 Strong Evidence:

Programs shown in well-conducted randomized controlled trials (RCTs), carried out in typical community settings, to produce sizable, sustained effects on important outcomes. This category requires replication—specifically, the demonstration of such effects in two or more RCTs conducted in different implementation sites, or, alternatively, in one large multi-site RCT.

#### 5 Preliminary Evidence:

The model has evidence based on a reasonable hypothesis and supported by credible research findings. Such evidence suggests the program may be an especially strong candidate for further research but does not yet provide confidence that the program would produce important effects if implemented in new settings.

#### 6 Promising Evidence:

Interventions that have been evaluated in RCTs or rigorous quasi-experimental studies, and found to have positive effects that are sizable, but not yet conclusive (e.g., due to only short-term follow-up, a single-site study design, well-matched comparison groups but not randomization, or effects that fall short of statistical significance).

• **Adequate funding:** FITW received less than \$150 million over its two years of funding. The Social Innovation Fund (SIF), which helped launch compelling community-based solutions in over 100 cities in 33 states and the District of Columbia, received approximately \$400 million in federal investment. When combined with philanthropic funds and other dollars, SIF reached an impact of over \$1 billion. We believe SIF’s total funding level offers more potential for success. And, although we think that level can eventually be achieved through a matching requirement, we believe additional investment is needed initially to achieve sufficient scale given the financial strain many states and institutions are experiencing currently and the scale of the problem the fund seeks to address. Grants would be awarded to states or state-entities in partnership with their institutions and nonprofits operating evidence-based programs, interventions or policies that increase completion rates for at-risk students such as counseling, mentoring, financial assistance, and other supports. As a tiered evidence fund, grants would be awarded in ranges based upon the amount and quality of causal evidence underlying the state’s proposed plan. Grants at the highest, or “strong evidence,”<sup>4</sup> tier would be reserved for states proposing to scale an existing program that has met the What Works Clearinghouse’s (WWC) highest level of effectiveness rating. Programs would be required to submit their randomized or quasi-experimental evaluation evidence to the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), and for IES to review those evaluations within the first, planning year. Grants at the lowest, or “preliminary evidence,”<sup>5</sup> tier would be for states proposing a program and strategic plan that would build evidence around how to increase completion for at-risk students. These grants would have to be accompanied by a plan for evaluating, in a rigorous manner, the impact of the proposed program, practice intervention or policy. The middle, or “promising evidence,”<sup>6</sup> tier would be for states proposing a plan to replicate an existing strategy that has shown positive causal impacts, but only has short-term, non-experimental results, or has not yet been replicated.

• **Planning Grants.** Planning grants would be awarded in the range of \$300,000 for a 12-month period to any state or state-entity interested in applying for a grant from the fund. Following a streamlined, rapid review and certification process by the U.S. Department of Education, any state or state-entity interested in submitting a competitive application would be eligible to automatically receive a planning grant, ensuring every state would have the resources, staff and capacity necessary to formulate a catalytic plan to build evidence for and scale effective higher education approaches. Recipients would develop a plan for either scaling an existing, WWC-reviewed, evidence-based approach or for building evidence of a new approach to increasing college completion; States could also elect to pursue a hybrid approach with a plan that did some of both. Plans would

need to identify, among other things, the state's plan for distributing funds among its institutions to focus on the most at-risk students, its evidence-based intervention or program, its technical assistance/ implementation partner, its goals for increased completion, and its plan for tracking and publicly reporting its performance against those goals.

### Key Elements to Include

- **Focus on those most in need.** State plans should specifically focus - as does the current FINISH Act - on first-generation students, students of color, and students in or near poverty, as well as students with high risk factors for not finishing college, such as those with children of their own and non-dependent, SNAP eligible students. To that end, state plans should prioritize partnerships with institutions that serve these students, namely community colleges, regional public universities, and minority-serving institutions. States that successfully prioritize these students, communities and institutions should receive favorable consideration in the competitive application process. Moreover, for grants at the early-phase or evidence-building tier, priority should be given to proposals to build evidence around increasing completion rates for part-time students with other vulnerability factors.
- **Matching funds:** Grantees also would need to provide matching dollars, which could be a combination of state, institution, and philanthropic dollars. States should be eligible for a waiver from the match requirement, through 2022 due to the current unfolding recession, with modifications as needed depending on the fiscal realities states face in 2022 and beyond.
- **Funding for evaluation, performance management and capacity building:** Costs associated with evidence-building and high-fidelity implementation of evidence-based programs (such as data system improvements, performance management improvements, technical assistance, evaluations and other training and capacity-building efforts) should be allowable uses of up to 10 percent of the full grant. (In the case of the planning grant, states should have maximal flexibility to use grant dollars for staff, planning, and capacity-building as needed to develop a coherent plan and application.)
- **Deadlines for releasing guidance and selecting awards:** So that the U.S. Department of Education prioritizes this initiative, legislation should include deadlines for the Department to release guidance, a Notice of Funding for the competitive grant process, and select awards. If the Department misses any of these deadlines by more than 60 days, the

legislation should require an investigation by the Office of the Inspector General into the cause of the delay.

### **Prioritize an expanded FINISH Act in 117th Congress**

In addition, the new Administration should work closely with the bipartisan FINISH Act sponsors, as well as additional, engaged members of both parties (in particular, members of the relevant education and appropriations Committees in the House and Senate) to introduce an expanded and retooled FINISH Act in 2021 that creates the evidence-based college completion fund proposed above.

In 2019, Senators Todd Young (R-IN), Michael Bennet (D-CO), Tim Scott (R-SC) in the **Senate** and Representatives Ben McAdams (D-UT) and Ron Wright (R-TX) in the **House** introduced the Fund for Innovation and Success in Higher Education Act (FINISH Act), which included a new tiered-evidence fund to improve graduation rates and boost the attainment of postsecondary credentials for today's students. These members can be tapped as possible champions for the legislation.

The FINISH Act would **amend** the Fund for the Improvement of Secondary Education (FIPSE) within the Higher Education Act (HEA) to “allow grant recipients to use a portion of their funds for tiered, evidence-based grants to support initiatives that increase access to higher education for high-need students, increase degree attainment, and improve efficiency in our higher education systems.”

## Notes

1 One study, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/community-college-completion-rates-structural-and-motivational-barriers/#footref-7> found that completing a two-year associate's degree is associated with a 37 percent increase in earnings compared with a high school diploma. Another recent analysis, <https://research.collegeboard.org/pdf/education-pays-2019-full-report.pdf#page=4> found median earnings of bachelor's degree recipients were \$24,900 higher than those of high school graduates. Without a college degree, children born into a low-income family have a 45 percent, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/THP\\_13EconFacts\\_FINAL.pdf#page=16](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/THP_13EconFacts_FINAL.pdf#page=16) chance of remaining in the bottom quintile of earnings as an adult. With a college degree, those odds plummet to 16 percent., [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/THP\\_13EconFacts\\_FINAL.pdf#page=16](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/THP_13EconFacts_FINAL.pdf#page=16)

2 A similar program targeted at identifying, promoting and scaling evidence-based programs across the social innovation sector, the Social Innovation Fund (SIF) was created in the same year. SIF and i3 funded innovative new projects coupled with rigorous evaluations at a “lower” evidence tier, while scaling proven approaches in “higher” evidence tiers. SIF also combined private dollars with public ones to extend the reach of evidence-based federal funds., <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/administration/eop/sicp/initiatives/social-innovation-fund>

3 Former Vice President Biden's platform on education beyond high school includes a recommendation to create such a grant program., <https://joebiden.com/beyondhs/>

4 **Strong Evidence:** Programs shown in well-conducted randomized controlled trials (RCTs), carried out in typical community settings, to produce sizable, sustained effects on important outcomes. This category requires replication—specifically, the demonstration of such effects in two or more RCTs

conducted in different implementation sites, or, alternatively, in one large multi-site RCT.

5 **Preliminary Evidence:** The model has evidence based on a reasonable hypothesis and supported by credible research findings. Such evidence suggests the program may be an especially strong candidate for further research but does not yet provide confidence that the program would produce important effects if implemented in new settings.

6 **Promising Evidence:** Interventions that have been evaluated in RCTs or rigorous quasi-experimental studies, and found to have positive effects that are sizable, but not yet conclusive (e.g., due to only short-term follow-up, a single-site study design, well-matched comparison groups but not randomization, or effects that fall short of statistical significance).



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