

# RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE: STUDENT SUCCESS STRATEGIES

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## About the Project

This research summary pairs with a series of policy briefs that highlight various postsecondary completion strategies across the WICHE region. These reviews provide a short overview of the research surrounding the various policies and initiatives surfaced in the landscape analysis of state strategic plans. Each research summary serves as the research context partner to the accompanying policy brief. Further details on the findings of this analysis, including the policy briefs on student success, workforce alignment, academic success, and coordinated collaboration strategies, and an interactive online resource displaying state-level strategies, are available at [wiche.edu/policy-research/completion](https://wiche.edu/policy-research/completion). This work was generously funded by ECOM Foundation.

As states work to increase completion across the West, they have made strategic investments to support student success on campuses, outside of their coursework and credits.<sup>1</sup> WICHE identified student success strategies as those that benefit students' completion and retention and are either direct or indirect interventions outside of the academic classroom setting. State efforts in this category include resources and support for student mental health and wellbeing; efforts to meet students' basic needs such as emergency funding, housing access and food resources; grants and financial aid programs; and advising models and peer supports.

Each of these sections gives a brief overview of the literature within that field, such as affordability or increased professional development for advising staff. However, many of these strategies are intertwined with student support services, which address needs such as student mental health and belonging, financial aid support, basic needs support, and integrated advising.<sup>2</sup> We discuss research into the areas of both structural and institutional

reforms and efforts to support student needs separately and together, as these student success programs often have compelling research and policy outcomes.

## Affordability

Historically, affordability has been a central deciding factor for students' matriculation into postsecondary degree programs. Student costs continue to have a strong relationship with student degree completion.<sup>3</sup> This section highlights research on affordability and student outcomes that contribute to student degree completion, or on completion outcomes resulting from affordability interventions. As a concept, affordability is broader than financial aid. It encompasses state-level affordability policies like grant aid, tuition policy, tuition freezes, and state appropriations to institutions. Specific to this section, we focus on grant aid research, and expand on other policies, such as basic needs support, below.

Recognizing the necessity for affordable postsecondary options, states have invested in strategies that address student financial need. Every state in the WICHE region administers state grant aid programs, with wide variation in both models and funding capacity. For examples of these policies, see the accompanying [policy brief](#).

Financial aid and its effect on the completion and degree attainment rates of students can be difficult to study, given confounding factors and the various types of aid students receive.<sup>4</sup> However, recent research has explored the positive impacts of different types of aid on student persistence and completion.<sup>5</sup> One meta-analysis of financial aid's impact on student completion rates showed that for every \$1,000 in grant aid that a student received, they were 1.5 to 2 percentage points more likely to persist in their college career and attain a degree.<sup>6</sup> This relationship has been confirmed in research on need-based financial aid programs, which have a stronger field of study and demonstrate a record of positive outcomes for completion rates.<sup>7</sup> While research in this area has primarily investigated the effects of the federal financial aid landscape, state-level affordability programs also have supplementary effects.<sup>8</sup> Research suggests that when students receive a combination of both need- and merit-based financial aid (i.e., Pell grants, Stafford loans, state-level grants) there is a positive relationship with outcomes in student retention.<sup>9</sup> Further, an international research effort found a connection between improved student retention and financial aid, focusing on need-based aid for lower-income households.<sup>10</sup>

These positive effects for persistence and degree completion are more pronounced for non-traditional students, students from historically underrepresented groups, and students at two-year institutions.<sup>11</sup> Further, when affordability policies are targeted to non-traditional students, such as adult postsecondary learners, they are more likely to yield persistence and degree completion.<sup>12</sup> Research clearly indicates that students are more concerned than ever about the value proposition of a postsecondary degree. Particularly, students experiencing

financial stress have an increased likelihood of discontinuing college, demonstrating that a student's financial situation directly impacts their postsecondary degree completion.<sup>13</sup> State affordability policies can positively support student degree completion.<sup>14</sup>

As one of the strongest indicators for student retention, affordability policies have some of the strongest research base on their effectiveness. While a large subset of the research focuses on the federal landscape, there is still a large subsection of the field that has investigated the relationship between need-based aid, whether at the state or federal level. Further, research on efforts to lower the cost of admission, whether through state grant programs, open education resources, tuition freezes, and support for student basic needs, has indicated a positive relationship with completion outcomes.

## Advising

States in the WICHE region have focused on adapting the structures and systems of advising to better support student completion efforts, by investing in guided pathways programs, advisor professional development, individualized student advising, and lowering student-to-advisor ratios. This is well-aligned with research, emphasizing that student success is dependent on both academic performance as well as greater institutional support students receive throughout their postsecondary experience.<sup>15</sup>

Historically, advising services have consisted of academic advisors who support a student's degree program planning and execution. However, in recent years there is a greater focus on case management and individualized programming for students.<sup>16</sup>

The longstanding history of advising services in postsecondary institutions provides a strong systemic foundation for strategic efforts connecting advising to student degree completion. However, not all academic advising is created equal. The research is clear that sustained, personalized support for students can significantly improve student outcomes.<sup>17</sup> Further, advising is an important support to students when it is conducive to their degree planning, providing students with a clear pathway to efficient completion and with fewer excess credits.<sup>18</sup> Research has also found that pragmatic, goal-oriented advisors promote greater student perceptions of institutional support, meaning that when students feel supported in their course selection, they are more likely to complete their degree.<sup>19</sup> Proactive and personalized advising has been particularly important for students at two-year institutions, with research showing they are more likely to complete their credential when they are supported in a personalized manner, and not with a one-size-fits-all type of advising model.<sup>20</sup> This parallels state efforts to develop guided pathways, lower advisor-to-student ratios, and invest in professional development for advisors, as well as leveraging student data and analytics to support student completion.

Additionally, states are adapting advising models into a more holistic approach to student success. Research highlights that when academic advising is integrated with career advising and long-term goals for students, completion rates increase.<sup>21</sup> This is demonstrated across the research, with advising becoming more integrated in other wrap-around services in support of a more expansive model of student support services. This approach combines innovative and meaningful advising services with financial support for basic needs, peer mentoring, and tutoring support.<sup>22</sup> These wrap-around services have been found effective in increasing student retention, particularly for rural and economically disadvantaged students.<sup>23</sup> Further, the integrated model of advising has shown to have improved academic outcomes as measured by student GPA and ease of transition to the workforce.<sup>24</sup>

Research is clear that investments in quality advising are directly correlated to positive student retention, persistence towards a degree, and final credential completion.<sup>25</sup>

States have added to the research base through studies on various programs, such as CUNY ASAP, and their correlation with student retention and completion. As states apply some of these holistic advising models to their institutions, important studies on the replicability and applications to a variety of contexts will be important to the field of research. Continued focus on the quality of advising, support or advisors and personalized attention to students have shown to have important impacts on student experience and completion.

## Basic Needs

Initiatives to ensure that students' basic needs, such as food and housing, are met are a separate effort from financial aid. These initiatives aim to remove foundational and immediate financial barriers to student success.

While the research and policies supporting student basic needs are recent in comparison to other student success strategies, research has established that financial insecurity, particularly around basic needs, can be detrimental to a student's degree completion.<sup>26</sup> States have recognized that food and housing security loom large in students' postsecondary experiences.

Students facing basic needs insecurity, specifically around food and housing insecurity, are more likely to fail or withdraw from courses.<sup>27</sup> Further, this is not a singular problem faced by a small subset of postsecondary students. More than half of students surveyed in 2018 reported a food-access problem or limitation, which has a direct impact on the ability to afford continuing towards a degree.<sup>28</sup>

Research also indicates that students who do not have their basic needs met are forced to make decisions to continue or stop out, with some students choosing between food and education or housing.<sup>29</sup> While many institutions are working to address student food and

housing insecurity, recent research clearly shows that students continue to struggle to meet their basic needs.<sup>30</sup> Research also suggests that by addressing students' basic needs, institutions can increase student retention rates.<sup>31</sup>

Student basic needs support, such as food or housing assistance, has been shown to positively affect student success outcomes, such as persistence and retention, due to the direct influence of financial health on the ability to pursue a degree.<sup>32</sup> Basic needs are also intertwined with the previously discussed student support programs, with research demonstrating that when partnered with an existing campus office, such as advising or outreach, food assistance programs lead to increased completion rates and course credits per term.<sup>33</sup> Students have also reported that emergency support programs positively influenced their perceptions of supportive relationships on campus and enhanced their persistence.<sup>34</sup> While most research within the field of basic needs is more recent, studies show that support for student basic needs increases student success outcomes and the likelihood of postsecondary degree attainment.<sup>35</sup>

## **Mental Health and Belonging**

Addressing student mental health and fostering a sense of belonging can lead to positive academic outcomes.<sup>36</sup> As institutions consider how best to support students throughout degree completion, research suggests that students' sense of safety and belonging at an educational institution have direct impacts on their success.<sup>37</sup> To see examples of policies from states in the WICHE region, see the accompanying [policy brief](#).

Students who feel that they do not belong on a campus can feel especially alienated if they are also experiencing financial hardship.<sup>38</sup> Research also found that students are more likely to stop out due to unaddressed mental health needs.<sup>39</sup> As states continue to prioritize degree completion strategies, student mental health and belonging on campus has become central to their efforts.

As highlighted above, advising has intersectional impacts on student degree impacts. But advising also has a direct connection to students' feelings of belonging on their campuses and motivation to persist or stop-out.<sup>40</sup> By addressing students' physical and mental health needs, institutions can have a greater impact on student retention and completion outcomes.<sup>41</sup> Some examples from the research include investments in a structured support system that specifically caters to some of the most at-risk students on their campus.<sup>42</sup> Other research has shown that non-academic support programs for students as well as additional support services result in positive outcomes for students at two-year institutions.<sup>43</sup> Studies continue to show the advantages of more holistic supports for students at institutions that have a stated goal of supporting student degree completion. Institutions have also made strides in identifying early intervention programs. These programs, which flag student

performance early in the semester, increase positive academic outcomes on the course level through targeted intervention and remediation services.<sup>44</sup>

Beyond academic support services, access to college counseling services and increased intervention services affect students' sense of belonging on campus and have also shown positive impacts on degree completion and persistence.<sup>45</sup> Further, addressing the various social determinants of mental health, especially those with a direct impact on the mental health of a postsecondary student, has been shown to have important effects on student degree completion.<sup>46</sup> These services do not exist in silos, and they have become intertwined with student basic needs interventions. When combined with financial aid and advising, intervention services have important positive impacts on student degree attainment.<sup>47</sup>

While most of the research above was conducted at an institution-level, the promising results could be an important area for future investment and state-level research. Addressing the nonacademic barriers to student postsecondary success proves to be a significant avenue for investment, with research showing direct connections to persistence and retention outcomes. Coupled with the gaps in basic needs research above, states have the opportunity to extend the research base on student support services and their outcomes on student degree completion.

## Conclusion

Student success strategies have become increasingly interconnected in order to support a more holistic picture of students outside of their academic credit attainment. Within the WICHE region, states are investing in a wide range of strategies to support student experiences on campus and foster greater credential completion. The student success strategies of greater postsecondary affordability, increased focus on quality advising, addressing students' basic needs, and supporting student mental health have direct implications for state completion goals. As states continue to focus on the value proposition of postsecondary education, research has proven the potential of these student success strategies to improve student retention and completion.

# ENDNOTES

- 1 WICHE is a regional higher education interstate compact that includes 15 states and the U.S. Pacific Territories and Freely Associated States. The use of the term state reflects all states, territories, and freely associated states in the WICHE region. The WICHE region includes Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, Wyoming, and the following U.S. Pacific Territories and Freely Associated States: American Samoa, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Guam, Republic of the Marshall Islands, and Republic of Palau. Throughout this brief, the term “state” is understood to include states, territories, and freely associated states.
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