

Investing for Success: Interventions to Support College Persistence and Completion

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Understanding Evidence-Based Approaches to Student Persistence

Despite efforts across states, institutions, and the field to improve student success, [completion](#) rates remain stuck at roughly 60% nationally. While second-year [return rates](#) have reached a 10-year high, many students still do not persist to graduation — particularly those attending community colleges or from low-income backgrounds. These disparities persist due to significant equity gaps by race, income, and first-generation status, underscoring the need for more targeted, evidence-based approaches.

Improving college persistence and completion requires investments that address both immediate student needs and long-term systems that support success. Recently released research highlights several key factors that influence college completion and identify strategies that can strengthen outcomes across institutions and communities.

This guide identifies evidence-based drivers of persistence and offers interventions that support student success, with a focus on how institutions, funders, and policymakers can make strategic, high-impact investments.

What “Evidence-Based” Means

According to the [What Works Clearinghouse](#) and [MDRC’s College Completion Strategy Guide](#), evidence is strongest when supported by:

- **Causal studies**, such as randomized controlled trials (RCTs) or quasi-experimental designs
- **Positive, replicable outcomes** across different contexts
- **Disaggregated data** showing consistent results for key student populations

Evidence-based [student success interventions](#) consistently demonstrate strong, positive impacts on **credit accumulation, student retention, and timely graduation**.

Credit accumulation refers to progress toward a degree, retention refers to continued enrollment from term to term or year to year, and timely graduation refers to completing within expected timeframes.

Four Key Drivers of Student Persistence

1. Financial Stability

Financial barriers remain one of the most significant obstacles to student persistence. [EdTrust researchers](#) found that community college students face an average **annual unmet financial need of nearly \$5,000**, which significantly impacts their ability to remain enrolled.

2. Sense of Belonging and Student Engagement

Students' [sense of belonging](#) can affect academic performance and persistence. [Research](#) conducted by the Student Experience Project found that faculty implementing evidence-based belonging practices saw the following positive outcomes:

- **12% increase in students earning A and B grades**
- **26% decrease in Ds, Fs, and withdrawals**

First-generation, Black, and Latino students often [report](#) lower levels of belonging than their peers. [National data](#) show that specialized sense-of-belonging interventions improved their continuous enrollment.

3. Mental Health

Mental health challenges can influence a student's engagement, sense of belonging, and academic progress. [Research](#) reveals that depression can reduce academic performance and contribute to course non-completion, hindering timely graduation. Randomized and experimental [studies](#) suggest that brief [cognitive behavioral therapy](#) (CBT) and mindfulness-based programs can reduce depression and anxiety among college students, while belonging-focused and persistence-focused interventions have been shown to improve continued enrollment and college completion.

Recent [research](#) also suggests that mental health supports are most effective when integrated into broader student success systems, rather than delivered as stand-alone services.

4. Comprehensive Student Supports

[Comprehensive student supports](#) are a coordinated set of academic, financial, social, and emotional services designed to help students persist and succeed. They go beyond one-off tutoring or advising by combining proactive outreach, wraparound services, and referral systems that address barriers to learning.

These models, shared in the next section, typically include structured pathways, proactive advising, financial supports, and case management approaches that ensure students receive timely and coordinated assistance.

[CUNY ASAP](#) increased its three-year graduation rates by about 18 percentage points through implementing comprehensive student supports — one of the largest effects found in randomized evaluations of community college interventions. In an eight-year follow-up of the [ASAP Ohio](#) replication, 46% of participants earned a degree, compared with 31% in the control group.

Successful Evidence-Based and Promising Programs

The following programs illustrate how institutions and organizations are implementing evidence-based strategies aligned to key drivers of persistence. Many incorporate multiple supports, reflecting the importance of coordinated, comprehensive approaches.

Arkansas rootED Pilot <i>Comprehensive Student Supports</i> The program trained locally embedded college and career advisors in 10 rural high schools across northwest Arkansas. National benchmarking shows 82% of rootEd students are on track for a living-wage career, compared to only 41% of rural working 21-24-year-olds overall.	College Possible Texas <i>Comprehensive Student Supports</i> This program provides intensive coaching and advising for low-income students as they navigate the college application and completion process. A randomized evaluation found that the program increased initial four-year college enrollment and completion.
Louisiana Meauxmentum Framework <i>Belonging and Student Engagement</i> A framework proven to significantly improve student success and close equity gaps across all types of universities and colleges in multiple states. Students participating in the first-year experience program at Louisiana State University averaged a 0.33 higher GPA in their first semester compared to those who did not.	Alabama College Attainment Network <i>Comprehensive Student Supports</i> In support of Alabama’s goal of adding 500,000 skilled workers by 2025 and boosting attainment for low-income, first-generation, and adult students, AlabamaCAN and Alabama Possible offered training and advocacy to educators, community-based organizations, and policymakers. This effort led to dramatic FAFSA completion gains, with rural counties seeing a rise in FAFSA completion rates from approximately 25-40% to 70-90% within a single year.

Emergency Aid as an Effective Lever for Student Success

Financial shocks — such as unexpected housing, food, or transportation costs — can quickly derail students’ ability to stay enrolled. [Emergency aid](#) is one of the most immediate tools institutions can use to stabilize students and prevent stop-out.

This short-term financial assistance helps students manage unforeseen expenses like essential housing, food, transportation, or medical costs, that, if unaddressed, could threaten their ability to remain enrolled.

What the Evidence Shows

The evidence on emergency aid is clear: design matters. Financial aid alone often has limited effects, but well-designed programs can significantly improve persistence — especially for students with the greatest need.

[Research](#) shows that emergency aid can support persistence, but results on completion outcomes are sometimes mixed. The strongest impacts occur when emergency aid is **paired with proactive student supports**, such as academic coaching or mentorship.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, [around 90% of colleges](#) reported that emergency funds provided through the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) helped **keep at-risk students** enrolled who might otherwise have dropped out.

Why Results Are Mixed: Program Design Matters

Research suggests that differences in program design — rather than the concept of emergency aid itself — largely explain variation in outcomes. Key design factors include:

- Administrative burden: Programs that require applications or documentation [reduce access](#), particularly for students with the greatest need
- Speed of delivery: Rapid disbursement is [critical](#) for addressing urgent financial shocks and preventing stop-out
- Targeting: Aid directed toward students with specific financial barriers — such as small balances or near-completion status — has [stronger impacts](#)
- Integration with supports: While emergency aid alone has limited effects, aid paired with case management or advising [improves persistence and completion](#)
- Equity and access: Programs that [reduce barriers](#) and proactively identify need are [more likely to reach students](#) of color, first-generation students, and those facing basic needs insecurity

EdTrust recommends that emergency aid be implemented as part of a broader student support strategy, including:

- [Streamlining](#) application processes and eligibility requirements
- Assisting students with emergency aid applications
- Incorporating emergency aid into institutional persistence and completion goals

Other Student Interventions: What Research Says About Microgrants

Emergency microgrants are commonly used to help students overcome unexpected financial barriers. However, [microgrants alone](#) may not significantly improve completion outcomes.

Randomized trials show that small, standalone grants have limited long-term effects, but targeted, data-informed models, like [Georgia State's Panther Retention Grants](#), demonstrate that microgrants can improve completion when embedded within institutional systems.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that emergency aid is most effective when it is fast, targeted, low-barrier, and integrated into broader student success strategies.

Thinking About Strong Investments in Student Success

Improving college persistence and [completion](#) is not a single-lever problem. The strongest outcomes come from coordinated investments that address both immediate student needs and long-term institutional capacity.

Even when resources are constrained, prioritizing both immediate supports, like emergency aid, and sustained efforts has the greatest impact. While immediate assistance helps students stay enrolled, institutions must also invest in systems that support long-term success.

When prioritizing investment, organizations should consider:

- **Immediacy:** Does this address urgent barriers?
- **Scale:** Can this reach many students?
- **Sustainability:** Can this be maintained over time?
- **Integration:** Does this connect to existing systems?

Evidence-Based Practices Worth Institutional Investment

Short-Term Supports	Long-Term Supports
• Emergency microgrants • Crisis navigation • FAFSA completion drives	• Mentorship and coaching • Mental health support • Comprehensive data dashboards and systems • Timely, efficient advising and case management • Institutional partnerships and policy advocacy

Emergency aid, mental health supports, belonging interventions, and comprehensive models like CUNY ASAP each play a role, but their greatest impact is realized when implemented together as part of a coherent, evidence-based strategy to [improve college completion and persistence](#).