

They Are Not Alone

Recommended strategies to help young people without college degrees in Northeast Ohio address their concerns about attaining a postsecondary credential

A report prepared by Public Agenda for The Northeast Ohio Council on Higher Education

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Findings drawn from focus groups with young adults that discussed interventions currently in practice

The more educated a region's population, the more robust its economy will be. To encourage leaders to focus on the relationship between education and the economy, CEOs for Cities has calculated the economic value to cities and the nation of increasing college attainment rates by one percentage point. NOCHE (The Northeast Ohio Council on Higher Education) recognizes the importance of this and has outlined three strategic goals for the region to increase college readiness, college degree completion and degree attainment among adults with some college or that don't have a degree.

In the summer of 2010, Public Agenda worked in consultation with NOCHE to conduct research focused on a small segment of the Northeast Ohio population that is critical to engage in order to meet these strategic goals – young adults aged 18 to 24 who have graduated high school but do not have a college degree. Talking to this group of young adults allowed us to uncover what they really think about their current situation, what would help them to go back to school and what would have helped them transition more easily from high school to college.

As part of this research, Public Agenda presented young adults with interventions that have been implemented around the country and asked them which ones they thought would work and why. From their responses we saw that the interventions that received the most attention and support centered around three basic concerns:

1. **Not having the time and money to go to college.** While many young adults believe that college is important and fully expect to eventually earn a degree, they talked about financial concerns and the need to have a job as the greatest barriers to enrollment.
2. **Not having enough support from people who would hold them accountable and encourage them in their educational pursuits.** Young adults fear that they will lack adequate support networks in college and be left to navigate the social and academic intricacies of college on their own. Many also said that they have rarely been held accountable for their own successes and failures, and without people looking out for them in college their academic success is less likely.
3. **Lack of information and communication about what to expect at college.** Many of the concerns that these young adults face are already being addressed at higher education institutions throughout Northeast Ohio – often with the interventions these young adults most favor. But it is clear that awareness of these interventions is low and that many are apprehensive about struggling alone in their pursuit of higher education. As the college experience is new and foreign to most of these young adults, they worry about what they are getting themselves into.

We hope that in reviewing our findings, you see how young adults in your community express their concerns. As you read which interventions resonated with them, keep the following in mind:

- While we spoke only with young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 who are not currently enrolled in a post-secondary program and don't hold a postsecondary degree, we believe that the findings provide some guidance for all three of NOCHE's strategic goals. As recent high school graduates, the focus group participants talked mostly about ways to improve their readiness for college, and this discussion was often related to their chances of college completion. And although many were confident that they would earn a degree in the future, what they knew and didn't know about receiving a post-secondary credential is not likely to be much different from the knowledge level of older adults without a degree.
- Young people's concerns should not be seen as any sort of failure on the part of the education system, but rather as areas where some young adults like them – those who either did not go directly to college or did not complete a degree – could use more assistance and reassurance. Since the goal of this endeavor is to expand college attainment, we need to think of ways to communicate about existing, effective programs currently in place, as well as consider new initiatives that will attract more adults to higher education.
- As part of the research, we identified interventions that are being successfully implemented in Northeast Ohio and throughout the country and asked the focus group participants if these would address some of their concerns. The interventions we discussed are certainly not the only ways to support students in their pursuit of postsecondary credentials, but the extent to which these strategies resonated with these young people can be used as a guide for leaders as they decide which strategies to pursue in the region. And while many institutions might decide to focus on optimizing or scaling up existing programs, a significant issue remains: What is the best way to communicate to young adults still without a degree that these interventions exist – that they are not alone in their journey toward degree attainment?

The interventions we tested that received the greatest support were those that promised to:

- **Increase college readiness.** Tested interventions include: Dual enrollment and/or early college high schools, online grade monitoring, improving high school counseling and providing guidance on early college savings plans.
- **Increase college degree completion.** Tested interventions include: Summer bridge and/or freshman year experience programs, improved student support services and counseling and peer mentoring and/or learning communities.
- **Increase degree attainment among adults with some college but don't have a degree.** Tested interventions include: Flexible college schedules and better technical/vocational programs.

In this report you will hear young adults express the concerns outlined above in their own words and discuss why they think some interventions would be most helpful. You will also find reference to additional research that has shown independently that these interventions have indeed shown promise or success. And whether or not you choose to adopt a particular intervention – or if some of them are already in place – we hope this report brings to light the concerns that these young people have and begins a discussion about strategies to communicate that they will not be alone in their college pursuits.

Note that these interventions could be initiated by a variety of actors in the Northeast Ohio community. For instance, parents can communicate the importance of postsecondary education and guide students to make educational choices that will help them succeed. Concerned citizens can offer advice and support, working directly with high schoolers and young adults to help them understand what steps they need to take in order to earn a college degree. Business leaders can offer funding and technical support for infrastructure changes that would support these interventions. And those in education – at both the secondary and higher education level – can share how best to implement interventions such as these at various points in a person’s life.

Methodology

Focus groups were conducted in three locations in the Northeast Ohio region – in Akron, Cleveland and Youngstown – with young adults from the metropolitan area and their surrounding communities. Although this qualitative research cannot be generalized to young people overall in Northeast Ohio, consistent themes emerged from the three focus groups, both in general and in response to the interventions.

Focus Group Participants (30 young adults in total)

Gender	# participants	Race	# participants
Man	20	White or Caucasian	15
Woman	10	Black or African American	13
		Other	2
Age		Currently employed	
18-20	8	Yes	12
21-24	22	No	18
Some College Experience			
Yes	19		
No	11		

Concern #1: For many young adults, balancing the financial and time demands of college with work were seen as the greatest barriers to enrollment.

What young adults in Northeast Ohio said

The difficulty of managing college classes and a job – whether part-time or full-time – was a theme in every focus group. The participants also saw finances as a major barrier to completing college.

Well, the fact of the matter is, when you're in school, you're paying money. When you're not in school, you're making money. At a time like this, making money is what you have to do, so a lot of people just say, "Well, I'll just advance within the company," and it just gets to be too late. It's like a catch-22 You can't overstretch yourself. [But] you can't under-educate yourself. – *Man from Akron, employed with some college experience*

People are so keen on ... applying for loans. Great, you've got a \$20,000 loan. It's going to be \$30,000 by the time you pay it back. It's not the fact that you can get the loans. It's the fact that you need the financial support. – *Man from Akron, unemployed with some college experience*

I think that there need to be more grants, as opposed to loans, because we can't afford to pay them back. You're not going to find a job right out of school, and then the interest starts collecting. You graduate college, and you're already in debt, and then you're trying to buy a house. You're trying to start a family, and you're already in debt. You can't get yourself out of the hole because you're trying to better your life, but you've started in the hole. ... We're burying ourselves before we ever even get started. – *Man from Akron, unemployed with some college experience*

Similarly, in Public Agenda's national survey of young adults with some postsecondary experience, *With Their Whole Lives Ahead of Them*, we learned that most postsecondary students struggled with balancing work, money worries, family responsibilities and school, and so they overwhelmingly favored programs that made school more affordable and convenient. These concerns also were a recurring theme among focus group participants from Northeast Ohio.

Percent who say the following is a "major reason" why they did not complete their program:

I needed to go to work and make money	54%
I just couldn't afford the tuition and fees	31%
I needed a break from school	21%

Interventions that could help address this concern

1. Initiatives that allow for flexibility in enrollment – such as weekend, evening and online classes – flexible work schedules and childcare.

Enrolling in college involves a substantial number of opportunity costs – when students are going to class or studying they forgo the wages they could have earned or the time they could have spent on family obligations.

WHAT YOUNG ADULTS IN NORTHEAST OHIO SAY

When I first tried to do college, tried to take 12 credits and go to school, and of course, go to work, and there was no way.... Now that I'm working ... the last thing I do after I work eight or nine hours a day, is to go and sit [in class] for two more hours and then not get home [until] 9:00 or 10:00 at night. Then I wake up, and do it all over again. I know I have to go to college. I know. I know, but ... I didn't have the drive. – *Woman from Cleveland, employed with some college experience*

I never thought that I was going to stop going to school. Me and my fiancé, we bought a house, and then I was ... going to school 8:00 to 3:00 every day, and then working 4:00 to close every night, and I was getting burnt out. My grades were slipping because I had to work.... I figured well, I need to work, so I just worked more.... I make decent money at McDonalds, but I don't want to stay there... [and] every time I look for jobs, it's always, 'minimum requirement of such a degree,' so that's why I say ... I'd really like to go back. – *Woman from Akron, employed with some college experience*

WHAT THEY ARE

Helping students balance their work and family commitments could take a variety of forms. In our survey of young adults with some college

Do you need to go to college to be successful? Some, but not all, young adults think so:

When you want to go get that job and there's one person that has that college degree over you ... they're going to look at me and [say] "Okay, what do you know compared to this guy? His is on paper. He has four years saying that, 'Yeah, I know this stuff.'" My word doesn't have anything over his. – Man from Youngstown, unemployed, high school graduate with no college experience

I think college is necessary because it's okay to go out and find a job like something at Wal-mart ... that will pay okay ... but you want to love what you're doing. You want to go to work and enjoy what you do. You will have to get a career, and have to go to school to get a degree [for a career]. – Woman from Cleveland, unemployed, high school graduate with no college experience

I'm already working – if I would have went to school and finished out, I'd still be in the same place I am right now, making the same amount of money... – Man from Youngstown, employed with some college experience

I need definitely some college background in order to excel [in] these positions ... that aren't available to me, but would be if I had a degree. – Man from Youngstown, employed with some college experience

I asked a lot of my teachers when I was both in high school and college whether or not to get my bachelor's, get a job, and then get my master's, or get my bachelor's and then go straight through and get my master's. The thing that I've been told the most is, "Don't learn your way out of a job." You would think, "Oh, wow, he's got a master's, [and] this guy only has a bachelor's. Let's take this guy. He's clearly got more experience." The problem is ... they're going to have to pay me more because of my degree, whereas they can pay Joe Schmo with his bachelor's and gradually get his master's and gradually increase his pay. Then I'm the one that is going to end up losing out because I gave myself more of that education. – Man from Akron, unemployed with some college experience

experience, a large majority of those who didn't complete school said that making college more convenient for them by offering more courses in the evenings or weekends would help people like them "a lot" in completing college (74 percent). Providing daycare also received strong support (66 percent) in the survey.

There are a number of other options that could also make college more convenient for students. Some suggestions include:

- Hybrid courses that combine face-to-face and online segments;
- A 12-month academic calendar; or
- Business-college partnerships that offer accommodating work schedules, among others.

WHY THEY WORK

Research has shown that among college-qualified students, the need to work was an important reason they decided not to enroll in college.¹ Some estimates suggest that half of adult students are employed full time and many others are supporting families. Given these work and family responsibilities, some students will greatly benefit from strategies designed to support part-time study. Because of their less-continuous schedule, mapping a path toward a degree in combination with alternative scheduling has been shown to be especially helpful for part-time students.² It helps students follow a sequence of courses for their program of study and helps them estimate the time required to earn a degree.

EXAMPLES OF THE INTERVENTIONS IN PRACTICE

- The Kentucky Workforce Development Trust Fund brings together state and business partners to fund career pathways at KY Community & Technical colleges. It offers workers ways to get training for college credit, and offers counseling, childcare, tutoring and other services for low- and modest-income workers students.
- Hiram Weekend College: Since 1977, Hiram has been offering traditional undergraduate courses to adults. The Weekend College takes advantage of adult students' capability for concentrated learning by holding classes on alternate weekends between Friday evening and Sunday morning. Housing is also available for students who wish to remain on campus for the weekend.

2. Early college savings plans (529s, CDAs, IDAs)

Because paying for college is such a primary concern for young adults in Northeast Ohio, interventions that help them save could make a college education a more attainable goal. Financial aid counseling can also help address some of these financial concerns, and that is discussed further under intervention 3.

¹ Hann, R.D. and Price, D. "Promise Lost: College-Qualified Students Who Don't Enroll in College." Institute for Higher Education Policy, November 2008.

² Pusser, B., Breneman, D.W., Gansneder, B.M., Kohl, K.J., Levin, J.S., Milam, J.H. and Turner, S.E. "Returning to Learning." Lumina Foundation for Education, March 2007.

WHAT THEY ARE

- **529 college savings plans** are savings & investment accounts that are state-sponsored, professionally managed, offer a spectrum of investment options and are usually protected from credit risk. Nearly every state has a 529 and though some are open only to residents, many are available to non-residents as well. Money saved in a 529 (plus any earnings from investments) is tax exempt if used for college upon withdrawal and can pay educational expenses at accredited schools nationwide, including private and public colleges, community colleges, many vocational schools and some tribal colleges.
- **Child Development Accounts (CDAs)** are savings & investment accounts usually established at birth or in a child's first years. Like 529s, savings accumulated in a CDA are only for certain uses upon withdrawal – one of those being postsecondary education. Canada and the UK have established CDA programs, but in the United States they are still in the proposal stages. For more detailed discussion of CDAs, visit: <http://csd.wustl.edu/AssetBuilding/Pages/CDAFAQ.aspx>.
- **Individual Development Accounts (IDAs)** are savings accounts which match every deposit by the account holder with funds provided by the state or a sponsoring financial institution. Although they can be used to pay for postsecondary education, they have many other permitted uses, and because they typically offer some form of financial literacy training, they are more helpful for general asset building than for college saving. However, they are very common – many states have legislation supporting IDAs, and there are hundreds of organizations nationwide which administer them. For more detailed discussion, visit: <http://csd.wustl.edu/AssetBuilding/Pages/IDAFAQ.aspx>.

WHY THEY WORK

An emerging body of research has found a relationship between savings (or lack thereof) and important educational factors such as high school graduation, college attendance and completion of a degree. The effects of participation in a savings program seem to occur even for those participants who could only save very little. Even modest college savings, research suggests, changes the expectations of students and parents, making higher education a more realistic goal and encouraging students to work harder in primary and secondary school³ – consequently increasing graduation rates and rates of continuation to college. And according to recent research, having family savings with which to tackle college costs *is* connected to postsecondary expectations and achievement, while family *income* is not.⁴

EXAMPLES OF THE INTERVENTIONS IN PRACTICE

Ohio's 529 plan (CollegeAdvantage) is one of the best rated in the country,⁵ offering a good combination of investment options and tax incentives. But research has shown that families with 529 plans are generally higher-income, and that use (or awareness) of 529s is less common among lower- and

³ Michael Sherraden. *Savings and Educational Attainment: The potential of college savings plans to increase educational success*. (St. Louis: Center for Social Development, Washington University in St. Louis, 2009).

⁴ Min Zhan & Michael Sherraden. *Assets and Liabilities, Educational Expectations, and Children's College Degree Attainment*. (St. Louis: Center for Social Development, Washington University in St. Louis, 2009).

⁵ "Top Five 529 Plans," Kiplinger, August 20, 2010.

<http://www.kiplinger.com/tools/best-529-college-savings-plans/>

"The Best and Worst 529 College-Savings Plans," Morningstar, April 23, 2009.

<http://news.morningstar.com/articlenet/article.aspx?id=287783>

moderate-income families.⁶ Many states are trying to reach these families with incentives such as deposit matching, low fees or minimum deposit requirements, and scholarships for students through partnership with federal programs such as GEAR UP.⁷

Following are examples of 529 plans that have partnered with federal agencies to provide incentives specifically for low- and moderate-income families.

- **California ScholarShare College Savings Plan:** This plan combines a college savings account with additional incentives for high-performing, low-income students – awards of up to \$2000 are given to students selected by teachers and staff in middle schools participating in the GEAR UP program.
- **Virginia College Savings Plan:** A comprehensive 529 that also offers scholarships (for GEAR UP students) awarded during college to supplement the students’ Pell Grants.
- **Louisiana START Saving Program:** One of a dozen 529s with fund matching provided by the state (up to 14% of annual account deposits are matched). In addition, current middle and high school students participating in GEAR UP can be awarded up to \$1,000 a year, based on school performance (graded on a point system) and financial need. The scholarship is deposited into a student’s 529 account (which is created for them if necessary), so these scholarships can earn interest and corresponding fund matching from the state.

Concern #2: Social support, encouragement and accountability.

Aside from practical and financially-based interventions, research has shown that certain institutional policies and practices can have a significant effect on retention and graduation rates at the secondary and postsecondary level. The consensus among researchers is that students who are both academically and socially engaged – by faculty as well as fellow students – are more likely to graduate.

What young adults in Northeast Ohio said

Young adults didn’t feel that their high schools had strong college-going cultures. They also pointed out that they could have used both more guidance and accountability leading up to their high school graduation. In each focus group, there was nearly universal agreement about the importance of holding students accountable for their work and still encouraging them to continue their education. Here are a few examples of what the participants had to say:

I didn’t like school, but I knew that I had to go to school, so I did. [But] I was a middle-of-road person, and my school focused on the achievers because they were going to go to the John Carols and the nice schools, the Case Westerns. That’s why I want to become a teacher – because of teachers that didn’t really care. Teachers focus on the A students. When the truth is, you need to focus on the middle-of-the-road, the strugglers, because the A students, they’re going to do their work.... It’s the ones that don’t like school, that

⁶ Clancy, M., Sherraden, M., Huelsman, M., Newville, D., & Boshara, R. (2009). *Toward progressive 529 plans: Key points*. St. Louis, MO: Washington University, Center for Social Development; Washington, DC: New America Foundation.

⁷ Boshara, R., Clancy, M., Newville, D., & Sherraden, M. (2009). *The basics of progressive 529s*. St. Louis, MO: Washington University, Center for Social Development; Washington, DC: New America Foundation.

can't do it, or don't understand it, that need you. – *Man from Akron, unemployed with some college experience*

In my school, we actually didn't have extra help until they started seeing that everybody was flunking their [state exams]. – *Woman from Cleveland, unemployed, high school graduate with no college experience*

[In high school,] there [weren't] a lot of people who ... really talked about going to college or what you need to prepare for college.... You looked in a book [and] figured it out on your own. – *Woman from Cleveland, unemployed with some college experience*

Interventions that could address this concern

3. Improve counseling to help students select and apply for college and financial aid, especially for those who are the first in their families to attend college

National research suggests that better preparation in high school – as well more consistent contact with advisors – would help students achieve postsecondary credentials. This is consistent with Public Agenda's own findings in *With their Whole Lives Ahead of Them*, where 77 percent of students favored programs to “make sure students learn good study habits in high school so they're prepared for college work,” and 72 percent supported programs that offered “the opportunity to talk with advisors who know all about the different college and job training programs so you can make a good choice.”

WHAT YOUNG ADULTS IN NORTHEAST OHIO SAID

Young adults described their high schools as places that didn't necessary encourage college going, or at least didn't encourage them in particular to go to college. Having more guidance as they were making decisions about what to do after they graduated from high school received a lot of support from focus group participants.

I didn't like school as it is, and [a good advisor] probably would have motivated me more to get through it. – *Man from Cleveland, employed, high school graduate with no college experience*

A counselor [could have helped] with the loans, stuff like that, grants, ways of getting school paid for you don't know about until you're there. – *Man from Akron, unemployed with some college experience*

I didn't talk [with my guidance counselor] at all about college. She said, “Are you going to college?” and “Where are you going?” I told her, “I want to go to Bowling Green.” She asked, “Why?” I said, “[For] music.” [Then she said], “Okay, well, fill out your application.” That was it. – *Man from Youngstown, employed with some college experience*

[I would want] more than one guidance counselor in the school, [so] they [could] have one-on-one time with everybody in the school and talk about, “What do you want to do?” – *Man from Youngstown, employed with some college experience*

[I would want] better advisors.... When I went to [college], I didn't know about the co-signer and loan thing, so I transferred not knowing that somebody could co-sign [with] me. – *Woman from Akron, unemployed with some college experience*

WHAT IT IS

High-quality counseling provides information and social support especially important for first-generation college-goers and those from low- to moderate-income families. It is an essential component of most successful college preparation programs. But statistics show that the national student-to-guidance counselor ratio is 488:1,⁸ significantly higher than the ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association, 250:1. Counselors are often in greatest demand at schools where budgets are tightest, so innovative strategies are necessary to focus counselor work at troublesome points in a student's academic career. This often involves integrating counseling right into the curriculum – in effect, pairing them with teachers to provide support to a specific class or cohort of students.

Other common counseling strategies include: one-on-one counseling, group or peer support, faculty mentoring, individualized lesson plans and “alert” advising, which targets students who are performing poorly or in danger of dropping out. College counselors are also adopting social media as recruitment and information-providing tools, and there is room for creativity in how to connect counselors at the high school and college level.

WHY IT WORKS

Lack of information and support about college and financial aid decisions is an avoidable barrier to postsecondary education, and research shows that low-income students are at particular risk. Counselors have been shown to be a significant influence on children's aspirations, school course choices and future career options.⁹ They are well positioned to provide the needed help to those students in special danger of dropping out, including minority, low-income and first-generation students going to college.¹⁰

The Consortium of Chicago School Research (CCSR) at the University of Chicago found that school counselors are in a unique position to encourage college ambitions¹¹ in two ways: (1) fostering a college-going culture and (2) providing students with support and guidance about important decisions like college choice and financial aid.

EXAMPLES OF THE INTERVENTION IN PRACTICE

- **National College Advising Corps:** The Corps places motivated recent graduates of partner universities as college advisers in low-income high schools and community colleges. The program aims to increase the number of low-income, first-generation and underrepresented students entering and completing postsecondary education by increasing the number and diversity of counselors overall.

⁸ National Center for Education Statistics.

⁹ R. House and P.J. Martin, “Advocating for Better Futures for All Students: A New Vision for School Counselors,” *Education* 119 (1999): 284-291.

¹⁰ Patricia M. McDonough, *The School-to-College Transition: Challenges and Prospects* (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 2004).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

- **Financial Aid Counseling Programs:** One study found that low- and moderate- income families are substantially more likely to submit financial aid applications, enroll in the fall and receive greater aid if they receive assistance completing the initial financial aid applications. Programs that give this sort of assistance are active nationwide.¹²
- **Completion By Design:** A new initiative designed and funded by the Gates Foundation, Completion By Design will soon be awarding grants to colleges in nine states, including Ohio. It emphasizes the importance of supporting low- and moderate-income students with programs such as innovative financial aid counseling and course scheduling; in general, its goal is for colleges to adapt to the new realities of an increasing number of working students and students in need of remediation. Visit their website at <http://www.completionbydesign.org/> for more information.
- **Individual Learning Plans (ILPs):** A counseling strategy wherein the student, with the help of a counselor, maps out the courses he/she needs to complete each year of high school or college. Most community colleges that use ILPs combine them with other advising services, such as financial advising and coaching in study skills, and they may be particularly effective when used in conjunction with an on-line course or grade monitoring system (discussed below). Sinclair Community College in Dayton (<http://www.sinclair.edu>) uses such a system. Some schools use software such as CareerCruising (<https://www.careercruising.com/>), a program that assesses student skills, helps students develop academic and career plans, reports progress to counselors and provides detailed information about college, financial aid and careers.

4. Online grade monitoring

WHAT YOUNG ADULTS IN NORTHEAST OHIO SAY

Focus group participants were often aware of their need for greater accountability – to parents and professors as well as themselves. Although some of our young adults cited lack of motivation as an obstacle to academic success, many others said that simply having a better sense of how they were doing would help them stay on track to meet their academic goals.

Many focus group participants agreed that online grade tracking would have made them feel more responsible for their work, since it leaves little room for surprises or ambiguity in grading decisions. They also agreed that the easy communication between parents and teachers made possible by these systems would have helped them feel more accountable – both to themselves and others – for their academic performance.

Based on my experiences, being able to check your grades online is a lot like a cell phone – half my life I grew up without it, [and] now you wonder, how could I have ever lived without this? I don't think I could ever go to a college that didn't have online [grade tracking]. It helps me immensely just to know where I'm at and what I need to do. – *Man from Akron, unemployed with some college experience*

¹² Bettinger, E.P., Long, B.T., Oreopoulos, P., & Sanbonmatsu, L. *The Role of Simplification and Information in College Decisions: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA Experiment*. Cambridge: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2009.

I know in high school ... you're supposed to be responsible for yourself, but ... when it comes down to it, and a parent gets a report card that says their child failed or their child is going to fail or whatever, a lot of it comes back on the teacher. "Why didn't you do this for my son?" Why didn't you do this for my daughter?" With that, with the computer program, the parent can see he didn't do it. We gave it to him. He didn't study. He didn't do his homework. I think that puts a lot more emphasis on the parents' caring, because a lot of parents ... maybe they don't even wake you up for school, and then they see you when you come home from school, or maybe they don't. It's completely on you. I just think that maybe that would get parents ... more involved with each other. – *Man from Akron, employed with some college experience*

I was always bright, one of the smartest, but I was never motivated. If I had that back then, in high school – I would have all these people always checking up on me ... That's why you could go check on your grades. – *Man from Cleveland, unemployed with some college experience*

WHAT IT IS

Grade monitoring systems usually take the form of a website or internet-based application that tracks assignment grades, cumulative (mid-term, semester) grades, GPA and attendance or disciplinary records. At the high school level, it allows teachers to communicate directly with students and parents about assignments; when used in college, it is most often for teachers, students and advisers.

Online grade tracking allows access to the most up-to-date information and depending on the grade level facilitates communication between parents, students, counselors, and teachers, either online or in subsequent face-to-face meetings. Note that there are some concerns about security of personal information, access to the Internet for less affluent families and effects on teacher workload (if stringent deadlines are imposed for grading – as might be the case for an online system to be operationally feasible – teachers may be encouraged to assign fewer or less complicated assignments).

The schools themselves usually implement grade monitoring, though some school districts are making progress with district-wide systems. The monitoring systems are usually developed by private software companies or technical assistance nonprofits; however, schools with their own technical capacity have developed proprietary systems with some success.

WHY IT WORKS

There is little systematic research about the effects of online grade monitoring on student performance. However, these programs are very popular, and a great deal of anecdotal evidence suggests that grade-tracking programs encourage parent involvement in their children's education at the primary and secondary level. In theory this would help high school completion rates.

However, grade tracking is less common in postsecondary education, and future research could productively investigate whether better grade tracking at the college level might also motivate retention and completion. Many of the young adults in our focus groups agreed that it would.

EXAMPLES OF THE INTERVENTION IN PRACTICE

Grade monitoring software is used in schools nationwide, and institutions have dozens of software options, including InnovatED, OnCourse, SchoolMAX, Edulink, Edline, GradeLink, PowerSchool and ParentConnect.

5. Improve student support services: Tutoring programs, study groups, learning communities, academic advising

Students most at risk of not completing postsecondary degrees often lack the life, work and academic supports to be successful. Accordingly, the most successful support programs attempt to address student concerns on all three fronts.

WHAT YOUNG ADULTS IN NORTHEAST OHIO SAID

Learning communities and better college advisors were, among our focus group participants, the best-liked individual interventions. What these interventions have in common is a source of social support that engages students actively, rather than waiting for students to come to them.

I like the learning community idea. I know for at least me personally, I've always done better with someone there with me, learning along with me. Also I usually, when I know that my work is going to affect them, I'll put forth a lot more effort. – *Man from Akron, employed with some college experience*

Some days I just needed that extra little push, somebody there [saying], "Come on. You know we've got to go do our work." – *Woman from Akron, unemployed with some college experience*

I think that [counselors] should make themselves more available to us, as opposed to us having to seek them out. – *Man from Akron, unemployed with some college experience*

On my college campus, my advisor ... is in my life, knows my business, talks to me regularly. [But] how can you snatch me up on campus, and I didn't get that in high school? I know how scholarships go now, and back in high school I didn't. – *Woman from Akron, unemployed with some college experience*

I like the learning communities ... for me there are some things that I just don't get very easily and if there are people who understand that so I can ask questions That would help. – *Man from Youngstown, employed, high school graduate with no college experience*

I like the learning community plus the better counselors because I think when you get more people together, you get more ideas going so you can feed off each other... Then I think your advisors in college need to be – I mean – I always got the feeling [that] I was going to school, but I wasn't going anywhere, because they never really tell you, "You have a really good job. You have a really good chance of getting a job outside of school." They never really tell you are they going to help place you in a job? That's why I [always thought], "What am I going to school for then?" – *Woman from Akron, employed with some college experience*

WHAT IT IS

- Academic student support services include tutoring, supplemental instruction in study skills and strategic use of learning communities – groups of students with similar interests or needs taking courses together – to encourage student confidence and the creation of support networks between students. College and career advising includes college orientation and ‘student success’ courses. And personal support services include the provision of childcare and transportation, access to personal counseling, and emergency funds to “assist students with minor crises before they become major derailments.”¹³
- These programs are already in practice to some degree at many institutions, but some research suggests that they may not optimally address the most pressing student needs.¹⁴ There are a few nascent national- and state-level mechanisms for funding student support programs, and so financial and administrative support for them is usually the prerogative of individual institutions. As a result, these interventions are typically carried out by existing school counseling staff, though some institutions have had success creating “counseling centers” or “student success institutes” staffed either with existing personnel or contractors from the community.
- Because these programs are intended to provide a variety of social supports, academic and financial counselors are not the only ones who might participate: many innovative programs work on developing one-on-one relationships with upperclassman peer or faculty mentors, for example, and the relationships fostered in learning communities provide an additional source of support.

WHY IT WORKS

Many of our focus group participants identified a need for better support at both the high school and college level. Students in our Ohio focus groups reported difficulties with academics (and expressed a special need for academic remediation that might be best suited to a student success counselor), as well as trouble finding opportunities for internships, vocational training and support in managing work/life balance. Better counseling could help retention and completion rates in college as well as high school. Counseling is also an important component of efforts to bring dropouts back into the fold, as pioneering programs such as “My Future, My Decision” at the Los Angeles Unified School District¹⁵ and the “Gateway to College” program at Portland Community College¹⁶ show. Although most dropout recovery programs focus on high school, community colleges can offer many resources – such as vocational and career-related counseling – that adults without college degrees might value.

The U.S. Department of Education found that students participating in its own Student Support Services program were more likely to persist through college and attain a degree.¹⁷ Other research has also shown that student support services are crucial for improving college completion rates.

¹³ Vickie Choitz and Marcie Foster, *Five Strategies to Help Low-Income Adults and Youth Attain Community College Credentials* (Washington DC: Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success, 2010)

¹⁴ Habley, Wesley R. and Randy McClanahan. “What Works in Student Retention,” ACT 2004.

¹⁵ To learn more about the LAUSD Dropout Prevention and Recovery Program (“My Future, My Decision”), visit their website: <http://myfuturemydecision.org/>

¹⁶ <http://www.pcc.edu/prepare/head-start/prep/gateway/>

¹⁷ Engle and Tinto, *Moving Beyond Access*.

EXAMPLES OF THE INTERVENTION IN PRACTICE

- POSSE (<http://www.possefoundation.org/>): A unique scholarship program that identifies students who might not excel in a traditional academic curriculum but who show other characteristics, such as leadership skills. Eligible students are chosen in small cohorts by their high school, and in their senior year of high school meet in weekly workshops to develop communication and leadership skills. This process continues on through college, where existing services are supplemented by seminars on various topics, career counseling, internship opportunities, etc.
- [MDRC's Opening Doors](#) project uses a random selection process to test the effectiveness of learning communities. One of these experiments began in 2003 at Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, NY, placing 750 students randomly in groups of 25. So far their research has shown positive effects on student performance but not necessarily on retention and completion – though conclusive assessments are as yet forthcoming.¹⁸
- Stark County: Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) Undergraduate Engagement in an Engineering Environment – An attempt by a number of Ohio schools to make STEM education more comprehensive by redesigning curriculum around learning communities, and linking counseling and tutoring services directly to the curriculum.
- The “Learning Communities Demonstration” by the National Center for Postsecondary Research concluded at the end of 2009, incorporated results from six different community colleges, including 7,000 student-subjects and nearly 200 learning communities.
- University of Akron College of Nursing (merit award winner of [National Academic Advising Association's Outstanding Advising Program Award](#)): Advising is a critical element of successful retention strategies. The University of Akron program, like others of its kind, combines an “academic advising center” with other interventions for selected student populations, such as first-year transition programs and separate departments for career and life planning.
- Education Opportunity Programs (EOP) have been implemented in California and New York. These state-funded programs help low-income, academically disadvantaged youth succeed in college through financial aid and comprehensive student support services. Implementation varies by college; Nyack College (NY) in particular has seen positive effects from the program.

Concern #3: More information and better communication starting at an early age on what is expected and required of college aspirants.

What young adults in Northeast Ohio said

Many of the young adults in our Ohio focus groups said that they hadn't felt prepared for college after graduating high school. In our Youngstown group, for example, not a single participant volunteered the opinion that they felt “very prepared” for college – they felt either “somewhat prepared” or not prepared at all.

¹⁸ Goldrick-Rab, Sara. “Promoting Academic Momentum at Community Colleges: Challenges and Opportunities,” Community College Research Center 2007.

You can seriously sleep through high school; make it through because they give you so many breaks. [But] they're not going to give you a break while you're on campus. – *Man from Youngstown, unemployed, high school graduate with no college experience*

I didn't feel prepared with the culture shock [at college].... when I got on campus, it was just, 'Wow.' ... You didn't know how to fit in. – *Woman from Akron, unemployed with some college experience*

I would hear the same thing every day: "College isn't going to be like this." They would always tell you what college isn't like – [but in high school] they would cater to your needs. They pampered the students a lot. – *Man from Youngstown, employed with some college experience*

Interventions that could address this concern

6. Dual enrollment / early college high schools

These programs are meant to clear a path to college by exposing students to aspects of the college environment – more responsibility, more challenging academic expectations and more specialized coursework – while they are still in high school. They are also intended to help college completion rates by easing the stress of transition from high school to college and giving students an opportunity to develop academic and career goals before beginning postsecondary education. It is important to note that higher education institutions have an important role to play in these programs: the most successful programs have been those that established strong partnerships between a high school and a college or university that provides necessary programmatic, administrative and curricular support.

WHAT YOUNG ADULTS IN NORTHEAST OHIO SAY

Focus group participants were receptive to the two main advantages of dual enrollment programs: the opportunity to experience a college-style social environment and the opportunity to earn college credits while still in high school.

I think that would have made you be more prepared for college than anything else, actually going to a college class and sitting with older people and stuff like that. – *Man from Youngstown, employed with some college experience*

If you're able to go to school in high school – if you're able to eliminate some of those college credits in high school, then you can free up some of that time to work, so that kind of eliminates a future problem [with finances] if you can knock it out early. – *Man from Akron, unemployed with some college experience*

It's only, I think, one school in Cleveland ... [with a program] called health careers... It's really getting them started for college. You get to pick what you ... want to be when you get older... in high school, instead of going to your work study, [you] would have that class, so when you graduate from high school, you have that certificate. – *Woman from Cleveland, unemployed with no college experience*

WHAT THEY ARE

- **Dual enrollment** programs blend together elements of high school and college curriculum. They attempt to increase students' college-going 'confidence' by giving them an early taste of college coursework and familiarizing them with college standards and expectations. Typically, high-school students are given opportunities to earn college credits while remaining on their high school campus (or attending an affiliated higher education institution). Students are expected to complete whatever assignments would be completed for the actual college course; this is how they are distinct from college-level coursework offered through the Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs – for the latter, college credit is awarded only according to the results of a single, end-of-course examination.

Among different dual enrollment programs, most of the variation occurs in (1) whether courses can grant high school and college credits simultaneously, (2) whether courses are taught on a college campus, (3) whether high school students take courses alongside college students and (4) who teaches the courses (college professors teach some programs, while others allow qualified high school teachers to teach, often with the advice of a college instructor).

Some programs do little to support the transition to higher academic expectations in college from high school (especially important if classes are taken at a separate college campus). College faculty may not be aware of, or know how to handle, high school students in their classrooms, and the selection of properly qualified and motivated college faculty is an important consideration. The most successful dual enrollment programs find ways to

Do technical programs help keep kids in high school?

Unlike many of the other interventions discussed in the focus groups, the young adults we spoke with often talked about their experiences with career and technical education. They viewed the programs in favorable light almost universally:

I'd probably be in college still if we did more "hands on" – that would have helped me out a lot – more doing what you're going to do when you get out of school. – Man from Youngstown, employed, high school graduate with no college experience

For you to be 18 years old, walking out of high school and have that type of knowledge where you can work with adults that have been [working] for years, I think it's great ... [and since] it's a part of high school, you're not paying for it, that's free education. That's education you could have been paying for out of a college or something like that. – Man from Youngstown, unemployed, high school graduate with no college experience

Career & technical education (CTE) helps students at the high school or postsecondary level to persist and graduate by combining traditional academic curricula with coursework geared towards work-ready vocational or technical skills. Whatever its form, CTE is meant to supplement and motivate engagement with traditional academic content, by allowing students opportunities to gain work experience, develop employable skills and be mentored by professionals.

Options vary widely and may include academic coursework with a STEM focus, specialized technical training, apprenticeships or work-based study programs.

In some states (such as California), students can commit to specific career pathways (for example, students with an interest in engineering might elect to take classes on mechanical, architectural, or computer engineering). In other states (such as North Carolina), CTE is itself a recognized academic concentration, focusing less on industry-specific skills and more on generally applicable knowledge such as advanced math, computer programming, reading and writing, and critical thinking. [continued]

establish communication between high school counselors and college faculty; more generally, successful programs find ways to share responsibility for participating students between secondary and postsecondary institutions.

- The **Early College High School** model has much in common with dual enrollment programs, but is more focused on minimizing the transition from high school to college (or vocational school). Generally, Early College High Schools have academic programs that combine high school and college-level material into a unified curriculum. Such a program would grant a regular high school diploma, but can also grant college credits up to an Associates' degree (dual enrollment programs rarely offer students the chance to earn the same amount of college credit). Because students remain on a single campus through their studies, they are less distracted by the college admissions and financial aid process, and upon graduation they will have already completed up to two years of college coursework tuition-free. This emphasis on affordability and social support makes the Early College High School model particularly promising for students from low- to moderate-income families.

WHY THEY WORK

Although some school districts and states maintain eligibility criteria for dual enrollment programs and Early College High Schools, there is evidence that the opportunity to take college-level courses during high school increases college-going rates even for students who would not otherwise be college-bound, in part by preparing them for the academic expectations of college.¹⁹ And while most dual

¹⁹ Elisabeth Barnett and Liesa Stamm, *Dual Enrollment: A strategy for educational advancement of all students* (Washington, DC: Blackboard Institute, 2010).

CTE curriculum is usually offered through partnerships of high schools, community or technical colleges and local businesses or industries. In some districts, middle schools offer CTE curriculum as well. Some innovative CTE programs also partner with technical experts from nonprofits or growth industries (such as IT).

Why it works

Research has shown that opportunities to gain work experience or professional skills are desirable to most students, whether or not they are immediately work-bound. Thus, CTE programs may help both secondary and postsecondary retention and completion rates by providing alternative pathways to graduation to students who have difficulty engaging with traditional academic curriculum. The array of experiences that CTE programs offer may also help re-engage dropouts at the postsecondary level by offering a chance to learn new work skills or re-train in a different occupational field. Indeed, past research – as well as our focus group participants – indicate that “uninteresting classes” was a major reason many chose to leave school.

Finally, research has also shown that CTE programming rarely interferes with “traditional” academic course taking, and there is some evidence that it fosters academic achievement. (Source: National Research Center for Career and Technical Education)

Examples of the intervention in practice

Anoka-Hennepin County Secondary Technical Education Program (STEP), The Twin Cities' STEP program focuses on providing vocational and technical education supplemented by regular academic classes. Classes are taught by working professionals, and career-related opportunities outside of the classroom are provided.

Stark County Tech Prep (<http://www.starkcountyttechprep.org>): Tech Prep programs like Stark County's link high school with community college curriculum to smooth the transition between secondary education, postsecondary coursework, and careers. An early college high school program geared towards applied STEM instruction. The program focuses on helping students prepare for associates' and technical degrees.

enrollment programs happen in partnership with community colleges, early research suggests that students may be more likely to enroll in four-year institutions upon graduation – perhaps an indication of higher educational aspirations.²⁰

EXAMPLES OF THE INTERVENTION IN PRACTICE

- **Stark County Dual Credit Initiatives** (<http://www.edpartner.org/initiatives/credit.php>): A group of programs – not all of them targeted only to at-risk or minority students – that feature dual enrollment options. This includes attending classes on a college campus during the school year, summer programs where high school students can earn college credits, and re-designed curriculum (akin to the Early College High School model) that allows students to accrue college credits from completing high school coursework.
- **Oregon Expanded Options Program (EOP)** (<http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/results/?id=350>): Dual enrollment options targeted specifically to at-risk students, with all school districts required to notify students and their families of their participation in the program.
- **Early College High School (ECHS) Initiative** (<http://www.earlycolleges.org/schools.html>): An academic program – the largest of its kind – sponsored by the Gates Foundation and administered by the nonprofit Jobs for the Future. Schools working under this model try to ease the high school to college transition by giving students the chance to earn an associates' degree or two years of college credits, tuition-free, without leaving their high school campus.
- **Canton City-Stark Education Partnership Early College High School** (<http://earlycollege.ccsdistrict.org>): Also sponsored by Gates, this is an example of the Early College High School model at an Ohio school.
- **CUNY College Now Program** (<http://collegenow.cuny.edu/>): An early-college high school style program. Participating high schools partner with one of New York's City Universities to develop coursework – for both high school and college credit – for eligible students. The program is administered by the university system, which also handles extra programming and professional development work for staff. Students are offered college level coursework, opportunities to visit college campuses and attend cultural events and scholarships upon successful completion of the program.

7. Summer bridge programs / freshman year experience

Past research has shown that a student's experiences in his first college year is an important predictor of persistence and degree completion. Summer bridge and first-year programs are an increasingly important part of college efforts to promote student success and prepare students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

WHAT YOUNG ADULTS IN NORTHEAST OHIO SAY

Although summer bridge and first-year programs are comprehensive and combine many types of interventions, our focus group participants found two things particularly appealing: a chance to

²⁰ Katherine Hughes, *Dual Enrollment: Postsecondary/secondary partnerships to prepare students* (New York: CCRC, 2010).

acclimate themselves to the culture of higher education and the opportunity to become familiar with university services and resources for student support.

The summer bridge [would have helped] ... just to know a little bit more what I was getting myself into when going to college. A lot people don't know what they're getting themselves into when they start college. – *Woman from Akron, unemployed with some college experience*

There are a lot of things I've wished I knew ... even the loans, stuff like that, grants, ways of getting school paid for you don't know about until you're there. – *Man from Akron, unemployed with some college experience*

I just like the idea of getting to the campus sooner, although, at the same time, you want [some] time to chill because you're going to make this big step in your life ... but getting your foot in the door sooner doesn't hurt. – *Man from Youngstown, employed with some college experience*

WHAT IT IS

- **Summer Bridge programs** offer an initial "landing pad" for soon-to-be college freshman, especially those with developmental needs or those in need of extra social support or information (such as first-generation college-goers). Typically, these programs combine on-campus residence before classes start, on-line or in-person remedial instruction, intensive college-prep or college-level courses, mentoring by faculty or older students, counseling services targeted to specific needs (such as study skills and life habits) and social network building with fellow program participants. Aside from addressing potential obstacles to retention, these programs aim to orient students in the academic and social atmosphere of college and provide them with information on the school's resources and support services.
- **Freshman year orientation/experience/supplementary curricula** serve the same general purpose as summer bridge programs but are usually integrated into the regular academic semesters. These programs are meant to provide students with information on what to expect in college academically, financially and socially, as well as connect students with counselors for career and study skills.²¹ Some offer specific instruction – whether on-line, through tutoring or through specially recruited student learning communities – on topics such as time management, academic plans and career goals. Many such programs are seamlessly integrated into a regular elective or core class.

WHY IT WORKS

Research has shown that 60 percent of low-income, first-generation students who leave postsecondary education without attaining a degree do so after the first year.²² Implementing strategies such as bridge courses and programs during the summer between high school and college, orientation sessions and

²¹ Kezar, Adrianna. "Summer Bridge Programs: Supporting All Students. ERIC Digest." Retrieved from <http://www.ericdigests.org/2001-1/summer.html>.

²² Jennifer Engle and Vincent Tinto, *Moving Beyond Access: College success for low-income, first-generation students* (Washington, DC: The Pell Institute, 2008).

courses before and during the freshman year and first-year learning communities have all been shown to ease the transition to college by helping students get integrated into the social and academic communities of the institutions and acquire the skills and knowledge needed to become successful learners in those communities.²³

EXAMPLES OF THE INTERVENTION IN PRACTICE

- A variety of schools participating in the MDRC/CCRC [Texas Developmental Summer Bridge Study](#): Each of the sites implemented a program that included an intensive academic experience for recent high school graduates, with four to six weeks of remedial coursework during the summer of 2009. The programs incorporated pedagogical strategies, such as accelerated and contextualized learning; included lessons on college knowledge to help prepare students for the social and academic rigors of college; and provided stipends of roughly \$400 to students who participated and successfully completed the summer program.
- “Learning Framework” course at University of Texas – Pan American: A largely Hispanic-serving institution, UTPA has recently instituted this three-hour course as a graduation requirement for all students to be taken within a student’s first 30 hours of study on campus. In essence, it is a ‘student success’ course that focuses on “the understanding and application of the psychology of learning, cognition and motivation.” See the syllabus here: http://www.utpa.edu/ugs/documents/UNIV_1301_Syllabus.pdf
- Freshman seminars – whether presented as a separate class, a school-wide event, or an on-line course (among other possibilities) – are found in many institutions nationwide, including Cuyahoga Community College, which offers both in-person and ‘virtual’ options. See the website: (<http://tli.tri-c.edu/students/firstyear/index.asp>)

²³ Ibid.