

# What We Know About Nonacademic **Student** **Supports**

## What Are Nonacademic Student Supports?

Nonacademic student supports are activities and programs that are designed to encourage academic success but that do not deal directly with academic content. They include formally structured programs—such as student success courses—and one-on-one services, such as academic, career, and financial aid advising. Some nonacademic student supports are provided in an academic context through activities such as required study groups, mandatory meetings with professors, and faculty/staff interactions with students.

This research overview is part one of CCRC's nonacademic student supports practitioner packet. For ideas on how advising and online advising can be designed to provide sustained and integrated services for students throughout college, see [Designing a System for Strategic Advising](#) (part two). To learn more about how student success courses can be developed to make a more long-lasting impact on students' college outcomes, see [Student Success Courses for Sustained Impact](#) (part three).

## Why Are Nonacademic Supports Important for Community College Students?

While many community college students encounter significant academic barriers in completing a degree, they also face nonacademic barriers that are often equally significant. Some of these barriers—financial struggles, transportation difficulties, and insufficient childcare—are obvious and concrete.

Other nonacademic barriers are more obscure and subtle. Students may come from families with no postsecondary experience and may thus have little social capital to draw upon. They may have difficulty navigating college bureaucracies or understanding how to enact the habits and behaviors necessary for sustained achievement. They may have only a tenuous understanding of how college will help them achieve career and life goals, and they may lack confidence in their ability to succeed. Colleges work to address these challenges through various support activities.

**Students may have difficulty navigating college bureaucracies or understanding how to enact the habits and behaviors necessary for sustained achievement.**

## How Can Nonacademic Supports Improve Student Outcomes?

In a review of the theoretical and empirical literature, CCRC identified four central mechanisms by which nonacademic support services appear to promote student success: *creating*

social relationships, clarifying aspirations and enhancing commitment, developing college know-how, and making college life feasible.<sup>1</sup>

NONACADEMIC SUPPORT MECHANISMS	
CREATING SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS	CLARIFYING ASPIRATIONS AND ENHANCING COMMITMENT
<p>Students who have strong relationships with peers and instructors are more likely to feel that they belong in higher education, and they are more likely to have access to information and resources that can help them succeed.</p> <p>Student support activities should promote sustained and meaningful interactions between students and their professors, advisors, and classmates so that the students can develop strong college-based relationships.</p>	<p>Most students understand that a college degree is important and will make them more employable, but many do not know what career they want to pursue or how college majors and course pathways are related to specific careers.</p> <p>Support services should help students gain clarity about their academic and career goals and should make clear how the completion of particular course pathways will help them achieve these goals. This increased clarity should in turn strengthen students' commitment to achieving their higher education goals.</p>
DEVELOPING COLLEGE KNOW-HOW	MAKING COLLEGE LIFE FEASIBLE
<p>Students—particularly those from families with no college-going experience—may lack college know-how and become overwhelmed by the cultural, behavioral, and logistical demands of college.</p> <p>Support activities should help students develop college-readiness competencies such as time-management skills and should help them understand when, how, and where to access important college services, such as financial aid advising.</p>	<p>Many community college students face challenges related to work, single parenting, or poverty that create barriers to academic success.</p> <p>Support services can help students overcome obstacles in their daily lives that, if left unaddressed, could become large enough to stymie progress toward a degree. For example, offering on-site daycare would help minimize the conflict between family and school, particularly for female students.</p>

CCRC has identified four central mechanisms by which nonacademic support services appear to promote student success.

## How Effective Are Popular Approaches to Providing Nonacademic Support?

Community colleges have created an array of student support activities designed to promote student success through the mechanisms discussed above. How effective are these activities? Below, we review popular types of support and current evidence on their effectiveness.

### Enhanced Advising

Enhanced advising often includes mandatory, extended meetings with one assigned advisor who helps students address academic and nonacademic challenges. Due to their cost, enhanced advising services usually target high-risk students.

Studies of enhanced advising have tended to focus on programs that are relatively “light touch” (involving, for instance, meeting with an assigned advisor two times per semester), and these studies have found modest short-term effects.<sup>2</sup> However, one rigorous study examined the effects of a more intensive approach, in which individual students were assigned “coaches” for two semesters.

The coaches communicated with their students frequently, helped them develop strategies to address challenges, and monitored their academic performance. Coached students were more likely to persist and to complete college.<sup>3</sup>

### Student Success Courses

Usually a semester in length, student success courses are designed to build time-management, test-taking, information literacy, and study skills in students as well as to promote help-seeking behavior. A recent survey of 288 community colleges found that 83 percent offered student success courses.<sup>4</sup>

Correlational studies controlling for observable student characteristics have found evidence of short- and long-term benefits for students who enroll in student success courses, including improved academic performance, greater persistence, and increased rates of completion and transfer.<sup>5</sup> However, evidence from a set of more rigorous studies suggests that the benefits from success courses may fade after two or three semesters.<sup>6</sup>

**Evidence from a set of rigorous studies suggests that the benefits from success courses may fade after two or three semesters.**

### Learning Communities

Learning communities aim to strengthen connections between students and their instructors and peers by enrolling groups of students in a set of two or more linked courses. Some learning communities incorporate additional support services—for example, by making a success course one of the linked courses. The goal of learning communities is to promote social relationships, help-seeking behavior, and college know-how among participants. A survey of 288 community colleges found that over half offered learning communities.<sup>7</sup>

Nonexperimental studies have found that participation in learning communities is correlated with positive short-term outcomes, such as improved performance and persistence.<sup>8</sup> However, a large pooled random assignment study found only modest and short-term effects on academic outcomes.<sup>9,10</sup>

## The Limits of Short-Term Supports

Overall, the evidence suggests that although short-term supports can be helpful during the term in which they are provided, their benefits do not persist. The impact of short-term support activities could potentially be larger and more long-lasting if they were implemented with the explicit goal of developing skills and behaviors that can be sustained over time—if advisors focused on building students' problem-solving abilities; if success courses explicitly focused on the practice and application of skills essential to success in the early semesters of college; and if learning community instructors worked together to coordinate lessons and utilized pedagogies that create a more connected and engaged classroom environment.

Even with rigorous implementation, however, short-term support activities are likely to affect only a small number of students. Colleges cannot afford enhanced advising for all their students, for instance, and scheduling constraints typically keep learning communities at a small scale.

## Pervasive Supports: The SSIP Approach

It is clear that support activities need to be integrated more thoroughly and consistently across the student experience. In their interactions with college faculty and staff, students should receive help in strengthening their ability to make important decisions, in making social connections, in gaining

clarity about the utility of college and coursework, and in building knowledge about college expectations and norms. How can colleges do this within current budget constraints?

Based on accumulated research evidence, CCRC suggests that colleges take an approach to student supports that we have termed SSIP: Sustained, Strategic, Intrusive and Integrated, and Personalized.<sup>11</sup>

### **Sustained**

Findings suggest that a one-time “inoculation” of student support at the start of college is not enough to contribute to meaningful, long-term college success. Students encounter challenges throughout their college careers, and support activities must be sustained across the entire college experience.

### **Strategic**

Providing sustained supports requires that colleges utilize their resources more strategically. Colleges can streamline support services and use existing resources more effectively by offering rigorously implemented success courses and well-designed online advising systems, and by differentiating when and how students receive services according to their need.

### **Intrusive and Integrated**

Students are often unaware that they need nonacademic help. Making supports an integral and intrusive part of every student’s experience means that all students will receive help, whether or not they think they need it. Supports can be made intrusive by requiring participation in orientations and success courses, making advising mandatory, and having advisors proactively contact struggling students with the help of an early-alert system.

Additionally, colleges can integrate support activities into students’ academic experience by assigning advisors to particular programs of study and by locating their offices within academic departments; by having an academic dean oversee student success courses; and by bringing support services staff and academic faculty members together in professional development activities focused on contextualizing nonacademic skill building in academic settings. Together, these practices can help break down the silos that exist between academic and nonacademic support units.

### **Personalized**

Students have differing levels of need when it comes to supports. Some may need intensive advising upon entry; others may require help later in their college pathway, as they reach important decision points. While colleges can make more efficient use of resources by directing more self-sufficient students to online advising systems, online advising should be supplemented with in-person advising as students reach critical junctures.

Colleges can personalize supports by using an online system that tracks students’ academic progress and that alerts advisors when students reach key points in their college trajectories. Such points might include: when students are registering for their second year; when their course choices appear to stray from a designated major; and when students are approaching 15 credits from credential completion.

---

**Students have differing levels of need. Some may benefit from intensive advising upon entry; others may require help later in their college pathway.**

## Conclusion

In this overview of nonacademic supports, we have outlined the four central mechanisms by which student supports work to promote positive outcomes, and we have described overarching principals that should inform the design of an institution-wide system of nonacademic supports. Colleges should move beyond reliance on specific programs and work to integrate activities that incorporate the four support mechanisms across all offices and departments.

Additionally, colleges should consider strategically reallocating resources, taking advantage of the efficiencies of student success courses and online advising so that more resources can be devoted to students who need more intensive advising. For such an approach to be effective, however, these more efficient services must be well-designed and rigorously implemented, and all students must be able to meet with their advisors in person at critical junctures in their college trajectories.

In part two of this practitioner packet, *Designing a System for Strategic Advising*, we review relevant research on advising and make recommendations on how the SSIP approach can be applied to advising at community colleges.

In part three, *Success Courses for Sustained Impact*, we review quantitative and qualitative research findings on student success courses and make recommendations on how student success courses might be designed and implemented to have a greater impact on long-term student outcomes.

## Endnotes

1. Karp (2011).
2. Scrivener & Weiss (2009).
3. Bettinger & Baker (2011).
4. Center for Community College Student Engagement (2012).
5. Boudreau & Kromrey (1994); Cho & Karp (2012); Schnell & Doetkott (2003), Strumpf & Hunt (1993); Yamasaki (2010); Zeidenberg, Jenkins, & Calcagno (2007).
6. Rutschow, Cullinan, & Welbeck (2012); Scrivener, Sommo, & Collado (2009); Weiss, Brock, Sommo, Rudd, & Turner (2011).
7. Center for Community College Student Engagement (2012).
8. Moore & Shulock (2009).
9. Visher, Weiss, Weissman, Rudd, & Wathington (2012).
10. Another rigorous study of learning communities at Kingsborough Community College found that although positive impacts on student outcomes such as credit accumulation and persistence faded over the short term, at the end of six years participating students were 4.6 percentage points more likely to earn a degree. However, because these learning communities provided enhanced services, recruited students intending to enroll in college full-time, and had unusually strong support from college leadership, it is not clear whether the positive impacts could be readily replicated at other institutions (Sommo, Mayer, Rudd, & Cullinan, 2012).
11. In part two of this practitioner packet, *Designing a System of Strategic Advising*, we explore in more detail how to implement the SSIP approach for advising.

## Sources

Bettinger, E., & Baker, R. (2011). *The effects of student coaching in college: An evaluation of a randomized experiment in student mentoring* (NBER Working Paper No. 16881). Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.

Boudreau, C. A., & Kromrey, J. D. (1994). A longitudinal study of the retention and academic performance of participants in freshmen orientation courses. *Journal of College Student Development*, 35(6), 444–449.

Center for Community College Student Engagement. (2012). *A matter of degrees: Promising practices for community college student success (A first look)*. Austin, TX: University of Texas at -Austin, Community College Leadership Program.

Cho, S. W., & Karp, M. M. (2012). *Student success courses and educational outcomes at Virginia community colleges* (CCRC Working Paper No. 40). New York, NY: Columbia University, Teachers College, Community College Research Center.

Karp, M. M. (2011). *Toward a new understanding of nonacademic support: Four mechanisms encouraging positive student outcomes in the community college* (CCRC Working Paper No. 28, Assessment of Evidence Series). New York, NY: Columbia University, Teachers College, Community College Research Center.

Moore, C., & Shulock, N. (2009). *Student progress toward degree completion: Lessons from the research literature*. Sacramento, CA: California State University, Sacramento, Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy.

Rutschow, E. Z., Cullinan, D., & Welbeck, R. (2012). *Keeping students on course: An impact study of a student success course at Guilford Technical Community College*. New York, NY: MDRC.

Schnell, C. A., & Doetkott, C. D. (2003). First year seminars produce long-term impact. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 4(4), 377–391.

Scrivener, S., Sommo, C., & Collado, H. (2009). *Getting back on track: Effects of a community college program for probationary students*. New York, NY: MDRC.

Scrivener, S., & Weiss, M. J. (2009). *More guidance, better results? Three-year effects of an enhanced student services program at two community colleges*. New York, NY: MDRC.

Sommo, C., Mayer, A. K., Rudd, T., & Cullinan, D. (with Fresques, H.). (2012). *Commencement day: Six-year effects of a freshman learning community program at Kingsborough Community College*. New York, NY: MDRC.

Strumpf, G., & Hunt, P. (1993). The effects of an orientation course on the retention and academic standing of entering freshmen, controlling for the volunteer effect. *Journal of the Freshman Year Experience*, 5(1), 7–14.

Visher, M. G., Weiss, M. J., Weissman, E., Rudd, T., & Wathington, H. D. (with Teres, J., & Fong, K.). (2012). *The effects of learning communities for students in developmental education: A synthesis of findings from six community colleges*. New York, NY: National Center for Postsecondary Research.

Weiss, M. J., Brock, T., Sommo, C., Rudd, T., & Turner, M. C. (2011). *Serving community college students on probation: Four-year findings from Chaffey College's Opening Doors program*. New York, NY: MDRC.

Yamasaki, K. (2010). *Enrollment in success courses: Credential completion rates and developmental education in the North Carolina Community College System* (Master's thesis). Sanford School of Public Policy, Duke University, Durham, NC.

Zeidenberg, M., Jenkins, D., & Calcagno, J. C. (2007). *Do student success courses actually help community college students succeed?* (CCRC Brief No. 36). New York, NY: Columbia University, Teachers College, Community College Research Center.

---

*This research overview was prepared by Melinda Mechur Karp and Georgia West Stacey, Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University. Funding was provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.*

**Community College Research Center**  
**Teachers College, Columbia University**  
525 West 120th Street, Box 174  
New York, New York 10027  
Tel: 212.678.3091 Fax: 212.678.3699  
[ccrc@columbia.edu](mailto:ccrc@columbia.edu)  
<http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu>