

Supporting College Student Success during COVID-19: Evaluation Report

Prepared by: Daniel Douglas, PhD¹

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¹ Karolina Barrientos and Renita Washington provided support in the preparation of this report.

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Introduction

As open-access institutions, community colleges provide avenues to educational attainment and economic mobility for historically marginalized groups. In 2017-18, about 44 percent of US undergraduate students attended community colleges (Community College Research Center, nd). According to 2015-16 federal data, 38% of community college students were Black and Latinx, and 54% were the first generation college students.² But persistence and completion rates community colleges are low in real and relative terms. Among students who began at community colleges in fall 2018, only 62% re-enrolled in the next fall (Community College Research Center, nd). Looking at the cohort who began in fall 2014, only 40% completed an associate's or bachelor's degree within six years (Causey, et al., 2020). Low persistence and completion has been attributed both to factors within the institutions themselves – such as low funding levels and high student to faculty ratios – and to contextual factors facing community college students – who are typically older, from lower-income families, and less academically prepared (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). But if the US is to realize its aims of equal opportunity for all, supporting community colleges and their students will play a key role.

In the United States, the COVID-19 pandemic first took shape on the west coast in January of 2020 and quickly spread across the country. With little warning, the pandemic forced educational institutions at all levels to move their operations to online-only delivery. The impact of this shift was unevenly felt. Minority and low-income students are impacted by the “digital divide,” and the community colleges are less likely to have the human and material resources available to bridge this gap. The broader economic consequences of the pandemic – lost jobs and increased family responsibilities – also disproportionately fall on the populations served by community colleges (Davis, 2020). Further compounding the problem, comparatively low levels of social and academic integration mean that community college students are less likely to know what resources are available to them, and less likely to ask for help. Practically, recent reports have shown that both enrollment and persistence at community colleges have declined sharply since the beginning of the pandemic (The College Board, 2021; Gardner, 2021).

In this context, Hartford Foundation for Public Giving sought to make short-duration grants to community colleges and affiliated local organizations to address and support community college student retention during the 2020/21 academic year. The Foundation sought proposals that focused on low-income, Black and Latinx continuing students – who were already enrolled during the prior academic

² Author's tabulation of National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey 2015-16 (NPSAS: 16). Variables used: GENDER, PAREduc, RACE, SECTOR11. Computation by NCES PowerStats on 7/22/2021.

year. The Foundation awarded approximately \$250,000 to four Connecticut colleges and one non-profit organization. The successful proposals fell into two broad categories. Three proposed to provide material support to students – in the form of emergency funds and technology (e.g., laptops and Wi-Fi hot-spots) – to keep them engaged in their now-remote coursework. Two sought to keep students engaged using targeted coaching – which connected participating students with mentors and advising support.

To understand the impact of these grants during the pandemic, the Foundation contracted an evaluation team from Trinity College. The aim of this evaluation is to provide insights as the Foundation hones its approach to postsecondary grant-making.

The evaluation team worked alongside Foundation staff and the five grantees to develop an evaluation plan. The evaluation involved periodic surveys of grantees to measure students' engagement with their programs and their persistence with their studies. In addition, the evaluation sought to understand the processes involved with implementing material and coaching support programs during a period of remote learning. As a related deliverable, the evaluation team also examined prior postsecondary and workforce development grants made by the foundation to compare their implementation and outcomes with those of the current grantees. The report proceeds as follows. First, we present an overview of the methods used in the evaluation. Then, we present results from the prior grant review, the current grantee surveys, and the follow-up interviews. We conclude by summarizing the findings and offering an overall evaluation and recommendations for future work.

Methods

For governments, private firms, and non-profit organizations alike, evaluation is a critical part of effective policy-making. Beyond simply collecting data, evaluation seeks to make judgments about the impact of policies or programs for the purpose of making decisions about prioritizing and allocating resources. Data needs to be collected both about whether a program or policy was successful in realizing its goals, and about how programs worked or did not work. These summative and formative elements are complementary parts of a thorough program evaluation.

There are many approaches to program evaluation, but the general methodological approach taken here is known as responsive evaluation. In this approach, the evaluator works alongside the people delivering the program to understand the population served and the context of the program, and to

agree on indicators of success (Stake, 1976; Abma, 2006).³ The evaluation also has elements of Patton’s (2016) developmental approach, insofar as the team provided some ongoing technical support to both the grantees and the Foundation over the course of the grant period.

Grantee Surveys

To make this a responsive evaluation, the team arranged a series of interviews with the grantees shortly after the awards were made. In these initial conversations, the lead evaluator and the grantees began by discussing the aims and activities of their respective programs, and the challenges faced by the students these programs would serve. We then discussed how their programs would directly support student persistence, and what barriers to student persistence would remain despite the program. Finally, we discussed the specific ways that grantees could measure student success with their programs.

Based on these discussions, the lead evaluator drafted three surveys to be distributed over the course of the Spring 2021 semester. These drafts were reviewed by the grantees and staff at the Hartford Foundation, and were finalized in January of 2020. The complete text of all three questionnaires is included in the Appendix to this report. Each survey first asks grantees to report on the number of students served by the grant – using the agreed-upon metrics, and ask for qualitative updates about successes and challenges with implementing the program. The second question in each survey asks about how the program is impacting students’ engagement with their Spring 2021 coursework. The midterm and summative surveys ask whether students plan to re-enroll in the next semester, as well as whether any students have completed programs of study. The last question in each survey asks about any unintended impacts on students and/or their families, households, or the institution as a whole.

Table 1. Evaluation Survey Timing and Response Rates

	Immediate Impacts	Midterm Impacts	Summative Impacts
<i>Distribution Timing</i>	~2 weeks after start of Spring 2021 semester	~8 weeks after start of Spring 2021 semester	~12 weeks after start of Spring 2021 semester
<i>Response Rate</i> ⁴	100%	80%	100%

³ A related approach evaluation for programs serving historically marginalized populations is known as Culturally Responsive Evaluation (CRE). While similar to Stake’s responsive evaluation, this approach emphasizes the need for centering the experiences of marginalized populations, and placing marginalized people in leading roles in all evaluation activities (Bryan & Lewis, 2020; Hood, 2005). As such, this evaluation does not, in our estimation, meet the standard of CRE.

⁴ One of the grantees submitted all three forms at the conclusion of the semester, and only after completing a follow-up interview.

Table 1 shows the survey distribution schedule and response rates. By June of 2021, all five grantees had completed the immediate and summative impact surveys, and four of five had completed the midterm survey.

Grantee Interviews

To supplement the data collected in the surveys, and to better understand the unique circumstances of each program – the evaluation team scheduled debrief interviews with the grantees in July 2021. The interviews focused on successes and challenges with program delivery, anticipated and unanticipated impacts of the program (both on the students and their institutions), and the sustainability of the programs beyond the grant period. All five grantees participated in debrief interviews. These interviews were not recorded, the interviewer took comprehensive notes during and immediately following the interviews. In the findings section, direct quotes are drawn from the survey responses, while material from the debrief interviews is indicated as paraphrases.

Prior Grant Inventory

During the Spring 2021 semester, the evaluation team conducted a review of the Hartford Foundation’s postsecondary education and workforce grants since 2015. This review was conducted to better understand the trajectories and impacts of grants made by the Foundation that serve similar populations of young people. The review focused on population served, methods of student outreach, and metrics of success. Findings from the workforce grant review were delivered as a standalone memo in June 2021. The findings from the review of the postsecondary grants are included as Appendix B.

Analysis strategy

Survey responses were analyzed quantitatively to understand whether the programs met their targets in terms of students served, whether students remained engaged during the term, and student plans for re-enrollment and/or degree completion. Qualitative responses were analyzed to identify themes in implementation challenges, and program impacts on students and the institutions. Interviews are similarly analyzed thematically. The qualitative findings are thus presented by weaving together data from the surveys and the interviews.

Results

Overview of the Grantees and Programs

Before presenting the analysis, we provide brief overviews of the five grantees and their programs. Broadly, the analysis focuses on the similarities and differences in implementation and impact between the material support and coaching support grants.

Asnuntuck Community College. (ACC) Asnuntuck CC proposed a two-part program. The first part of the program provided loaner laptops to campus-based continuing students in its academic programs and Advanced Manufacturing programs of study. The second part of the program placed cameras and large monitor screens in four correctional facilities to support remote learning for incarcerated people participating in ACCs Second-Chance Pell programs in Human Services, Business, General Studies and Manufacturing programs. ACC is classified as a material support program.

Capital Community College. (CCC) Capital CC proposed to use grant funds to develop its Brother-2-Brother and Sister-2-Sister programs. B2B and S2S are mentoring programs that aim to foster social integration among Black and Latinx college students. Students are connected with professional and faculty mentors. The program coordinator also facilitates peer mentoring, workshops, and community service activities for participating students. CCC is classified as a coaching program.

Goodwin University. (GU) The Attaining Connections to Success (ACTS) program focused primarily on technology and resource access for students. It provided laptops and wi-fi hotspots on a semester loan basis, made emergency funds available to cover the cost of textbooks, and specialized advisor coaching. Grant funds covered the laptops, hotspots, and training for program advisors. GU is classified as a material support program.

Manchester Community College. (MCC) The MCC Connectors program is a peer-mentoring program built around MCC's introductory student success course. The program aimed to pair three part-time course instructors with a total of six peer mentors. Each course section would serve a group of 12 students, with peer mentor serving a 'pod' of six students to discuss and refine the concepts taught in the course. The program aimed to improve students' self-advocacy behaviors, in addition to helping them navigate resources available at the school (e.g., advising and financial aid). MCC is classified as a coaching program.

Hartford Promise. (HP) The Urgent Needs for Promise Scholars program established a pool of emergency funds for HPs scholars. Grant funds were specifically directed at Promise scholars enrolled in Manchester and Capital community colleges. In addition to emergency funds, HP also purchased laptops for scholars who requested them. Grant monies were also used to facilitate outreach and increase awareness about the availability of emergency funds. HP is classified as a material support program.

Quantitative Findings

Table 2. Student Participation and Outcomes for Current Grantees

	Material Supports			Coaching Supports	
	Asnuntuck CC*	Goodwin University	Hartford Promise	Capital CC	Manchester CC
<i>Intended # of Participants</i>	167 (SCP) 29 (LL)	30	100-150	15-40 per semester	36-72
<i>Midterm # of participants</i>	83 (SCP) 2 (LL)	33	97 (funds) 27 (laptops)	<i>No Data</i>	16 (enrolled) 9 (engaged)
<i>Final # of Participants</i>	68 (SCP) 2 (LL)	36	104 (funds) 28 (laptops)	25 (enrolled) 20 (engaged)	14
<i>% of participants re-enrolling</i>	77% (SCP) 100% (LL)	64% (Summer) 47% (Fall)**	85% (projected for Fall 2021)	60% (for Fall 2021)	29% (for Summer 2021)
<i># of participants completing or transferring</i>	0	3	17-20	0	0

*SCP = Second Chance Pell, LL = Loaner Laptop

**As of July 27, 2021. Enrollment at GU is still ongoing, proportion expected to increase.

Table 2 presents broad indicators of the reach and impact of the five grant programs, grouped by broad type – material and coaching supports. Comparing the final number of participants to the intended number of participants, only two (GU and HP) met or exceeded their initial target. Notably, the material support programs generally intended to serve more students than coaching support programs. This stands to reason as the per-student costs of material support interventions were lower than those of coaching interventions.

In terms of student retention, programs ranged from between 30 and 85 percent re-enrollment. But the data quality varies by site. Some programs reported fall re-enrollment, while others reported for summer. Hartford Promise does not have direct access to student enrollment data, so the 85 percent figure is based on impressions from their contact with scholars. Thus, it is not possible to say that one program or type of program produced better re-enrollment outcomes than another. But in this regard material support and coaching programs are at least comparable.

In terms of degree and credential completion, only Goodwin's connections program and Hartford Promise reported that participating students would complete their programs of study in the 2020-21 academic year. This is to be expected given that the five grant programs generally served students who are early in their college careers. ACC's Second Chance Pell program would not lead to credential completion *per se*, which makes it difficult to evaluate by these standard metrics.

Qualitative Findings

Barriers to implementation. Implementation hurdles varied by the type of program. For material support programs, early obstacles related to the purchase and registration of devices. For example, while GU reported a steady student outreach effort in their first survey, the process of securing laptops was delayed:

"Laptops were ordered and arrived on January 11th. However, it took some time to get them ready for distribution. Laptops must first be loaded with software and added to the Goodwin network. Distribution of laptops will begin the week of February 8th." (GU)

ACC reported a similar schedule, but elaborated on the complex process once laptops were physically received by the college:

"One of the challenges for both programs was getting the equipment to arrive at ACC in a timely manner. The internal paperwork for the purchases was generated at ACC on January 15, 2021... The laptops for the Laptop Loaner Program arrived around March 15, 2021 and then had to be processed by our Information Technology Department so they could be loaned out to students... The system that was created involved the IT Department, Student Services, the Library and Academic Affairs." (ACC)

The program coordinator at ACC noted that the logistics of distributing laptops was the biggest unanticipated challenge for the campus-based portion of their program. The delayed start of the program led to the disappointingly low number of students who utilized laptops during the spring. The second-chance Pell component went relatively smoothly:

"The equipment for the Second Chance Pell program arrived between February 15, 2021 and March 15, 2021. The equipment was then installed at each of the DOC facilities and tested. Recruitment sessions with students started right away and classes started March 22, 2021." (ACC)

For coaching/mentoring programs, obstacles concerned outreach to students and encouraging participation. For example, in their initial survey, CCC reported that recruiting students to participate in the B2B/S2S programs was slow because

“placing phone calls, and emails, along with utilizing social media, these are the main and/or only methods available to recruit..., in addition to the Covid-19 protocols, we’re not able to provide traditional information sessions or travel to High Schools to present to an audience and by default, this impacts our recruiting in general.” (CCC)

Similarly, MCC reported of its early recruitment efforts:

“We canvassed ~150 students eligible for the 4-week Math Advancement Program (MAP) and only 16 signed up...Getting a new program up and running during finals/break is difficult because people are really scattered at that time. Our student worker found that many of the students she called didn’t know they have a college email address or how to check their college email.” (MCC)

Once the semester was underway, MCC connectors participants (including students and tutors) struggled to find the right technical solutions for engaging with the program. The college changed its rules about videoconferencing software, which forced faculty and students to change the way they interacted with the program – which was centered around a developmental mathematics course.

‘There was a lot of challenge for faculty navigating all the digital platforms and learning to deliver content online. One of the big issues was whether faculty could use WebX, Zoom, or Teams, and getting the different online platforms like ALEKS, [Pearson] MyMathLab, and Wiley to work well with the proctoring software. During the semester, faculty were told they could not use Zoom, and that they had to migrate to Teams. But students were not aided in this transition. These shifts created a lot of stress for faculty, especially adjuncts.’ (MCC, paraphrase)

At Capital, the B2B program was also centered around a course for new students. While participation in the course was generally good, program staff struggled to get students to engage with content other than their coursework. In this context, the program coordinator talks about why an on-campus program would be more successful:

‘...when they’re home, nothing changes. When they’re on campus, it builds rapport and self-advocacy, develops of new culture, increases morale’ (CCC, paraphrase)

Hartford Promise was unique among the grantees in reporting no substantial barriers to implementation. This can be attributed to both the nature of the program and the position of Hartford Promise as an external organization rather than a college. The creation of an emergency fund and the provision of laptops meant that there was comparatively little ‘behind-the-scenes’ administrative work to be done – funds could be distributed once requests were received and processed. The main task was to notify Promise scholars of the availability of funds – which was done via email, text message, and word-of-mouth through the organization’s ambassadors at the colleges. Hartford Promise made the decision to purchase laptops through Dell Computers – with whom the organization already had a working relationship. This further eased burden on both students and organization staff.

'We directly ordered laptops for 27 students from Dell and had them drop-shipped to the students' addresses. This was easier than asking students to buy a computer with a stipend. A couple of shipped laptops were stolen, a couple more were not working on arrival and needed to be re-ordered.' (HP, paraphrase)

If there was a minor problem, it was overcoming students' suspicion about the getting help without preconditions:

"It is hard for many of them to ask for help. When they do it is often with suspicion or doubt that real help will materialize, especially quickly and without lots of hassles. We have shifted their experience and trust by doing this quickly and without strings." (HP)

Lessons Learned. The evaluation surveys asked grantees to report on implementation challenges at multiple points during the spring 2021 semester. The interviews conducted after the end of the term allowed grantees to reflect on what they learned from these challenges and how they might proceed differently based on those experiences. Specifically, they were asked what relationships they would build in advance either within their institutions or with external organizations, and if there were any process changes they would make with regards to student outreach.

In general, grantees felt that their programs would benefit from better relationships with other offices in the colleges whose work impacts student success. For material support programs, these included information technology, college libraries, and financial aid. ACC's loaner laptop program was ultimately facilitated through the college library – where students already go to borrow other types of shared resources. But before the computers can be set up as loaners, IT needs to install software and tie the computer to the college's network; this latter point was also evident at GU. Since their program also included emergency funds, GU staff also stated that connecting in advance with financial aid and university accounts offices would have facilitated the delivery of funds. Paraphrasing from an interview:

'depending on what type of emergency funding a student needed, distributing those funds could involve financial aid, the accounts office, or the bookstore. Having someone involved who understands those processes would have been helpful.' (GU, paraphrase)

Coaching and mentoring programs also noted important within-college relationships included financial aid and the registrar. Because these programs aim to help students better navigate college bureaucracy, the mentors themselves reported a need to understand more about registration and student aid processes. A peer mentor from MCC explained that while she can help mentees with situations like those she has personally encountered, other issues were outside of what she knew. CCC plans to build these intra-college relationships once they onboard a new coordinator for the B2B program, who they also hope will improve the programs outreach efforts.

Both types of programs recognized the need for building relationships with faculty and student advisors. Material support programs like those at ACC and GU would rely on faculty and advisers to promote the availability of material supports. The program coordinator at ACC reported that she created language for faculty to build into course syllabi to inform students of the loaner laptop program. Coaching programs directly engage with faculty as facilitators, but also suggested a need for a relationship between peer mentors and student advising services.

'The program needs to liaise with the advising office. Getting students on track depends on advising. Advising workshop was an optional activity in the Student Success Course (IDS 105), but instructor wants to build that into class time, since students are less likely to do the supplemental activities.' (CCC, paraphrase)

Expected and Unexpected Impacts. In the final survey and the debrief interview, grantees were asked to think broadly about the impact of their programs, and about the barriers that still continued to impact student success. The intended impacts on persistence and course engagement were summarized above in Table 2, but were described better by a number of grantees.

"These additional funds and laptops were incredibly important. Because of this additional support Scholars had one less thing to worry about. Many could work less hours which meant they could focus more on school. Many had working laptops vs borrowing one or sharing a laptop with 2-3 other siblings. It also reassured students that we "had their back" and that they could depend on us for all sorts of support." (HP)

'Students who participated in IDS 105 [introductory student success course] for the B2B program said it was the best class they had. It was a group of young men of color able to be together and share experiences and build self-advocacy.' (CCC, paraphrase)

" We have helped to reduce the number of students dropping courses due to lack of resources. Other eliminated barriers include not having sufficient funds to purchase textbooks, rent eBooks, and pay tuition or late registration fees to register for summer courses. Having their own laptop or even access to a hotspot, allowed students to complete discussion boards even during their work lunch breaks. This eased the technology burden at home." (GU)

But the impacts of grant programs often go beyond their stated intentions. Two broad types of unintended impacts that emerged from the interviews were changes in how staff understood the needs of their students, and how they were able to respond to those needs. For the coaching and mentoring programs, staff quickly learned that getting students to engage in additional activities was challenging, especially when those activities were happening online. As staff from CCC and MCC expressed:

"Engagement is the most difficult part as students have disconnected virtually. Many of our students are also working, and at times due to the availability of extra hours they're offered, that becomes their priority at times." (CCC)

“Time and self-management were the two biggest obstacles for our students. Several remarked that they didn’t have ‘time’ to take an extra course during the spring semester to learn how to manage their busy lives more effectively.” (MCC)

MCC’s program encountered many recruitment obstacles, but it led them to adapt the peer mentors’ time to create a wellness site on the college intranet. Engagement with that tool has been encouraging, but also indicates the degree of difficulty facing many students:

“In mid-February, our team started an intranet site with weekly wellness/happiness updates that encourage members to persist. The site now has 40 members (including faculty/staff and cohort 2 students) and is open to anyone who has a college email address. Since the first post, we have seen an increase in visits from ~ 30 views/week to ~600.” (MCC)

For the material-support programs at GU and HP, connecting students with resources started new conversations about their needs. As expected, students faced many overlapping challenges during the 2020/21 academic year, including issues that preceded the pandemic:

‘Some of our students are also parents, and so we learned that they might have one computer at home already, but they really need two so that their children can engage with remote schooling as well.’ (GU, paraphrase)

‘The grant gave us a better purview on the reality our scholars face. When we say there’s no safety net, there is no safety net. A small bill or financial obligation can toss many students out of college. The grant funds probably kept 30-50 students in college, or enrolled full-time.’ (HP, paraphrase)

In terms of response, the grants allowed colleges to build more robust student support infrastructure – including having more devices to loan and better means of distributing them.

“One of the most notable barriers to the Laptop Lending program was setting up the system to track the laptops and then getting the word out to students in an effective manner...For the Fall we will include a statement in the syllabus template that we send out to instructors, ask instructors to include an announcement in their course Blackboard shells, send information out in the Student Government newsletter, and ask the student government representatives for suggestions...” (ACC)

Another important impact concerned the relationship between students and their institutions. Grantees reported that their programs opened up or revitalized interaction with students.

‘Another unanticipated impact was that the emergency funds got them back in touch with Promise scholars who they did not usually hear from. And those relationships are likely to continue. Made students more confident to reach out [to the Promise program] and seek help.’ (HP, paraphrase)

Sustainability. The debrief interviews finally asked grantees to think forward about their programs – how and in what form they would persist after the end of the grant. The responses suggest an important difference between programs based on activities and those based on material supports.

Material supports programs will still be able to loan the laptops bought with grant funds, and staff from both ACC and GU expressed this in their interviews. Both were optimistic that the grant helped build the college's capacity to distribute these new resources to students.

'The grant provided 35 new laptops. The laptops will go to Travis [who distributed laptops and hotspots for the program], and the Communications office will continue to advertise these resources to students.' (GU, paraphrase)

'The program was initially focused on Black and Latinx students, but the office of diversity decided that it should be expanded for equity reasons. This program will be combined with an existing SNAP program that provides loaner laptops.' (ACC, paraphrase)

ACC's Second-Chance Pell program placed new devices in correctional facilities, and the impact of these is likely widely felt – even beyond ACC's program – and for many years to come. One example of this is the college's SCP recruitment process:

"With the use of the technology the ACC staff members are able to display the necessary forms on the screen and walk the students through the process of completing each form. This cut the recruitment sessions down to 1.5 hours per facility...they were able to more efficiently guide the students through the paperwork process, answer questions, and obtain the necessary signatures on the appropriate forms. This hybrid model has proved to be effective and an unexpected benefit of utilizing the technology in the DOC facilities... The current plan is to hold on ground classes this coming Fall and utilize the technology as needed for either class sessions or recruitment or advising sessions with students." (ACC)

The screens now in place at four Connecticut DOC facilities are starting to be used by other educational programs. For ACC's program, they also allowed instructors to use video content they had not been able to use before.

Not all device purchases are equally sustainable. GU also purchased hotspots as loaner devices, but hotspots require internet service to be useful. GU program staff said that the IT department is attempting to secure internal funding to keep the loaner hotspots connected.

Activity based coaching and mentoring programs will need continued funding to keep their programs going. This raises concerns about sustainability. Capital's B2B program is using grant funds to hire their first program coordinator, but the program's sustainability will depend on that coordinator producing results that will entice further internal or external funding. Both the peer mentors and coordinators of

their program felt confident that the program should continue, but understood that sustainability would depend on continued funding and effective use of funds.

“Is it sustainable as-is? No. Should it be sustainable? Yes.” (MCC peer mentor)

“Goes back to needing an external fiscal agent to manage the funds. Student workers are relatively inexpensive and would be critical to doing this sustainably.” (MCC program coordinator)

The idea of an external fiscal agent is important, since it could allow for faster hiring and more efficient use of funds. This was indeed the case with Hartford Promise, the only grantee that was not a college. Hartford Promise was the outlier among the cases, and the sustainability discussion with HP was unique. Prior to the grant, they did have a ‘hurdle fund,’ but it was relatively small and under-utilized. This academic year exposed the depth of need among Promise scholars and caused HP to think about expanding their emergency funds and making sure that those funds can be distributed quickly and with few conditions.

“The ease of availability of Hartford Foundation funding was important to the success of the program. The longer we waited, the more students we would miss. Hartford Promise tried to make accessing emergency funds and laptops as easy and pain-free as possible – not embarrassing, not diminishing to the students... It created a belief in help, and removed a stigma around needing help.”

Discussion and Recommendations

The data collected over the course of the spring 2021 semester showed how different student support programs were implemented and how they impacted community college student persistence during the COVID-19 pandemic. To facilitate analysis, the grantees were broadly classified into material support programs and coaching/mentoring programs. This was analytically useful since implementation and student engagement varied meaningfully between programs of these sorts.

In terms of measured impact, material support programs were broadly comparable to coaching programs in terms of student persistence. But material support programs required fewer institutional resources to administer. Further those programs which purchased durable resources – laptops and hotspots – will have impacts beyond the life of the grant. This makes them perhaps a more powerful means of supporting persistence when financial and administrative resources are limited. The provision of computers may also have met the particular need of the moment; as virtual learning became indispensable to student success.

A further point relates to the notion of administrative burden. Goldirck-Rab et al. (2021) examined how ‘completion grant’ programs were implemented at seven open or broad-access colleges. They found that programs which required less complex effort by college staff and students were more likely to be effective at promoting student completion. Lower administrative burden for students meant, among other things, less required participation in activities, and fewer points of assessment. For staff, lower administrative burden meant fewer required contacts with students and less complicated eligibility requirements.

We can apply this notion of administrative burden to the grant programs evaluated here. The research noted number of ‘burden points’ between the distribution of Foundation funds and their contact with students. For material support programs, the purchase of devices and their onboarding by IT were primary burden points. For mentoring programs, hiring staff, recruiting students, and maintaining engagement were burden points; the latter of these was constant throughout the semester.

Administrative burden was the lowest for Hartford Promise – which was external to the colleges and had a very simple program. Among college-based programs, burden was lower with material support programs than with activity-based programs. Administrative burden affects both students or college staff. Throughout the interviews, a common theme was that program staff wanted more efficiency, and were most satisfied when this was achieved. When things were not efficient, staff wondered if external agencies would be better able to administer programs. On the student side, program staff talked about digital burnout and general disengagement, particularly with activities, workshops, and appointments beyond their classes. These can all be read as indicators of administrative burden for students.

From this discussion we offer two main recommendations. The first is that the Foundation consider funding material support programs for community college students, especially when awarding smaller grants. Given that the Foundation has to make careful choices with its resources, the data collected here suggest that the benefits of material support programs are more likely to be widely felt and sustainable than similar-sized awards given for activity-based programs. Specifically, programs that purchase durable objects may offer substantial return-on-investment.

Coaching interventions could be made less burdensome by engaging external agents to cut through college bureaucracy, specifically related to hiring and compensation. External agencies may also realize more efficiency with respect to recruiting and keeping participating students engaged. To facilitate collaboration, the Foundation could liaise between CBOs and community colleges to identify high need

areas and potential high-impact practices. These collaborations would not only lead to better-designed programs, but also could foster more robust data collection to get precise measures of impact.

Conclusion

This evaluation is in line with prior collaborative work between Trinity College and Hartford Foundation. Last year, our review of the research literature and investigation of the Foundation's internal data identified last-mile and renewable awards as important supports for student success (Semblante, et al., 2020; Douglas, et al., 2020). The larger research literature also shows that need-based aid is a potent factor in degree completion (Titus, 2006). Evidence from that review also suggests that material support and emergency fund programs may be important for hard-to-reach groups like undocumented and non-traditional students, who have less access to ordinary financial aid. Continuing from that thread in our research, we can view material support programs as a form of need-based aid.

Ultimately, we observe that all the programs funded in Spring 2021 made important impacts on student persistence. But those that provided material supports like laptops and emergency funds reached wider audiences with lower administrative burden for staff and students, and with potentially more sustained impacts. These observations informed our recommendations.

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Appendix A – Survey Questionnaires

A1. Immediate Impacts – Coaching Programs

In this form, focus your answers on what happened immediately, defined as 2-3 weeks after students were first exposed to grant resources in the Spring 2021 semester. Please be as detailed as possible in your responses.

1. How many students does this program intend to serve?
Please specify either an exact number or a range. [This question will tie to questions in the summative impacts form filled out later.]

2. At this point, how many students have accessed program resources (e.g., coaching, peer mentors, enhanced advising)?
Example: 15 students have been in contact with their assigned coach. 20 students have met with their peer groups.
 - a. Were there any challenges encountered in making initial contact with students?

 - b. How did students feel at the point of first contact with program resources?

3. At this point, how many students participating in the program have been engaged with their Spring 2021 classes?
Example: Based on logins to Blackboard courses, 25 program students have been engaged in their Spring 2021 class; 16 have logged in to online course systems. [Grantees have indicated that data from faculty surveys may be useful in preparing this response.]

4. Any other program impacts to report other than those mentioned above?
Note: This can be anecdotal based on what you're hearing from students.

A2. Immediate Impacts – Material Support Programs

In this form, focus your answers on what happened immediately, defined as 2-3 weeks after students were first exposed to grant resources in the Spring 2021 semester. In all responses, please be as detailed as possible.

1. How many students does this program intend to serve?

Note: Please specify either an exact number or a range. This question will tie to questions in the summative impacts form filled out later.

2. At this point, how many students have accessed program resources (e.g., laptops, hotspots, and/or emergency funds)?

Example: 15 students have claimed their laptop. 20 students have applied for (received) emergency funds.

- a. Were there any challenges encountered in distributing resources to students?

- b. How did students feel at the point of first contact with program resources?

3. At this point, how many students participating in the program have been engaged with their Spring 2021 classes?

Example: Based on logins to Blackboard courses, 25 program students have been engaged in their Spring 2021 class; 16 have logged in to online course systems. [Grantees have indicated that data from faculty surveys may be useful in preparing this response.]

4. Any other program impacts to report other than those mentioned above?

Note: This can be anecdotal based on what you're hearing from students.

A3. Midterm Impacts – Coaching Programs

In this form, focus your answers on what happened by the middle of the spring 2021 semester, approximately 6-8 weeks after students' first exposure to grant resources.

1. At this point, how many students have participated in any program activities (e.g., coaching, success courses, peer group meetings)?
Note: In addition to an overall total, please specify exact numbers by type(s) of resource accessed. Example: Overall, 30 students have been served by the program. 15 students have met with their peer group. 20 students have made contact with their mentor.
 - a. Were there any ongoing challenges encountered in distributing resources to students?

2. In general, how have students felt about the program activities?
Note: These can be systematic (i.e., the results of a student survey) or anecdotal (based on staff or student feedback), but specify the type or response being given.

3. At this point how many students participating in the program are regularly attending their Spring 2021 classes? *Example: Based on logins to Blackboard courses, 18 program students have been regularly attending their Spring 2021 classes.*
 - a. If students are not regularly attending, have any of them given reasons why? *This can be anecdotal based on what you're hearing from students.*

 - b. For students who are attending classes regularly, do you have a sense of the semester is going for them academically? in terms of their wellbeing? *Responses can be anecdotal based on what you're hearing from students.*

4. How do students' levels of attendance and/or engagement with their classes compare with either other students in the Spring 2021 semester, or with these students' own engagement in the Fall 2020 semester?
Note: Answers can be either quantitative (focused on attendance levels or assignment submission) and/or qualitative (focused on engagement) in nature.

5. Any other program impacts to report other than those mentioned above?
Note: This can be anecdotal based on what you're hearing from students.

A4. Midterm Impacts – Material Support Programs

In this form, focus your answers on what happened by the middle of the spring 2021 semester, approximately 6-8 weeks after students' first exposure to grant resources.

1. At this point, how many students have accessed program resources (e.g., laptops, hotspots, and/or emergency funds)?

In addition to an overall total, please specify exact numbers by type(s) of resource accessed.

Example: Overall, 30 students have been served by the program. 15 students have claimed their laptop. 20 students have applied for/received emergency funds.

- a. Were there any ongoing challenges encountered in distributing resources to students?

2. At this point, how many students participating in the program are regularly attending their Spring 2021 classes?

Note: Please report answer as a number and definition, or more than one number if using multiple definitions of engagement. Example: Based on logins to Blackboard courses, 18 program students have been regularly attending their Spring 2021 classes. [Grantees have indicated that data from faculty progress surveys may be useful in preparing this response.]

Example: Based on logins to Blackboard courses, 18 program students have been regularly attending their Spring 2021 classes. [Grantees have indicated that data from faculty progress surveys may be useful in preparing this response.]

- a. If students are not regularly attending, have any of them given reasons why? *This can be anecdotal based on what you're hearing from students.*
 - b. For students who are attending classes regularly, do you have a sense of the semester is going for them academically? in terms of their wellbeing? *Responses can be anecdotal based on what you're hearing from students.*

3. How do students' levels of attendance and/or engagement with their classes compare with either other students in the Spring 2021 semester, or with these students' own engagement in the Fall 2020 semester?

Note: Answers can be either quantitative (focused on attendance or assignment submission) and/or qualitative (focused on engagement) in nature.

4. Any other program impacts to report other than those mentioned above?

Note: This can be anecdotal based on what you're hearing from students.

A5. Summative Impact Form – Coaching Programs

In this form, focus your answers on what happened by the end of the spring 2021 semester. At the end of the grant period, which may be later than this, you will be asked to complete a separate short narrative/report to close out the grant.

1. At this point, how many students were served by the program?
In addition to an overall total, please specify exact numbers by type(s) of resource accessed. Example: Overall, 25 students were served, 15 students have met with their peer group. 20 students have made contact with their mentor.
 - a. If any of these totals were substantially different from what was expected at the beginning of the Spring 2021 semester, what caused it to change?
2. How many students participating in the program successfully completed the semester?
Note: Successful completion of the semester could be defined as completing all enrolled courses and passing 75% or more of those courses.
3. How many students participating in the program plan to re-enroll in Fall 2021?
Note: Re-enrollment plans can be based on known course registration or student self-reports.
4. How many students participating in the program completed a certificate or degree program of study this semester?
Note: Completion of certificates or degrees can be based on either official sources or student self-reports.
5. How do the success metrics reported in questions (2), (3), and (4) compare with similar non-program students in Spring 2021, or similar students in prior cohorts?
Note: For instance, are more program participants planning to re-enroll as compared to students in past years.
6. Overall, what barriers to success in the Spring 2021 semester did this program reduce or remove? What barriers remained in spite of the program?
7. At any point in the Spring 2021 semester, did program students report impacts of the program for people other than themselves at home, at school, or in their community?

A6. Summative Impact Form – Material Support Programs

In this form, focus your answers on what happened by the end of the spring 2021 semester. At the end of the grant period, which may be later than this, you will be asked to complete a separate short narrative/report to close out the grant.

1. At this point, how many students were served by the program?
*In addition to an overall total, please specify exact numbers by type(s) of resource accessed.
Example: Overall, 42 students were served; 30 students received their laptop/hotspot; 20 students applied for/received emergency funds.*
 - a. If any of these totals were substantially different from what was expected at the beginning of the Spring 2021 semester, what caused it to change?
2. How many students participating in the program successfully completed the semester?
Example: 20 students completed all enrolled courses and passed 75% or more of those courses.
3. How many students participating in the program plan to re-enroll in Summer 2021 and/or Fall 2021?
Note: Re-enrollment plans can be based on known course registration or student self-reports.
4. How many students participating in the program completed a certificate or degree program of study this semester?
Note: Completion of certificates or degrees can be based on either official sources or student self-reports.
5. How do the success metrics reported in questions (2), (3), and (4) compare with similar non-program students in Spring 2021, or similar students in prior cohorts?
Note: For instance, are more program participants planning to re-enroll as compared to students in past years.
6. Overall, what barriers to student success in the Spring 2021 semester did this program reduce or remove? What barriers remained in spite of the program?
7. At any point in the Spring 2021 semester, did program students report impacts of the program for people other than themselves at home, at school, or in their community?

A7. Debrief Interview Guide – All Programs

Successes and challenges in delivery

Implementing grant programs can be difficult, especially on short notice, and in the midst of a very different academic year like 2020/21. Talk about what worked and what did not while delivering your program and getting resources or services delivered to the target population.

- a. If you had a chance to try again, what would you do differently?
- b. Are there any partnerships or relationships that you would need to establish in advance?
- c. (for the colleges) would an external provider have been useful in any way?

Anticipated and unanticipated impacts

We talked before the grant program started about the notion of impact. Some intended impacts were obvious (retention, engagement). We speculated about other sorts of impact, like bringing a new computer or a hotspot into a home that needed it. Still other impacts may have emerged that we could not have anticipated. Talk about what program impacts you measured directly, as well as anything else you heard from students served by the program\.

- a. Did the program change the way students related to the college (their college)?
- b. Did it anything change about how the college distributes resources?
- c. Any other substantive changes?

Program sustainability

Grants are often a way of innovating practices in higher education. But one challenge is sustainability - once the funding disappears, new programs are left unable to continue, particularly if funds supported a new role or expanded sets of duties for existing staff. Talk about how the program supported by this grant will or will not be able to sustain itself.

- a. If the program is relatively sustainable, talk about why and how.
- b. If it may not be sustainable, talk about what would be needed to keep it going?

Appendix B. Prior Postsecondary Grant Review

As a secondary activity, related to the primary evaluation of the Foundation's current grants, the research team reviewed four of the Foundation's prior postsecondary persistence grants made between 2016 and 2019. We also conducted a review of the Foundation's workforce development grants, which was submitted earlier, and is included below as Appendix C. These grant reviews focused on the following questions:

- *Who was eligible for the programs' services, and how did the programs coordinate outreach to the targeted population(s)?*
- *What were the intended outcomes for program participants, and what was the theory of change that guided the program's activities?*
- *What were the general outcomes of the programs? Did they succeed in their intentions?*

The Foundation supplied the research team with grant documentation including proposals, budget narratives, and any annual or summative reports. The four grants reviewed were made to: Our Piece of the Pie (2016), Asnuntuck Community College (2017), Hartford Promise (2018), and the Hartford Consortium of Higher Education (2019). When this report was written, we had only received outcomes reports for the first of these programs.

Targeted Population and Outreach Strategies

All four awardees used grant funds to expand or supplement existing programs. As such, their target populations were well-defined in the proposal narratives. All the programs focused on students living and attending school in Hartford, and stated that students must be eligible for financial aid. Two grantees targeted students based on intended programs of study. ACC's success coach was intended to be dedicated to students pursuing credentials in healthcare; OPP's revised CPI program targeted students pursuing credentials in either healthcare or business administration. Three of the four awardees – excepting Asnuntuck CC – intended to work directly with Hartford's public high schools to recruit students. ACC's program targeted students already receiving a scholarship for SNAP-eligible students.

Based on OPP's reporting, the CPI program operated on referral model, where Opportunity Academy was to refer interested students to CPI's dual enrollment. However, this produced very small cohorts in the first two grant years. Which led OPP to modify the program and use direct outreach to high school graduates from Hartford public high schools. The limited information in the grant documents did not allow a thorough investigation of outreach strategies for the other grants.

Grant Activities and Intended Outcomes

Grant funds were used both to increase the overall number of students served, and to fund new resources for participating students.

- ACC's success coach was charged with recruiting and retaining 25 students;
- OPP's original program design intended to support two cohorts of 15 students;
- Hartford Promise intended to fund an additional 40 scholars
- HCHE intended to recruit an additional 75-100 students

In terms of how funds were to be used, three of the four grantees used funds primarily to support existing or new staff:

- ACC intended to hire a new success coach for its SNAP support program;
- HCHE intended to use internal staff to conduct student outreach and create an advising tool;
- OPP's PCI program details a lengthy student recruitment and onboarding process that was staff-managed.

In the language of the main evaluation presented above, these prior grants more closely resemble coaching support programs, since they depend on relationships between students and staff. Hartford Promise, as a scholarship, is of course a material support program, though its 'Reaching Back' and 'Reaching Forward' components resemble coaching in some ways.

Program Outcomes

We only had outcomes information from OPP's CPI program, and the evaluation indicates that this initiative encountered similar hurdles to the two coaching programs among current grantees. The initial iteration of CPI was a dual enrollment between Opportunity Academy (OA) and Southern New Hampshire University's College for America (CfA). The evaluation indicates that the first two years failed to reach the target of 15 participants. Further, the students that did enroll had high rates of withdrawal due to the high workload required for dual enrollment and virtual instruction at SNHU. The program's shift to targeting high school graduates for in-person led to more successful recruitment and retention. But even with this revised model, participating students cited a need for more material supports to help them stay on track with their schooling. These recruitment and retention issues are similar to those faced by the two current coaching programs at Capital CC and Manchester CC.

Appendix C. An Inventory of the Hartford Foundation's Prior Workforce Grant-making⁵

Introduction

This memo is part of a larger project evaluating Postsecondary Persistence grants made by the Foundation in 2021. In a broad sense, we hope this memo will contribute to internal discussions about how the Foundation focuses its grant-making activities in the future. Along with the PI, Dr. Daniel Douglas, we reviewed fifteen grants made by the Foundation between 2014 and 2020.⁶ The Foundation provided documentation including the grant proposals, budget narratives, and any annual or summative reports.

The purpose of this review was to understand how these grants – most of which had a stated focus on workforce development – connected with postsecondary educational opportunities for the participants. The review focused on the following questions:

- Who was eligible for the programs' services, and how did the programs coordinate outreach to the targeted population(s)?
- What were the intended outcomes for program participants, and what was the theory of change that guided the program's activities?
- In what ways did the programs and their activities encourage postsecondary education?
- What were the general outcomes of the programs? Did they succeed in their intentions?

The memo concludes with suggestions based on these findings.

Targeted Population and Outreach Strategies

The targeted population for the programs is youth (aged 14-24) located in the Greater Hartford area. Some programs targeted geographic areas, such as North Central Connecticut, Hartford, Windsor, or Bloomfield. For two programs gender was a deciding factor, in that girls were the target population. Programs such as the Hartford Opportunity Youth Collaborative had a grade-level focus on 11th and 12th graders. In terms of ethnicity, all of the programs targeted Black and Latine youth. One of the programs, FUTUROS, focused specifically on Latine youth. Grant documents used phrases such as "at-risk," and "marginalized" to describe their targeted populations. Overall, it is apparent that Black and Latine youth who face barriers (out of school and/or without a high school diploma) are the target population. In terms of scope, larger grantees aimed to reach hundreds of students each year, while smaller grantees focused on smaller cohorts of 50 or less.

Across all 15 programs, there were three general ways in which participants were contacted: through school systems, working with Community Based Organizations, and through government agencies (DCF, HPD, etc.). For example, Capital Workforce Partners (CWP) connects with youth through Community Based Organizations, such as the Center for Latino Progress and the Blue Hills Civic Association. Notably in the case of CWP, because outreach is not done directly by CWP, the methods and strategies for outreach are unclear in grant documentation. It would be interesting to know exactly how these partner organizations connect with youth in the community.

⁵ Prepared By: Renita Washington and Karolina Barrientos

⁶ A full list of the reviewed grants is available at this link:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1oKZycdHQbqTVpCSyi5XoND7j3N261AMF/view?usp=sharing>

The OPPourtunity Academy and Hartford Student Internship Program are examples of programs that used the Hartford Public School System as part of their outreach strategy. Two other grantees – Billings Forge and Our Piece of the Pie - worked with the government entities such as the Department of Children and Families (DCF) or the Court Support Services Division of the Judicial Branch. Grantees working with schools or government agencies made their outreach methods clearer than those working with other Community Based Organizations. Regardless of their broad outreach strategy, most grantees reported successful outreach and recruitment. It is thus difficult to compare the merits of these methods.

Intended Outcomes and Theories of Change

Grantees mission statements generally indicate a desire to serve low-income communities of color by engaging them in workforce skill development trainings, and by providing them with tools and motivation to finish school. In terms of framing the problem, some grantees mentioned the notion of a skills gap in certain industries (e.g., Advanced Manufacturing, Healthcare, and Green Construction), while others noted the larger structural factors impacting these communities (e.g., justice involvement, poverty, homelessness).

Many programs sought to provide both job skills and compensation. The grants recognized that young people are looking for ways to make money, so they build earning opportunities into programs that give them the skills to secure and keep jobs. The implicit theory of change for such programs is that there are jobs available to low-income youth, but that there are skills or contextual barriers to securing these jobs, and that pressure to earn money causes them not to acquire these skills. They seek to address this pressure by integrating learning and earning opportunities. Similarly, these programs intended to place students in jobs and/or facilitate connections with potential employers. The Hartford Student Internship Program - which was funded in 2017, 2018, and 2019 - seeks to provide upper-level high school students with 60 hours of paid work experience supplemented by workshops including resume preparation and interview skills.

Other programs started adopted a broader theory change that brings workforce development together with formal schooling. For example, Summer Youth Employment and Learning Program goal was to reach a wide range of students ages 14-21. Different age groups were exposed to different programming. For incoming high school students received social and academic supports to facilitate this transition, but also were exposed to career pathways though full-day of programming. For 12th graders, who were closer to leaving school, their focus was on mentorship, connection to labor market, and leadership/skills training. The Hartford Student Internship Program also targeted upper-level high school students, and had a similar focus. Notably, the education components of many of these programs primarily emphasized high school completion and employment competency.

While these were the general patterns among grantees' intended outcomes, there were other focus areas. Our Piece of the Pie Academy, a pilot program funded in 2015, sought to enroll students in short-duration online associates degree programs. One novel program – Girls for Technology – emphasized coding skills alongside developing entrepreneurship. Charter Oak Boxing Academy's program focused on developing physical and emotional wellbeing among young women of color. These newer programs did not have outcomes when we received the reviewed documents, but they suggest novel approaches to meeting the needs of this target population.

Workforce Development and Postsecondary Education

Workforce development programs aim to provide participants with job skills with the goal of securing employment. This sets them apart from education-focused initiatives that focus on college access and success. This is understandable given that many WD programs specifically focus on youth who are disengaged from traditional schooling. However, given that research suggests employment and income prospects for young people without college credentials are discouraging, it is important to understand how workforce development programs integrate college pathways into their services. In general, we found that while job skills and gainful employment remain the primary focus, emphasis on postsecondary education has increased over time.

Most programs, in their application or reporting, make some mention of postsecondary education. In grant applications, statements usually connect career competency and earning opportunities to postsecondary success. In evaluation reports, postsecondary enrollment is mentioned alongside employment as a potential outcome for successful program participants. The shift in emphasis is most noticeable in the grant activities.

For example, the Summer Youth Employment and Learning Program, put on by Capital Workforce Partners, had a distinct emphasis on developing career related skills in its early years. However, there were some shifts in SYELP programming over time. One new component in their program assisted rising 9th graders in their transition to high school. Like many other programs in this review, SYELP focused on High School student retention and job training. But later grant documents noted the link between youth employment and postsecondary success, and the broader focus on incoming high school students suggests a pivot toward educational pathways.

The Center for Latino Progress' FUTUROS program – which works with enrolled high school students – also combines workforce training in the form of internships, with college readiness and socialization opportunities. CLP includes as an outcome that cohort members will have visited at least one college campus. Notably, the FUTUROS program is weaved together with SYELP and HSIP.

The Hartford Youth Services Corp by Our Piece of the Pie, combined civic engagement with job training, while also providing support for youth with college aspirations. This program helps low-income students affected by COVID-19 re-engage with their education by providing GED and high school support for students. These academic and career supports were provided to cohort members who engaged in service-learning at sites around Hartford – including childcare, canvassing, and public works.

While the above programs represent the general focus of grantees, there were outliers. Some programs, like Opportunity Youth Job Training Program by Billings Forge, still focus on low-skill occupations, and do not place an explicit emphasis on postsecondary education. While the number of jobs in food service is growing, such jobs are less likely to lead to career paths, stable incomes, or social mobility. On the other end, the OPP Academy pilot program attempted to bring participants directly into postsecondary education through a dual degree program with College of America.

The relationship between employment and education for the young people served by these programs is complex. The real need to earn income complicates a sole focus on study, especially for youth who have disengaged from high school. To the extent that grantees bring together earnings opportunities with skill-building and college preparation, they may be successful at resolving this contradiction. But one question that emerged from our review is whether the paid jobs given to participants in SYELP and HSIP

represent career paths or terminal low-paid jobs? Jobs of the latter sort would be unlikely to encourage participants to strive for more than a high school degree and continue their education.

Outcomes and Insights

For context, many of these programs serve a population that can be hard to engage. Participants face multiple barriers and may need more resources than these programs have to offer. More recent grants were also impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced organizations to shift the delivery of services and/or improvise their usual activities. Nonetheless, for those grants which reported outcomes, most appeared successful on the metrics set out in their proposals. Specifically, programs tended to meet or exceed their outreach targets and managed to place most or all participants in internships or training programs.

As the largest recipient of grants we reviewed, Capitol Workforce Partners demonstrated success with its long-term programs, SYELP and HSIP. Looking at grant materials over a span of years allowed us to see how these long-standing programs changed over time. Continuing to support these initiatives is an important element of the Foundation's portfolio. Our review led us to two primary insights in this regard.

The first concerns participant outreach. Particularly when grantees engaged other CBOs in the delivery of services, it was unclear how those organizations communicated with and secured program participants. While these partnerships may indeed be the best strategy for working with the programs' target populations, it creates an information gap around the outreach process, since only the primary awardee files the reports. We suggest that, when a grant is awarded for a multi-organization partnership, the Foundation might benefit from asking the primary awardee to provide details about sub-awardees' outreach strategies.

The second concerns outcomes. As noted above, college access appears to be featuring more prominently in what are primarily workforce development grants. But at times, it was unclear how successful these programs were at helping their target population gain access to postsecondary education. When evaluating these programs in the future, it would be useful to ask grantees to report measures of postsecondary entry and persistence.

Smaller and more novel initiatives such as Girls for Tech, OPP's dual degree program, and the Charter Oaks Boxing Academy are another area where the Foundation can play an important role. These small grants can help newer programs establish a model and seek other sources of funding. For these more novel programs, it may be helpful to incorporate additional evaluation activities so that grantees can have clear data to share with other potential funders.