

Report-in-Brief

Public Benefits and Community Colleges

Lessons from the Benefits Access for
College Completion Evaluation

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DVP-PRAXIS LTD

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The Benefits Access for College Completion demonstration (BACC) represented a collaborative multi-year investment from several philanthropic organizations to demonstrate how student supports from public human services programs could help address the college completion agenda. The idea fueling BACC was that existing financial aid programs are insufficient, and that high levels of unmet need lead to excessive work, poor grades, and dropping out of college. The underlying assumption for BACC was that, if students received additional financial and non-academic supports through public benefits programs in addition to financial aid, their personal lives would become more stable, and they would make more progress toward their postsecondary educational goals.

BACC supported seven community colleges in six states over 2.5 years to develop and implement benefits access services on their campuses, with the goals of increasing the numbers of eligible students who received public benefits, and, thus, subsequently improving academic progress toward a postsecondary credential. Our evaluation focused on *five* of these colleges – representing different college sizes and percentages of students that might be eligible for benefits, as well as operating in the context of five different state public benefits systems.

Intermediary and Funding Stakeholders for BACC included:

- CLASP (The Center for Law and Social Policy)
- AACC (American Association of Community Colleges)
- Lumina Foundation
- Annie E. Casey Foundation
- Ford Foundation
- Kresge Foundation
- Open Society Institute

BACC Colleges	Total Students	% Eligible for Max Pell Grant
Cuyahoga Community College, OH	48,164	32%
Gateway Community College, KY	4,944	51%
LaGuardia Community College, NY	20,370	44%
Northampton Community College, PA	14,485	27%
Skyline Community College, CA	14,859	15%
TOTAL	102,822	32,987 (32%)

Source: College Data Files, 2011-12.

Note: Students who completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid and had an Expected Family Contribution of \$0 are considered eligible for the maximum Pell Grant.

Although colleges approached benefits access differently, four core areas of work were addressed across the five colleges:



Although colleges began this work by providing pre-screening and screening activities, an early lesson was that application and case follow-up supports were needed in order to solidify students’ connections to public benefits, and such services were much more labor-intensive and required a deeper knowledge of benefits access programs than colleges anticipated.

Four key findings emerged from the BACC demonstration:

- **Finding 1: Benefits access services should be provided through a centralized hub**, with knowledgeable staff and individualized support for students. This hub should be widely known by campus stakeholders and highly visible to students.
- **Finding 2: Colleges should explore opt-out models of benefits pre-screening**, by connecting this initial step in benefits access to existing student support services, like financial aid and advising.
- **Finding 3: Leadership at multiple levels of the college and across all divisions and departments need to: (1) recognize benefits access services as an institution-wide priority, and (2) enact necessary policies and practices that support institutionalization of benefits access.**
- **Finding 4:** An initial analysis of college administrative data and state-level benefits data at one community college suggests that **benefits access can positively impact students’ academic progress.**

Overview of BACC Evaluation Approach

The overarching goal of the evaluation was to identify the most promising approaches for community colleges to provide benefits access services for their students, and to integrate these services into ongoing college operations. We conducted in-depth fieldwork at each college, supplemented with semi-structured interviews of key college stakeholders and intermediaries. We also participated in cross-site learning events.

In addition, we conducted a complementary research study at one college to explore the connection between benefits access and college completion. To analyze the impact of benefits data on student success, we employed a quasi-experimental, comparison group design in which the academic performance of benefits recipients was compared with that of similar peers who did not receive benefits.

Finding 1: Benefits access services should be provided through a centralized hub, with knowledgeable staff and individualized support for students. This hub should be widely known by campus stakeholders and highly visible to students.

A centralized hub with a dedicated staff person enabled colleges to build and maintain the knowledge necessary for providing benefits access services for students, created more opportunities to address multiple student needs at the same time, and helped strengthen the college’s relationship and collaboration with state and county agencies that administer public benefits programs. The hub also provided a visible, identifiable location for students seeking benefits access services and for college stakeholders referring them.

Early efforts to provide a diffuse model of benefits access services were not successful, in part because of the level of knowledge and expertise necessary to provide benefits access services. In colleges that approached benefits as an “add-on” to existing student services, benefits application and follow-up processes often created too many additional responsibilities for staff.

Over the course of the initiative, colleges started moving toward the centralized hub model, often co-locating benefits access with financial aid offices, and advising and enrollment centers. Creating a centralized benefits access hub allowed for colleges to have dedicated program staff with primary responsibility for maintaining up-to-date knowledge of public benefits policies, managing external partnerships, and supporting students in obtaining and maintaining these benefits. A centralized hub offered opportunities for serving student benefits access needs in the context of other student supports, such as transportation and financial counseling.

BACC Project Reach:
During the demonstration project, roughly 2,191 students across these five colleges applied for one or more public benefits, and 1,354 received public benefits (SNAP, TANF, and/or childcare) as a result of BACC efforts.

- Elements of a Benefits Access Hub**
- Dedicated staff member.
 - Connections to other college services and outside community based organizations.
 - Maintenance of up-to-date knowledge on ever-changing benefit regulations.
 - Visible and accessible location for students.
 - Plans in place for data collection and continuous improvement.

Finding 2: Colleges should explore opt-out models of benefits pre-screening, by connecting this initial step in benefits access to existing student support services, like financial aid and advising.

Over the course of the initiative, colleges moved from *opt-in models of benefits access*, broad-based and targeted outreach efforts that asked students to show up for support, to *opt-out models of benefits access* that required students to actively engage with initial benefits pre-screening on campuses. Opt-out models: (1) targeted students who were most likely to be eligible for public benefits based on available financial aid data around household size, income, and expected financial contribution, and (2) connected benefits access with existing academic and non-academic services that students were likely to seek. *Students were not required to apply for public benefits.*

During the demonstration, colleges discovered that both broad-based and targeted outreach to students were ineffective – students simply did not respond to broad marketing messages about public benefits or to targeted emails, texts, or phone-calls asking them to opt-in to the screening and application supports colleges were offering. Instead, focused efforts with college student services staff about *how* and *why* benefits access was a logical extension of existing services put the onus on the college student services staff to drive students to benefits screening, and required students to make an intentional decision about whether or not to pursue benefits access supports.

Colleges approached the opt-out model for benefits access services in various ways, but these services typically were connected with advising or financial aid services.

Strategies for developing opt-out systems included:

- Using flags on transcripts “requiring” students to show up at a college office.
- Engaging students in benefits access conversations when they showed up in enrollment or financial aid offices for other reasons.
- Developing process maps with various student services to identify the questions and conversations with student services staff that could create a gateway to benefits access.
- Providing mandatory benefits counseling as part of advising.

Elements of an Opt-Out Strategy

- Using data to target students that are likely benefits eligible.
- Understanding where and when students are showing up on campus for support (e.g., financial aid, advising).
- Creating systematic ways – whether through one-on-one advising or formal transcript “flags” – of identifying and connecting students when they show up for other services.

Finding 3: Leadership at multiple levels of the college and across all divisions and departments need to: (1) recognize benefits access services as an institution-wide priority, and (2) enact necessary policies and practices that support institutionalization of benefits access.

While executive leadership is important for sustainability, the depth and breadth of leadership and commitment is perhaps even more critical for benefits access to take root on campus as a core non-academic support service. By connecting benefits access services to larger institutional priorities, executive leaders, as well as leaders up and down the organizational hierarchy – and across departments and divisions – indicated a commitment to find the necessary resources to sustain benefits access services beyond the demonstration period. As a result, several colleges faced limited resistance moving forward with implementation – establishing and strengthening the benefits access hub, and incorporating opt-out benefits access services by connecting them to other college functions.

Colleges that showed signs of institutionalizing efforts at the end of the BACC demonstration had a broad array of administrators, faculty, and student services staff that: (1) believed providing benefits access services aligned with their institution’s overall mission, and (2) demonstrated a “sense of ownership” for embedding benefits access into the college’s culture and services.

Additionally, leadership and commitment meant that intentional decisions were made to identify and allocate financial resources for sustaining benefits access services on campus, including shifting staff positions to budget line items, incorporating benefits access responsibilities into job descriptions for new advising staff, and embedding benefits access into the college’s strategic planning or accreditation processes.

Setting the Groundwork for Institutionalizing Benefits Access

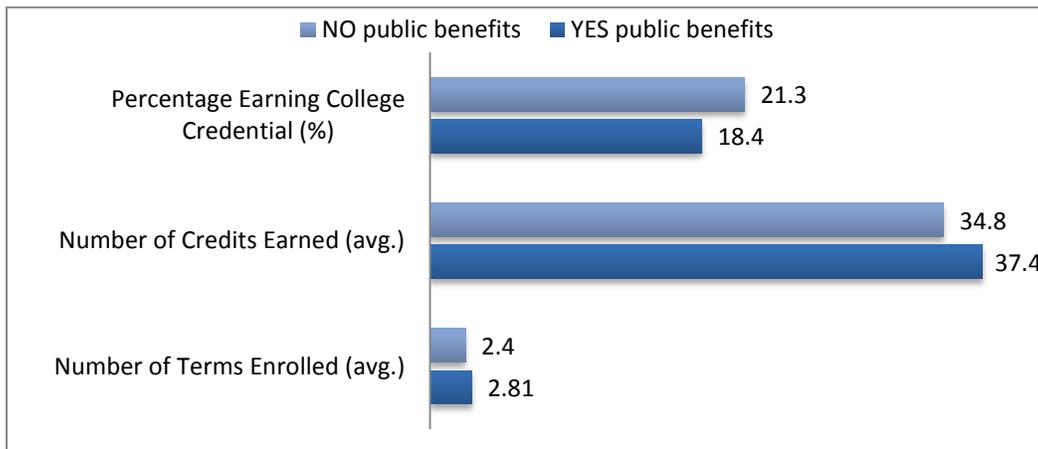
- Having top leadership buy-in.
- Putting accountability structures in place (making benefits access part of accreditation process).
- Having an administrative home/ownership for benefits access.
- Bringing benefits access services into the annual budgetary process.

Finding 4: An initial analysis of college administrative data and state-level benefits data at one community college suggests that benefits access can positively impact students' academic progress.

As shown in Figure 1, analysis from our data set that matched Gateway Community & Technical College data and state-level benefits data (specifically SNAP, TANF, and TANF childcare) showed that between Summer 2011 and Fall 2013:

- *Low-income students who received public benefits enrolled in more terms on average during this period (2.8 compared to 2.4) than a statistically matched comparison group.*

Figure 1: Impact of Public Benefits on Student Outcomes, Gateway Community & Technical College (N= 2,491)



Note: Neither the difference in number of credits earned nor percentage earning college credentials is statistically significant. Significance for number of terms enrolled is $p < .001$

- In addition, exploratory analysis suggests that *students who received multiple public benefits enrolled in even more terms during this period (3.3), accumulated more credits (43), and a larger percentage earned a college credential (24%) than the typical student receiving only one benefit.*¹ Of note, students who received more than one benefit are more likely to be women with children.

The fundamental takeaway is that benefits access can positively impact students' academic progress, and that this impact could be especially significant for students who bundle several benefits while enrolled in college.

¹ These findings reflect statistically significant differences between students who received two or more public benefits compared with those who received only one public benefit; however, because these comparisons are outside of the Propensity Score Model framework, we consider them exploratory and suggestive, and recommend caution when interpreting these results.

