



Connecting College Students to Alternative Sources of Support

The Single Stop Community College Initiative and Postsecondary Outcomes

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Executive Summary





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Summary

The success rates of community college students are low, with fewer than one-third of students graduating or transferring within three years (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Community colleges are searching for ways to better support their students and improve success rates. Yet colleges are often ill-equipped to deal with the range of nonacademic barriers to college completion that their student populations face. Advising departments are underresourced and focused on academic issues (Gallagher, 2010;

Key Findings

- In a study of first-time-in-college students at four community college systems during fall 2014, Single Stop use was associated with an increase in college persistence of at least 3 percentage points.
- Single Stop users attempted more credits than comparable students who did not use Single Stop.
- Use of Single Stop's tax assistance services was associated with particularly positive outcomes in terms of persistence and credits earned.
- Findings were particularly positive for Single Stop users who were adult learners (age 25 and older), independent students, and nonwhite students.
- Single Stop use was associated with improved postsecondary outcomes at all but one of the institutions in the study.

Karp, 2013). Institutional and community support services are often dispersed, and it can be challenging for students to navigate the broad range of options (Karp, O’Gara, and Hughes, 2008; Nodine et al., 2012). Many of the issues that students face are financial in nature, yet there are few programs that help students to access alternative sources of financial support through public benefit programs that provide access to food stamps, health care coverage, housing subsidies, and other essential resources. Financial programs, such as aid and tax credits, can help to cover costs but leave about half the price of college uncovered (Calahan and Perna, 2015). For students with low incomes, this unmet need can present a significant obstacle to attaining higher education and associated improvements in life circumstances. To address this shortcoming, there has been a call for improved access to and use of benefits among students (Goldrick-Rab, Broton, and Eisenberg, 2015; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2015).

This study examined Single Stop U.S.A.’s Community College Initiative, a program designed to improve the well-being of low-income communities by connecting individuals to public benefits and other institutional and community resources to address nonacademic barriers to college completion. Through offices located on community college campuses, Single Stop provides students with a range of free services, including screenings and applications for public benefit programs; tax services, financial counseling, and legal services; and case management with referrals to a wide variety of resources and support programs across the institution and community. This report presents an evaluation of the Single Stop program and its impact on students’ postsecondary outcomes.

Programs that provide wraparound services (e.g., mental health counseling, social service programs) to college students have the potential to improve postsecondary outcomes by helping students address non-academic barriers to success and facilitating access to alternative sources of financial support. Studies of wraparound support programs suggest that they lead to improved postsecondary outcomes (Castleman and Goodman, forthcoming; Scrivener et al., 2008; Scrivener et al., 2015). The research also shows that financial support programs play an important role in student success (see Dynarski and Scott-Clayton, 2013, for

a review). In addition, programs that help college students access existing resources and complete important administrative requirements have been shown to positively affect student outcomes (Castleman and Page, 2016; Castleman, Page, and Schooley, 2014). However, Single Stop's program differs from these other programs in a number of important ways, including its accessibility to all students in an institution, its focus on nonacademic supports, and its particular focus on facilitating access to public benefits. This report helps to build evidence on an approach to student support that shows the potential to improve postsecondary outcomes for community college students.

Study Approach

We examined the Single Stop program at four community college systems: Bunker Hill Community College, City University of New York, Delgado Community College, and Miami Dade College. Our analysis—which used data on program use from Single Stop's database and administrative data from the respective institution—focuses on first-time-in-college students in fall 2014. We examined the relationship between Single Stop use and postsecondary outcomes through two methodological approaches: multiple regression and coarsened exact matching. These approaches allowed us to compare Single Stop users with their peers at the same institutions who are similar in terms of demographics and financial resources. We examined five postsecondary outcomes: persistence into a second semester (one-term persistence), persistence into a second year (one-year persistence), credits attempted in the 2014–2015 academic year, credits earned in the 2014–2015 year, and ratio of earned to attempted credits. In addition, we analyzed outcomes for three definitions of Single Stop use. We first looked at all Single Stop users, individuals who were registered as clients with Single Stop. We then looked at individuals who received two of the primary services offered by Single Stop, benefit screenings and tax services. In addition to examining the outcomes for all students in our sample, we conducted several subgroup analyses. We calculated institution-specific estimates to

determine whether the results are consistent despite variation in implementation and context. We also looked at particular student subgroups to determine whether the program impact is greater for certain types of students. Specifically, we examined estimates for adult learners (25 or greater), students of varying races and ethnicities, and student dependent status.

Single Stop Use and College Success

Our analysis indicates that use of Single Stop was associated with improved postsecondary outcomes. Students who used Single Stop were more likely to persist into their second and third semesters of college relative to similar students who did not receive Single Stop services. These results were consistent across methodological approaches and robust to changes in model specifications. There was also a positive association between Single Stop use and attempted and earned credits, with results varying somewhat across models.

We examined outcomes for all Single Stop users, outcomes for individuals who received benefit screenings, and outcomes for individuals who received tax services. Across the full sample, the results were positive for all three groups of Single Stop users. The results for students who received tax services were particularly large; students who used these services were estimated to persist at rates nearly 15 percentage points higher than comparable students who did not receive tax services. When we examined results by institution, the findings were consistently positive for two of the institutions, mixed for one of the institutions (i.e., large, positive estimates for credits but no significant estimates for persistence), and null for one of the institutions (i.e., neither persistence nor credit estimates were statistically significant). These results suggest that aspects of implementation or unaccounted for differences in the student populations or other contextual factors might be related to the effectiveness of Single Stop in improving postsecondary outcomes. When we examined the estimates for various student subgroups, we found that the results were more positive and statistically significant for adult learners (ages 25 and older), independent stu-

dents, and nonwhite students. This aligned with expectations, because these students might have been more likely to qualify for public benefits and tax credits.

Together, these findings suggest that having a “one-stop shop” for nonacademic wraparound services and alternative sources of financial support can play a valuable role in promoting student success in college. Students can benefit from an office that assesses student needs, directs students to available resources, assists with application processes, and brings valuable services to campus. The positive outcomes of the program were consistent across program services, suggesting that students might have benefited regardless of the particular services they used. Variation in outcomes across student subgroups suggests that programs such as Single Stop might be particularly beneficial to older, independent students and nonwhite students. However, variation in the results by institution suggests that implementation and institutional context might have an impact on the ability of the Single Stop program to deliver outcomes for students. Given limitations in data and research design, we could not pinpoint the reasons for differences across institutions.

Limitations and Future Research

Our findings provide evidence of a strong relationship between use of Single Stop and postsecondary outcomes and represent important preliminary evidence for the impact of this coordinated approach to wraparound services. We are hesitant to conclude that these estimates indicate that Single Stop *caused* the outcomes, because the methodology used in this study does not permit such causal inferences. We accounted for many of the relevant observable differences between Single Stop users and nonusers in our methodological approaches, but there might be other factors that are related to Single Stop use and postsecondary outcomes that are not accounted for. For example, we were unable to account for motivation in our analysis, and we were limited in our ability to incorporate measures of financial need. Given these limitations, we are cautious in our interpretation of the find-

ings. More-rigorous studies of impact can provide additional evidence on the effectiveness of programs like Single Stop; experimental studies of the Single Stop program are currently ongoing. In addition, the return on investment of the program should be assessed and compared with other programs intended to support college students to determine which programs should be scaled to improve postsecondary success rates.

Single Stop's Community College Initiative is consistently associated with positive outcomes for college students. A next step would be to investigate how the program achieves these outcomes. More research is needed to unpack the program's mechanisms and understand how students are using various services and why the program might be effective. First, we are unable to examine some activities because of data limitations. Single Stop's data system does not collect data on all activities provided by Single Stop staff, and other services are tracked with varying reliability, so we cannot examine the relationship of these services to student outcomes. A more complete accounting of activities would be valuable in identifying the relative effectiveness of different services and understanding how combinations of services may work together to improve outcomes. This research could help Single Stop and institutions to refine their efforts and focus on the services with the highest impact.

It would also be useful to understand more about what the program delivers in terms of financial value to students. For example, Single Stop makes a strong effort to collect data on confirmed benefits for clients (e.g., benefit amount is reported through letters from some public benefit providers), but the total financial value is difficult to determine because not all clients who receive these benefits are confirmed in the system; therefore, the estimate might be lower than the actual value. Future analysis that includes government data on the recipients of public benefits would provide more-reliable evidence on the value of Single Stop services in terms of benefits delivered. These data would also improve analytic methods by allowing researchers to account for pretreatment receipt of benefits.

Finally, it would be valuable to understand more about how implementation and context are related to outcomes. Single Stop's national

office is providing sites with increasing autonomy, so implementing outreach and student services and integration into the institution may vary to a great extent. Additional cross-site analysis that incorporates measures of implementation could provide evidence around best practices that affect student outcomes.