

BRIDGING FINANCIAL WELLNESS AND STUDENT SUCCESS:

EFFECTIVE MODELS FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGES



ACCT
ASSOCIATION OF
COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRUSTEES

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..... 1

FOREWORD FROM ACCT PRESIDENT AND CEO 2

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 3

INTRODUCTION..... 4

STUDENTS’ FINANCIAL NEEDS AND CHALLENGES..... 5

FINANCIAL AID INTERVENTIONS 7

FRAMEWORKS FOR FINANCIAL EDUCATION 8

STUDENTS’ FINANCIAL KNOWLEDGE..... 10

COLLEGES’ ROLE IN BRIDGING FINANCIAL WELLNESS AND STUDENT SUCCESS..... 13

CONCLUSION..... 19

ENDNOTES 20



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FOREWORD FROM ACCT PRESIDENT AND CEO

A student's financial wellness and literacy are key to their success while enrolled, and after graduation. Students need to be aware of the short- and long-term impacts of the financial decisions they make, and it is in an institution's best interests to give students easy, digestible access to this information to equip them with the skills for sound financial and educational planning.

We began work on this project in 2019. The release of the final report has coincided with the international coronavirus pandemic, which has placed unforeseen health and financial strains on America's college students. The crisis has elevated the importance of ensuring students' financial well-being as current and former students struggle to navigate the turbulent financial waters before them. Now and in the coming months, students will be faced with myriad financial challenges. Community colleges have an opportunity to ensure that students are prepared to make informed decisions, and that students have access to the resources they need to continue their educations and pay for living essentials.

Strong supports from the federal and state levels will greatly affect how well community colleges are able to support students in this time of need. We hope those who influence these supports as well as community college leaders will benefit from the information and analysis in this report. The highlighted strategies and programs are of tremendous value, and we look forward to a proliferation of similar and new, innovative programs to guide students to long-term financial success and wellbeing.

J. Noah Brown

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community college students face a number of financial decisions and obligations along the path to degree completion. Students must secure resources to pay for college expenses, including their tuition, fees, and basic living necessities. Central to this is students' abilities to access financial aid resources including federal, state, and institutional aid. Colleges also play a role in providing clear and timely financial education to ensure students are aware of available resources and have a strong foundation in personal financial management. Existing research on students' financial wellness typically separates financial aid and financial education approaches. For this report, our aim is to address both categories to offer community colleges strategies for holistic supports. Key takeaways from the report include:

- 1) **Community college students' expenses often exceed available grant aid.** Community college tuition is known for being relatively affordable; however, the cost of tuition and living expenses is typically greater than the amount of grant aid students receive and their available resources for paying out of pocket. According to College Board researchers, on average, community college students spend approximately \$14,700 per year on room and board, books and supplies, transportation, and other living expenses.¹ However, other research suggests that many community college students likely spend more than this amount on living expenses, especially those who are independent and those who are financially responsible for a family. According to data from the U.S. Department of Education 2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), nearly three-quarters have unmet financial need to pay for expenses, or the difference between their expected family contribution as calculated by the federal Free Application for Student Aid (FAFSA) and their awarded grant aid.² Sufficient federal and state financial aid resources are necessary to meet students' financial needs. Colleges can also support students with financial aid interventions such as emergency grant aid, institutional balance forgiveness, and improved information.
- 2) **Financial literacy can be a critical topic for students seeking to navigate the complex nature of college financing and personal expenses; but is not a replacement for financial aid resources.** Financial education combined with sufficient aid can help empower students to make complex financial decisions associated with attending college. Recommendations by the U.S. Financial Literacy and Education Commission (FLEC) and the U.S. Consumer Financial Protection Bureau emphasize that financial education must provide students with clear, timely, and targeted information.³ To provide relevant financial education, community colleges must consider the varied skill sets and knowledge among their students. While recent high school graduates may benefit from financial education on foundational skills such as budgeting and saving, older students who have gained basic skills through life experiences are more likely to benefit from courses that address complex financial situations, such as managing family finances while attending college. Overall, community college students' self-reported knowledge of financial management demonstrates opportunity for improvement, especially in comparison to their peers in the four-year university sectors.⁴
- 3) **This report highlights the Guardian Money Management for Life (MMFL) Program as an example of a personal finance course that has expanded to a financial empowerment model to provide students with holistic support services.** The program began as a free, credit-bearing personal finance course, focusing on basic financial management topics such as budgeting, tax filing, and setting financial goals. Among students who participated in the course from 2015 to 2019, 75% report having a better understanding of personal financial management. Recognizing that when students' basic financial needs are met, they are more likely to succeed academically, several MMFL partner colleges have expanded to a holistic financial wellness model. We include profiles of three such colleges: The University of the District of Columbia Community College in Washington, D.C.; Berkshire Community College in Massachusetts; and Capital Community College in Connecticut. These colleges have expanded services to include personal financial and career coaching, referrals to community-based organizations, and financial aid interventions, and these colleges are moving towards developing or expanding one-stop financial empowerment centers where students receive resources for financial education, aid, and career development.



INTRODUCTION

For many community college students, navigating financial resources and obligations can be a critical component of their academic success. Starting with the basics, students must secure financial resources to pay for their direct academic expenses, such as tuition, institutional fees, books, and supplies. Beyond direct academic expenses, non-academic expenses such as housing, food, transportation, and childcare are often students' greatest financial obligations.

Existing research on how students pay for academic and non-academic expenses typically falls within two categories. The first category of research looks at the impacts of students' access to financial aid, including grants and loans, and what portion of their expenses must be paid out of pocket. A second category of research focuses on students' financial literacy and how their individual financial knowledge impacts their decision making, spending, and borrowing. In this white paper, our goal is to bridge these two categories of research and demonstrate how community colleges use both financial aid and financial education strategies to support students succeed academically.

In the first part of this paper, we examine the existing literature and data on community college students' academic and non-academic expenses, their access to financial aid, and their unmet needs. We provide examples of financial aid interventions to demonstrate how colleges can support students' financial needs when they lack resources to pay for college expenses. Furthermore, we examine the research on students' financial knowledge and frameworks for financial education.

In the second part of this paper, we present data on students participating in the Guardian Money Management for Life (MMFL) program, a financial empowerment program offered at several community colleges that provides students with both financial management education and expanded access to financial aid and services. We include profiles of three community colleges participating in the MMFL program: The University of the District of Columbia Community College in Washington, DC; Berkshire Community College in Massachusetts; and Capital Community College in Connecticut. These colleges were chosen because of their successes in expanding the MMFL personal finance course into a broader student success initiative that connects students to campus and community resources.

STUDENTS' FINANCIAL NEEDS AND CHALLENGES

For many community college students, academic success and completion can hinge on meeting financial needs. Community colleges are known for their relatively low tuition and fees, yet these expenses can be a burden for students who receive insufficient financial aid. In addition to tuition and fees, community college students face several large expenses, such as housing and living expenses, that make up the bulk of their total cost of attendance. According to a 2019 study conducted by researchers at North Carolina State University, paying for expenses is a top concern among community college students.⁵

When students' financial needs go unmet, they are more likely to face challenges to completing their degrees and are at greater risk of stopping out—temporarily suspending their studies, usually because of life obstacles—or dropping out entirely.⁶ However, programs that address students' holistic financial and academic needs are known to lead to greater student success—such as the City University of New York Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (CUNY ASAP), which has been found to increase credit completion and double graduation rates for participating students, in comparison to non-participating students.⁷ The following provide a closer look at students' full costs of attending college and the prevalence of unmet need, which colleges must consider to develop or improve their own support programs.

College Costs

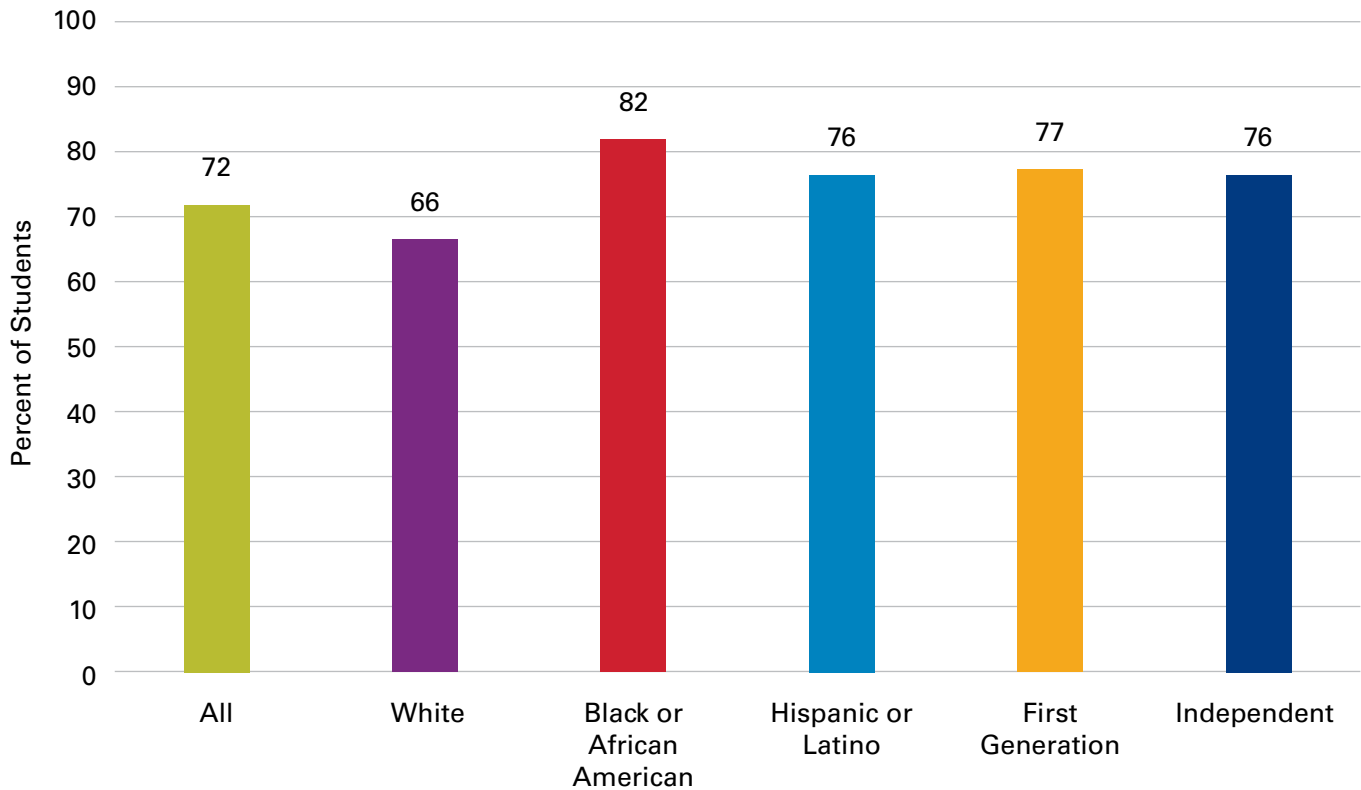
According to researchers from the College Board, for the 2019 – 20 academic year, the average price of tuition at public two-year colleges was approximately \$3,700. Over the past 10 years, community college tuition has risen beyond the rate of inflation. Furthermore, the cost of tuition varies widely from state to state. For example, California has the lowest average community college tuition in the country (\$1,400) while Vermont has the highest (\$8,200).⁸ The steady increase in tuition and variability from state to state can largely be attributed to state divestment in higher education. According to researchers from the State Higher Education Executives Officers Association (SHEEO), on average, state higher education appropriations per full-time student remain lower than levels prior to the Great Recession of 2008 and vary greatly among states.⁹

In addition to tuition, community college students face many high expenses—such as food, housing, childcare, and transportation. According to College Board researchers, on average, community college students spend approximately \$14,700 per year on room and board, books and supplies, transportation, and other living expenses.¹⁰ However, other research suggests that many community college students likely spend more than this amount on living expenses, especially those who are independent and those who are financially responsible for a family. According to researchers from the National Low-Income Housing Coalition, in 2019 the average fair market rent was \$970 per month (\$11,600 per year) for a one-bedroom apartment and \$1,200 per month (\$14,400 per year) for a two-bedroom apartment.¹¹ Furthermore, for students with young children, the cost of childcare can far exceed other monthly expenses. According to an analysis by researchers at the Center for American Progress, the average cost of center-based childcare for an infant is over \$1,200 per month.¹²

Unmet Financial Need

Insufficient financial aid and high cost-of-living expenses contribute to the prevalence of unmet financial need among community college students. For this report, we define unmet need as the difference between a student's calculated expected family contribution determined by the federal Free Application for Student Aid (FAFSA) and their awarded grant aid. While over one-third of community college students receive a federal Pell Grant, according to data from the U.S. Department of Education 2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), the maximum award of approximately \$6,500 often is not enough to pay for students' full cost of attendance. NPSAS data reveal that nearly three-quarters of community college students have unmet financial need to pay for college expenses—on average \$7,000 per year. Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and independent students are most likely to have unmet financial need, demonstrating the need for colleges to provide additional resources to these groups of students. The following graph demonstrates the difference in the prevalence of unmet need between student groups.

Community College Students with Unmet Financial Need



Source: Authors' analysis of NPSAS '16



FINANCIAL AID INTERVENTIONS

Community college students rely on federal and state financial aid programs to pay for their college expenses; however, colleges also play a role in implementing campus-based financial aid interventions to support students, especially in times of emergencies. Here, we present three different financial aid interventions that colleges can implement to support students ability to pay for college and better understand available resources—and ultimately support their persistence through college toward earning their degree.

Emergency Aid

Emergency aid is comprised of resources that colleges provide to students in times of emergency or unexpected need. According to the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, colleges typically offer emergency aid in the form of grants, loans, vouchers for campus services, and access to food pantries.¹³ By providing emergency aid, colleges can act quickly to support students facing financial challenges—such as a medical bill, housing costs, or transportation needs—that is standing in their way of paying for tuition or being able to continue attending courses.

Institutional Balance Forgiveness

Paying off institutional balances, or institutional debts, is a common barrier faced by students as they attempt to persist through college. Community colleges across the country have implemented balance-forgiveness programs to support students who are in good academic standing, but who owe money to the college, such as for a past-due tuition or fee payment, that prevents them from enrolling in future courses. By forgiving balances, colleges can help students remain enrolled in college or support re-enrollment after students stop out.¹⁴

Improved Financial Aid Information

College financial aid is a complex system of grant, scholarship, and loan programs provided by the federal and state governments, colleges, and private organizations. In addition to being a complex system, students frequently face challenges to finding clear and consistent information about the financial resources available to them. Researchers from New America, a think tank and advocacy organization, and uAspire, a national nonprofit seeking to improve financial aid information for students, conducted a study to examine one way that many students first receive financial aid information: award letters. Their national study found that award letters often contained confusing jargon, failed to differentiate between grants and loans, and omitted a clear calculation of students' costs of attendance.¹⁵ These findings demonstrate the need for colleges to provide students with clear information about available resources and increase access to financial counseling services that support students decisions about their financial responsibilities and goals.

FRAMEWORKS FOR FINANCIAL EDUCATION

Financial literacy can be a critical topic for students seeking to navigate the complex nature of college financing and personal expenses. To be sure, financial literacy skills are not a replacement for financial aid resources that improve college affordability. However, combined with sufficient aid, financial literacy skills can empower students to make complex financial decisions associated with attending college. For most students, these decisions include how to pay for tuition, fees, and living expenses—such as through the combination of aid and money earned from work. For many adult learners attending community college, these decisions also include how to pay for necessities such as childcare and other family expenses.

To support colleges in preparing students for financial decision-making, the U.S. Financial Literacy and Education Commission (FLEC) has developed best practices for teaching financial literacy and providing financial aid information. This commission was established in 2003 and is led by the U.S. Treasury Department and includes representatives from federal agencies, including the U.S. Department of Education and the White House Domestic Policy Council. In 2019, FLEC issued a report¹⁶ that details five financial literacy best practices for higher education institutions, including to:

1. Provide clear, timely, and customized information to inform student borrowing;
2. Effectively engage students in financial literacy and education;
3. Use data to target different student populations;
4. Communicate the importance of graduation and major on the repayment of student loans; and
5. Prepare students for financial obligations upon graduation.

A central theme of FLEC's recommendations is the connection between students' financial and academic successes. While pursuing their educations, students' abilities to access and clearly understand their financial aid can improve their abilities to complete their degrees in a timely manner. Ultimately, timely completion positively impacts a student's ability to earn higher wages and successfully repay student loans.¹⁷ FLEC's recommendation is supported by prior ACCT research, which has found that students who do not complete their degrees are most likely to default on loan repayment.¹⁸

In addition to the FLEC recommendations, the U.S. Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) has developed principles for effective financial education.¹⁹ These principles are not specific to higher education institutions, yet they can help inform how colleges work to ensure students' financial well-being. The five CFPB principles are as follows:

1. Know the individuals and families to be served;
2. Provide actionable, relevant, and timely information;
3. Improve key financial skills;
4. Build on motivation; and
5. Make it easy to make good decisions and follow through.



According to the CFPB, the goal of adhering to these principles is to support people's financial well-being in such a way that they can enjoy both "financial security and financial freedom" in the present and future. Unfortunately, many college students are unable to achieve this level of financial well-being. As described in the previous sections, many community college students face large unmet need to pay for academic and living expenses and have not been exposed to basic financial literacy knowledge.

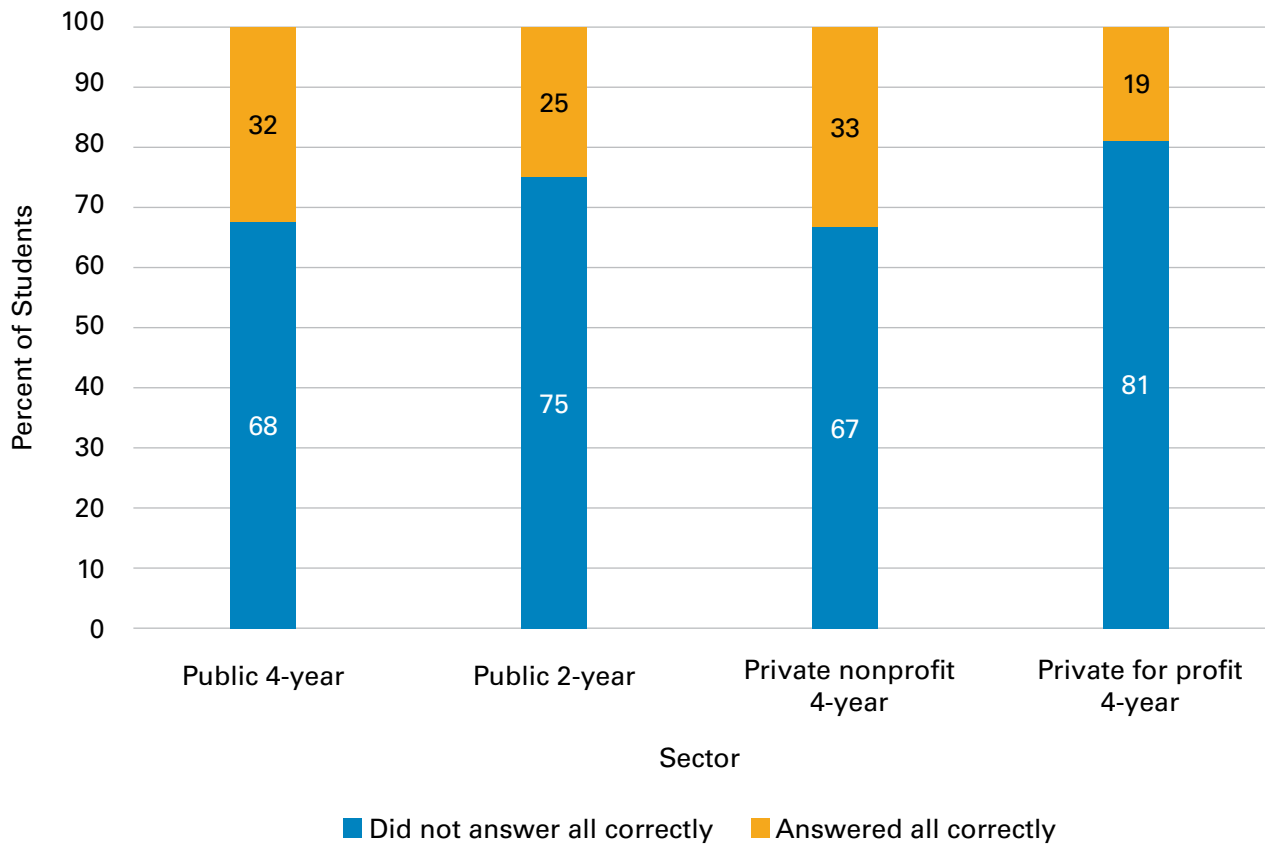
Researchers from the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) at the University of Texas used national data on students' financial needs and their comfortability with financial management to develop a guide for community colleges to implement financial education on campus. According to the data from the center's 2016 student financial health survey, over 80% felt they had the skills and knowledge to manage their personal finances; however, students' budgeting and financial planning practices varied widely. Furthermore, over a quarter of respondents felt they need more information from their colleges about financial assistance.²⁰ The difference between students' assessments of their financial knowledge and their actual practices could be an indicator that students do not have enough financial resources and highlights the needs for colleges to thoroughly assess students' knowledge and practices in order to design successful financial interventions. Based on the survey, CCCSE researchers recommend that colleges develop financial education programs using data on students' financial needs and understanding of financial management; training faculty and staff to provide supports; partnering with community organizations; connecting with students through outreach efforts; and incorporating financial education in academic course curriculum.²¹

STUDENTS' FINANCIAL KNOWLEDGE

For colleges to implement successful financial education programs, it is important to understand students' existing levels of financial knowledge. For example, students who enter college directly from high school without prior exposure to financial education may need to learn financial management basics, such as budgeting and saving. Most students who enter college directly from high school are unlikely to have participated in a formal financial education course. According to a survey by the Council for Economic Education, as of 2020, only 21 states require students to take a personal finance course.²² Despite the lack of financial education in high schools, older students are likely to gain financial management skills through personal life experiences and are more likely to benefit from supports that address complex financial situations, such as managing family finances while attending college.

Nationally, college students demonstrate relatively low levels of financial literacy, highlighting the need for additional education and resources to be made available on campuses. The need is especially high for community college students, who demonstrate lower levels of financial literacy than peers from other higher education sectors. As part of the 2016 NPSAS survey, students were asked three questions on financial literacy concepts of inflation, savings, and risk diversification. Only 25% of community college students answered all three questions correctly, compared to 32% of students attending public four-year colleges and 33% of students attending private four-year colleges. Students attending for-profit colleges were the only group of students to answer fewer questions correctly.²³

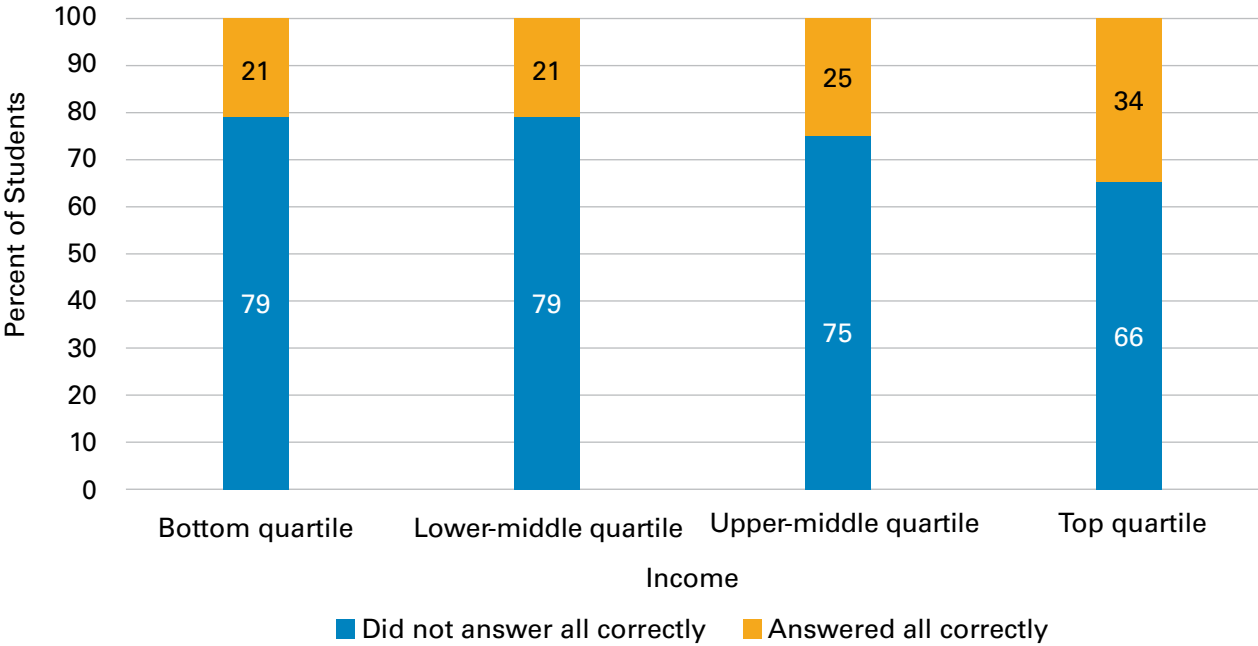
Students' Understanding of Financial Literacy Concepts: Sector Comparison



Source: Authors' analysis of NPSAS '16

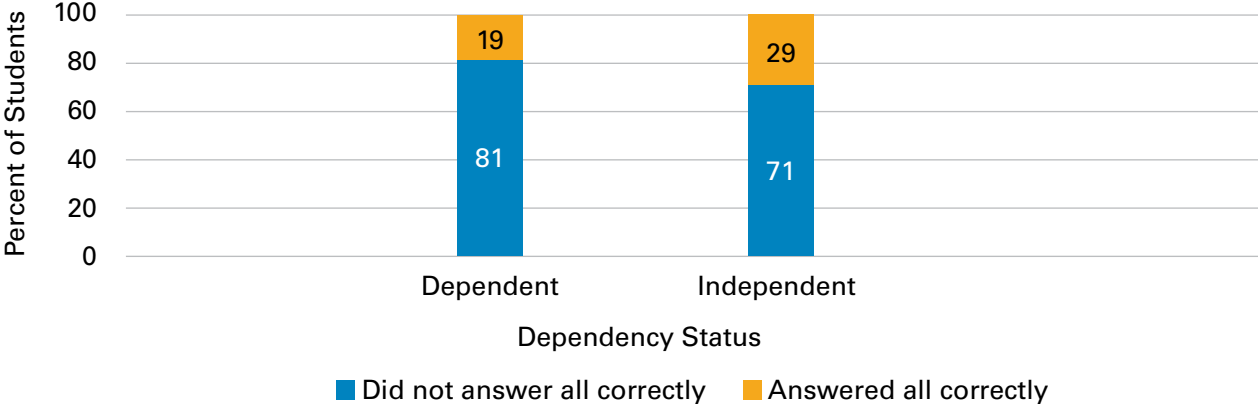
Data from the same survey also indicate varying levels of financial literacy among different demographic groups of community college students, notably by income and dependency status. Only 21% of low-income community college students answered all three questions correctly, compared to 34% of high-income students. One explanation for this difference may be students' financial constraints to participate in financial education courses prior to attending college, especially if not offered through the K-12 education system. According to NPSAS data, independent community college students (29% answered correctly) demonstrate higher levels of financial literacy compared to their dependent peers (19% answered correctly), likely because they have gained financial literacy skills through life experiences. These differences highlight the need for colleges to tailor financial education based on their student populations.

Students' Understanding of Financial Literacy Concepts: Community College Students



Source: Authors' analysis of NPSAS '16

Students' Understanding of Financial Literacy Concepts: Community College Students

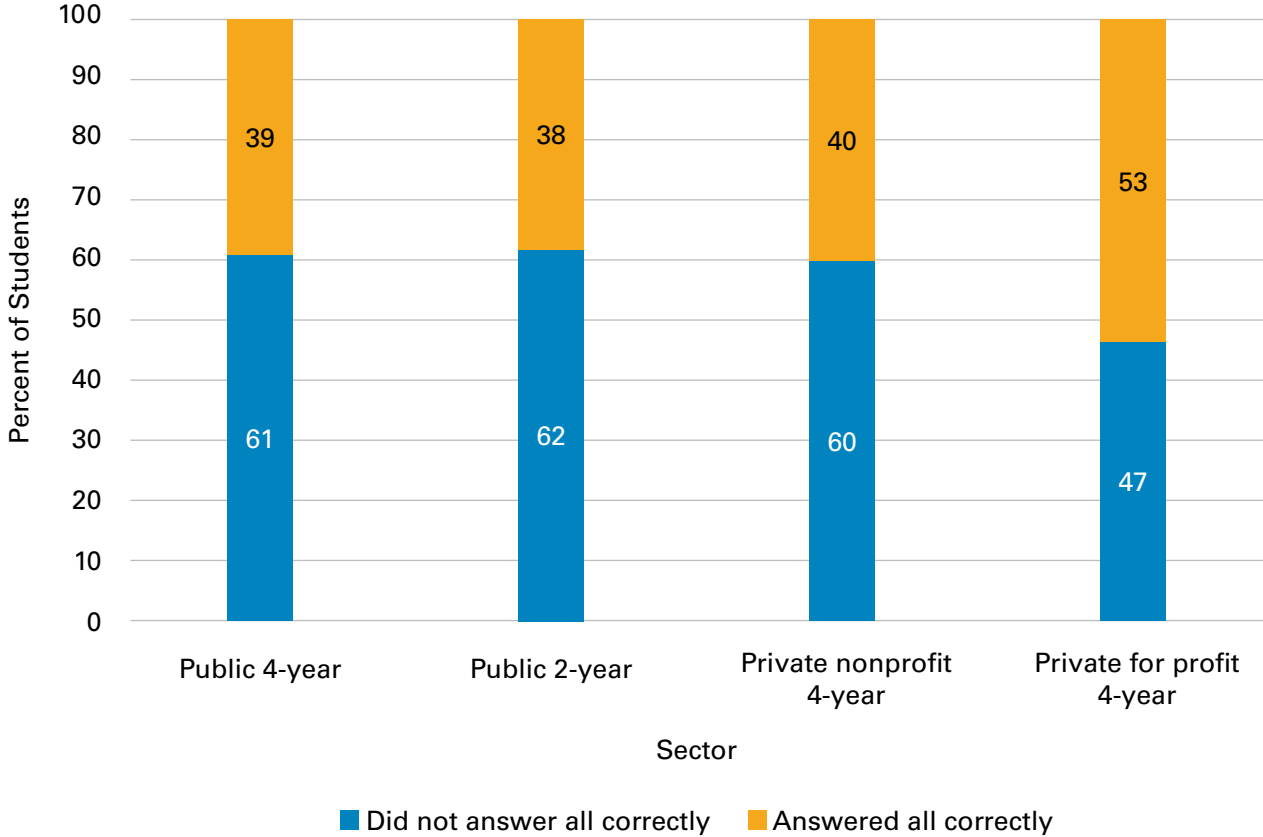


Source: Authors' analysis of NPSAS '16



In addition to general financial literacy concepts, students participating in the 2016 NPSAS survey were also asked questions to assess their respective levels of student loan literacy. The questions assessed students' knowledge of the consequences of unpaid debt, including negative credit history reporting, wage garnishment, and tax and Social Security benefit garnishment. Students demonstrated higher levels of loan literacy compared to general financial literacy. Across most higher education sectors, including public 2-year colleges, approximately 40% of students answered all three questions correctly.²⁴

Students' Understanding of Loan Literacy Concepts: Sector Comparison



Source: Authors' analysis of NPSAS '16

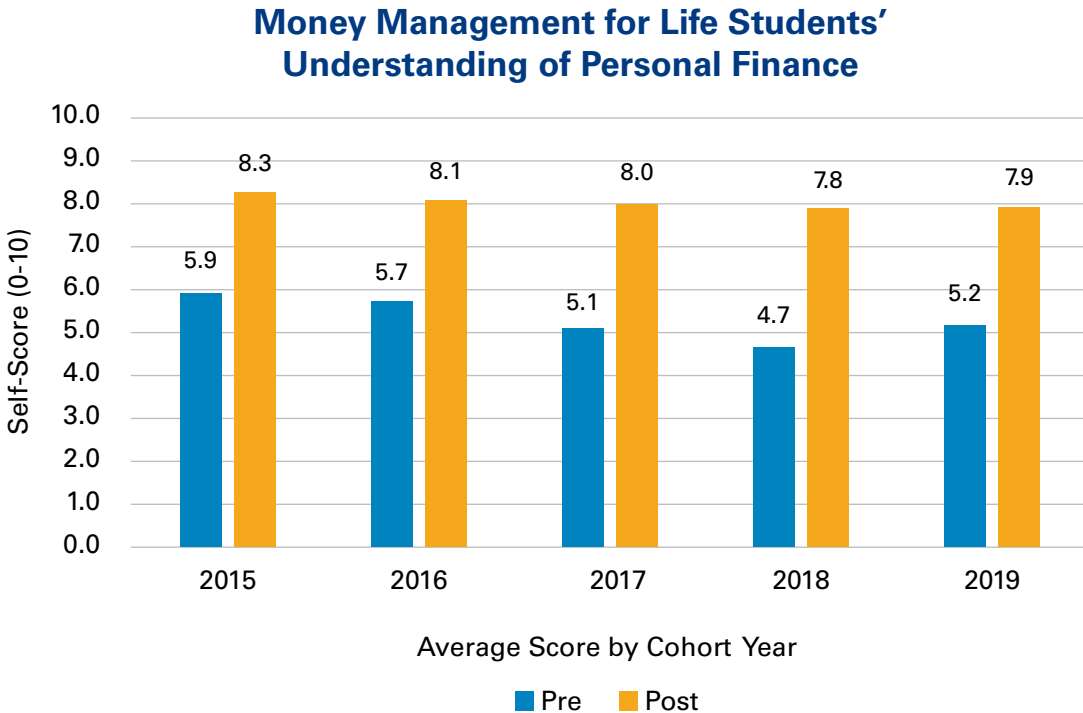


COLLEGES' ROLE IN BRIDGING FINANCIAL WELLNESS AND STUDENT SUCCESS


Colleges play a significant role in helping students access and manage financial resources. As described in the prior sections of this report, access to adequate financial aid is a determinant of students' abilities to persist through college and complete their degrees. Financial education is important to help students better understand financial resources; however, education alone is not enough to support students' academic successes. One initiative designed to provide both financial education and resources is the Guardian Money Management for Life (MMFL) program.

Guardian started the MMFL program in 2013 by partnering with community colleges across the country to offer a free, credit-bearing personal finance course. The course focuses on introducing students to basic financial management topics such as budgeting, tax filing, and setting financial goals. Since its creation, the MMFL program has expanded to encompass a holistic financial wellness model. Partner colleges have expanded services to include personal financial and career coaching, referrals to community-based organizations, and financial aid interventions—in particular, balance forgiveness. As next steps, several colleges are planning or expanding one-stop financial empowerment services, where students receive resources for financial education, aid, and career development.²⁵

Students in the MMFL course complete a self-assessment survey of their understanding of personal finances before and after participating. We analyzed the survey data of community college students who participated in the course from 2015 through 2019.²⁶ We found that approximately 75% of students who completed a post-survey indicated they were much better prepared to manage their personal finances as a result of taking the course. Students rated their understandings of financial management on a scale of 0 – 10, with 0 indicating no understanding and 10 indicating full understanding. We found that, on average, students rated their personal understanding 2.7 points higher after completing the course. This trend was seen consistently among each cohort of participating students. The following graph provides data for each year of participating students.



Source: Authors' analysis of MMFL Cumulative Survey Data



Educating students on personal finances is one tool colleges can use to support students in managing the complex financial obligations associated with attending and succeeding in college. Beyond education, colleges also serve a critical role in providing students with financial resources and support services. We interviewed representatives from three community colleges that implement the MMFL program to find out how each institution can bridge students' financial wellness to academic success. The following section includes profiles of MMFL programs at the University of the District of Columbia Community College, Berkshire Community College, and Capital Community College. These colleges were chosen because of their success in expanding the MMFL personal finance course into a broader student success initiative that connects students to campus and community resources.

University of the District of Columbia

For the University of the District of Columbia Community College (UDC-CC) in Washington, D.C., the issue of financial literacy became a priority in a response to research showing the widening income and wealth gaps between White and Black Americans. For example, research by the National Urban League shows that Black Americans are approximately 50% economically less well-off than White Americans.²⁷ Racial economic inequality is particularly stark in Washington, D.C., where the median wealth among White households is 80 times higher than it is among Black households.²⁸ Recognizing the need to support the financial well-being of UDC-CC's predominately Black student population, college leaders sought to partner with Guardian and bring the MMFL program to campus in 2015. To learn more about the MMFL program at UDC-CC, we spoke with Scott King, associate professor and director of the division of business and education, and Albert Pearsall, assistant professor of business.²⁹

The MMFL program at UDC-CC focuses on financial goal setting, saving, investing, managing debt, and retirement, among other topics. As part of the course, students create their own financial plans and have opportunities to meet visiting speakers from nearby federal government agencies that deal with the economy, such as the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission. King and Pearsall have integrated other experiential learning opportunities into the course. These opportunities have included trips to the Federal Reserve in Richmond, Virginia, to Guardian headquarters in New York City, and to historic sites related to Black Americans' roles in finances, including the home of businesswoman Maggie Walker. Based on initial success of the program, starting in 2017, the college began to require the class for all business students and expanded the course as an elective available to all other UDC-CC students.

Through teaching the course, Pearsall witnessed that many students had limited backgrounds in financial education. This challenge promoted King and Pearsall to seek partnerships with local D.C. financial agencies and K-12 schools to improve financial knowledge among UDC's pipeline of students and to support more individuals throughout the city. As of 2019, UDC-CC partners with five high schools and has plans to expand to 30 schools within the next three years. Furthermore, Pearsall serves as co-chair of the student committee of the D.C. Financial Literacy Council, which seeks to improve financial literacy among all D.C. residents.

King and Pearsall expressed how the UDC financial education course can be a foundation of academic and career success for participating students. We analyzed institutional data of participating students and found that the cohorts from 2015 through 2019 had an average GPA of 2.7 and had completed 80% of their attempted credits. For the UDC-CC cohort of MMFL students, outcomes were similar for those who received financial aid compared to those who did not. One explanation for this may be that a large share of the participating students at UDC-CC are dually enrolled through their high schools, and therefore do not face the same financial circumstances as adult college students who link their abilities to access aid to their academic successes. Beyond quantitative metrics, King and Pearsall explain that many students in the course demonstrate academic engagement through their interest in pursuing further education by transferring to a four-year university and pursuing graduate education. Many participating students also demonstrate engagement by taking early steps to plan for their future careers.

Going forward, King and Pearsall are working on expanding supports to students by bringing a financial empowerment center on campus which will leverage partnerships with D.C. government agencies, non-profit organizations, and the private sector. The financial empowerment center would go beyond the current financial education course by supporting students with personal finance, development of entrepreneurship, and career education. They are also working with the college's student success office to implement new financial interventions to support students' degree completion, such as balance forgiveness for students at risk of stopping out. With these new programs, King and Pearsall hope to make financial wellness a greater part of UDC-CC's overall student support culture.

Outcomes for UDC-CC MMFL Students

	ALL PARTICIPATING STUDENTS	RECEIVED ANY FINANCIAL AID
Average GPA	2.7	2.7
Average Percent of Credits Completed vs. Attempted	80%	81%

Berkshire Community College

At Berkshire Community College (BCC), located in Berkshire County, Massachusetts, nearly 70% of students receive federal Pell Grants. Among those students, about half have a zero expected family contribution, which means a student and their family has no ability to pay for college expenses based on the FAFSA needs assessment. For these students, access to financial aid and other financial resources can be the difference between their academic success and stopping out or dropping out. Furthermore, BCC serves a key role in providing community services as the only community college in Berkshire County, a predominately low-income area. Recognizing the great financial need among their student body and the broader community led BCC to expand their financial education and support services on campus, including by partnering with Guardian and starting an MMFL program. To learn about the MMFL program at BCC, we spoke with Nancy Stoll, special program coordinator for financial literacy, and Adam Klepetar, vice president for student affairs and enrollment management.³⁰

Through their partnership with Guardian, BCC offers academic supports through a personal finance class and finance forums that are free and open to students and members of the community. The course and the forums focus on financial topics that include basics of setting financial goals and budgeting; investing and building savings; and maintaining good credit. The course is offered in a traditional on-campus format as well as online, in local high schools, and at a BCC satellite campus. Approximately 40 students take the course each semester and enrollment is diverse, including recent high school graduates who are being exposed to many of these topics for the first time and older students seeking to build their financial capabilities.



Over time, the MMLF program has expanded to offer several non-academic supports to help meet students' financial needs. One new initiative is a balance forgiveness program that provides scholarships to students who are at risk of not completing their degrees due to challenges that prevent them from paying off an outstanding bill to the college. All students who receive balance forgiveness are also strongly recommended to enroll in the personal finance course and one-on-one coaching. At the outset of the balance forgiveness program, Stoll and Klepetar were surprised to learn that students' interest in receiving balance forgiveness was lower than expected. In response, they re-evaluated requirements of the scholarship that were possibly restricting students from participating, such as enrolling full-time and paying half of the debt out of pocket. Since relaxing these requirements, the college has been able to attract more students to participate and better meet their financial needs. Other non-academic supports that BCC is offering as part of their MMFL program include paid internships and financial wellness coaching to provide individualized support to students to set financial and academic goals leading to degree completion.

Stoll and Klepetar recognize that students are more likely to succeed academically when they have few financial worries and their basic needs are met. We analyzed institutional data of credit-seeking students who participated in the course from 2014 through 2019. We found that those who took the course and received a form of financial aid experienced the greatest levels of academic success. Notably, students who received aid had a 75% retention rate in comparison to 51% among all participating students. Though only a small number of students received balance forgiveness in this timeframe, these students experienced the highest rate among the cohort, at 92%. Below is further comparison of academic success indicators for participating students.

Moving forward, BCC is expanding their efforts to offer holistic financial empowerment services. One step is by partnering with nearby colleges and non-profit organizations to collectively address students' financial needs at the community college, the four-year universities, and within their place in the community. Furthermore, BCC is in the early stages of developing an on-campus financial empowerment center. Ultimately, the goal is for the center to serve as a one-stop center for meeting students' financial needs. Stoll and Klepetar describe these services as both financial crisis prevention and proactive planning, both of which are key to supporting students' financial wellness and their academic success.

Outcomes for BCC MMFL Students

	ALL PARTICIPATING STUDENTS	RECEIVED ANY FINANCIAL AID	RECEIVED BALANCE FORGIVENESS
Average GPA	2.8	2.8	3.0
Retention Rate	51%	75%	92%
Average Percent of Credits Completed vs. Attempted	80%	81%	80%



Capital Community College

Capital Community College (CCC), in Hartford, Connecticut, serves a large population of non-traditional students with financial needs beyond their tuition and individual living expenses. Many of these students face challenges to paying for expenses such as childcare, transportation, and food and housing for their families. These student challenges led CCC to expand their financial supports and education programs, including by starting a MMFL personal finance course in 2013, which has since evolved to offer holistic financial supports. To learn about the MMFL program at CCC, we spoke with Hannah Gregory, program coordinator for the FIRST Center.³¹

The three-credit personal finance course is free of charge for students. The course teaches fundamentals of financial literacy including budgeting, filing taxes, building credit, and banking. Beyond the fundamentals, the course teaches topics of relevance for older, non-traditional students, such as long-term savings and investing. Students enrolled in the course also have an opportunity to learn from financial professionals, including representatives from Guardian. Though the course is not required for students, it can count toward degree completion. One challenge that CCC is addressing is how to better incorporate the course into a guided-pathways model so students are encouraged to take the personal finance course without accumulating unnecessary credits.

To better ensure that students' participation in the personal finance course is linked to their overall college success, Gregory eventually would like to implement a system to track the outcomes of students who have enrolled and completed the course. One challenge is that the course tends to attract students who are already high-achieving and more likely to be persisting toward degree completion. CCC currently requires that MMFL students have an approximately 2.8 GPA to participate. We analyzed institutional data of credit-seeking students who participated in the course from 2013 through 2019. We found that the retention rate among this cohort was 73%. Students who participated in the course and received financial aid had a much higher retention rate of 88%, which may be an indicator of the benefits of a holistic services approach to financial education and aid.

Over time, Gregory has led the effort to evolve the MMFL program from the personal finance course to an integrated services model to address students' holistic financial needs. CCC created an on-campus financial literacy center, known as the FIRST Center, which offers services and resources including financial literacy workshops, coaching, tax filing assistance, and a library of financial literacy materials. The center helps connect students to community-based services and offering workshops by partnering with organizations including through the United Way, the Village for Families & Children, Center for Urban Research, Education & Training, the Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund, and Hartford Community Loan Fund. A major effort is the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program which serves about 300-400 households and results in \$1 million in tax refunds for Hartford families per tax season.



The center has also placed an emphasis on workforce development and went through a restructuring to merge with the college-wide career services department. Gregory explained that this shift allowed the center not only to assess students for services such as budget coaching, but also to offer wrap-around services to improve students' career readiness. One way the FIRST Center helps support students' career successes is by connecting them to paid internships and apprenticeships with several large national companies based in Hartford. A goal for Gregory is to offer more "high-touch services," such as one-on-one financial coaching, which are more likely to have a positive impact for participating students, compared to group-based or passive interventions.

Outcomes for CCC MMFL Students

	ALL PARTICIPATING STUDENTS	RECEIVED ANY FINANCIAL AID
Average GPA	3.2	3.1
Retention Rate	73%	88%
Average Percent of Credits Completed vs. Attempted	90%	91%



CONCLUSION


Students' financial wellness and literacy is key to their ability to manage the complex financial obligations they face on the way to degree completion. Students need sufficient resources to pay for tuition, living expenses, and family obligations. Throughout this report, we highlight several challenges community college students across the country face to achieving financial wellness, including unmet financial need, insufficient information on financial resources, and limited knowledge of financial literacy concepts. These challenges demonstrate the opportunity for colleges to support students' financial well-being with a combination of both financial aid and financial education.

In this report, we analyzed the outcomes of students who participated in the Guardian MMFL program. The MMFL program combines financial education and additional supports, such as financial aid and individual counseling. We found that students who participated in the MMLF personal finance course reported improved levels of understanding of personal financial management. In addition, we found that many students who participated in the course and received additional financial supports demonstrated higher levels of persistence toward degree completion.

The data and strategies in this report are intended to help colleges improve their own financial supports for students. We encourage colleges to consider a holistic approach to ensuring students' financial wellness. Financial education must be paired with financial aid resources to help students persist toward degree completion. Colleges play a critical role in ensuring students have access to resources, are provided with clear and consistent information, and are given the tools to manage their complex financial lives.

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