

# Chapter 1: Introducing the Working Families Success Strategy

## INTRODUCTION

---

Community colleges play a unique role in the United States. The training and education they provide offers students a path to careers and educational opportunities at an affordable price. That affordability and flexibility means more low-income individuals and families are served by community colleges than any other type of post-secondary institution.

Because they serve a population that may face financial challenges, community colleges struggle to connect students with the credentials they need to begin their careers. Only 20 percent of incoming community college students graduate within three years, and 54 percent of students never complete a degree at all. While academic issues hinder many students, financial issues are cited most often as the reason students interrupt their postsecondary education. Other frequently noted obstacles, such as lack of child care and lack of reliable transportation, have financial challenges at their core.

Community college students often start without an understanding of how to navigate college processes, such as enrollment and financial aid. Many face immediate, pressing needs—for expensive textbooks, reliable transportation and rent that must be paid. They often have families to support, making their financial burden even greater. Students also rarely begin with a full understanding of their overall financial needs, much less a budget to guide them. They likely are not aware of the full spectrum of student support services that the college offers.

The Working Families Success strategy brings together — or bundles — access to a full range of essential supports to help families build self-sufficiency, stabilize their finances and move ahead. WFS makes it easier for families to tap into all of the services and supports for which they qualify, filling in the gaps and helping them weather unexpected setbacks that can prevent students and their families from meeting their economic and educational goals. This work is especially important given that the average age of a student is 29, and 84 percent of community college students work more than 20 hours a week. In addition, community colleges serve more than half of students of color enrolled in post-secondary institutions and nearly one-fifth of community college students live below the poverty line.<sup>1</sup>

The WFS strategy grew from the Center for Working Families approach developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation eight years ago and has been adopted and implemented by community colleges across the United States.

This implementation guide is designed to be used by community colleges leaders, faculty and staff interested in starting or expanding a Working Families Success strategy at their institution. In addition to the text, the guide includes a wide range of materials provided by colleges already engaged in these efforts.

<sup>1</sup> Mullin, C. M. (2012, February). *Why access matters: The community college student body (Policy Brief 2012-01PBL)*. Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges.