

## Chapter 2: Designing and Implementing the WFS Strategy

### DESIGN Determining Your Target Population

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Colleges that have implemented the Working Families Success strategy have selected many different target populations. Some serve all students, some only serve the students they feel are most in need, some serve students who are part of a specific program, and others open their services to the entire community:

- A few colleges seek to provide services—or emphasize particular elements within the overall bundle—to the entire institution. In some cases, that’s true because virtually the entire student population is low-income or from a disadvantaged economic background.
- Other colleges, even with similar demographics, chiefly target all first-year students, whether through information disseminated at orientation sessions for new students or as a component of coursework required of newly entering students.
- Some schools target only the most distressed students, whether through specific remedial programs, through referrals from faculty or through marketing efforts that encourage students to step forward when they encounter difficulties that threaten to undermine their academic progress.
- In still other colleges, the WFS strategy actively engages members of the community at large, even if they are not enrolled in formal certificate or degree-granting programs.

To determine the target population that is appropriate for an institution, begin considering these interrelated questions:

- Who is most in need?
- What kinds of services are needed, and at what intensity?
- Through what programs are students currently being served?

Examples of populations identified as high-need include low-income students, student parents or adult basic education students. Analyzing completion data for the institution can lead to the identification of specific student populations that are not succeeding at the same rates as other students. One option is to disaggregate completion data by enrollment status (full-time or part-time), race and ethnicity, gender and socioeconomic status. Another option is to conduct qualitative analysis of your student population to determine why students are not succeeding. If many students are struggling to complete a degree because they are having trouble balancing school, work and family, the college may want to target student parents. If many students drop out after encountering an unexpected crisis, such as a car breakdown or a healthcare situation, the college may want to consider offering an emergency scholarship program that requires students to make use of WFS services after receiving funds.

In terms of the types of services offered, WFS approaches typically offer three levels:

- **Low-touch services** are those services that require less staff time and provide basic information and services to a student, such as financial products. They may reach more students but tend to have less impact than higher touch services.
- **Medium-touch services** generally require some one-on-one interaction with students though not always multiple sessions. While they may reach fewer students than low-intensity services, the more focused interaction often yields more positive student outcomes than low-touch services.
- **High-touch services** require a higher level of staff interaction and resources. These services are generally not offered to all students due to resource constraints. Generally, those students able to take advantage of these services have the best outcomes.

Of course, the students most in need of services also may need the highest touch services. Some institutions choose to begin the Working Families Success strategy with students who need lower touch services.

Offering high-touch services usually means an institution will serve a specific or limited population. Providing high-touch services to the entire college or community would require an immense amount of resources. A college can serve a broader population with limited resources by offering low-touch services. These decisions are interrelated and each institution has a different starting point. Most institutions that have implemented the Working Families Success strategy begin with a specific population and broaden access over time. Alternatively, an institution could begin with lower touch services for a broad population and deepen the level and type of services over time.

### **Alignment with institutional priorities and existing programs**

If a college can serve only a specific or limited population, there are several factors that can help determine which population that should be:

- Is serving a particular population, such as low-income students, best aligned with institutional priorities?
- Are there particular programs or funding sources that can be leveraged? Do they have an identified target population?

If a priority is to provide opportunities for low-income people in the community, then the college may want to target students who are Pell Grant eligible. If a priority is to meet the needs of the local workforce, the college may want to target students in a program that produces graduates for high-demand occupations, such as nursing.

The college may decide to choose its target population based on the complex interrelationship of existing, complementary support services. To leverage an existing program's funding and services, the college may need to select its

student population based on the guidelines that various funders—including federal, state, non-profit foundations and private corporations—have designated for the programs they support. Alternatively, the college may choose to serve students who are not being served by existing programs.



## Key Takeaways

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- Some colleges serve all students with the WFS strategy; some only serve the students they feel are most in need; some serve students who are part of a specific program, and others open their services to the entire community.
- Analyze completion data for the institution to identify specific student populations that are not succeeding at the same rates as other students.
- Conduct a qualitative analysis of your student population to determine why students are not succeeding.
- Considering overall institutional priorities also can provide some direction for choosing a target population.
- Focus on leveraging existing programs' funding and services—this may have implications for your target population.



## Examples

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Relationships between **Des Moines Area Community College** and many urban community-based organizations in the area allow the college to reach out and attract first generation and other populations with challenges, becoming an on ramp to the college. Organizations that refer individuals to the college to participate in training and receive other WFS-model services include United Way, the local one-stop workforce center and Urban Dreams, a community-based organization that works with young people looking for a new direction for a better and more productive life. Program leaders describe participants as at-risk populations faced with generational poverty and chronic unemployment.

When students at DMACC apply to participate in the school's Workforce Training Academy, they complete a needs assessment and later receive a follow-up call for financial coaching. In 2012, new regulations required that new students enrolling in this program take part in at least one financial coaching session.

Some colleges link scholarship awards to intensive financial coaching in order to help students make the best use of their education funds. At Skyline College, all Groves Scholarship students must take advantage of one-on-one coaching, which is provided by SparkPoint Center staff and volunteers. Norwalk Community College also requires that scholarship grantees participate in coaching sessions to help them achieve their educational and financial goals.