

THE NISOD PAPERS

An occasional publication dedicated to topics of interest to community and technical college educators.

Hudson County Community College's Hudson Scholars Project

Can Lead Investment of Federal Stimulus Funding Sustain and Scale a Best-Practice Student Success Model With Mission-Centric Retention and Completion Outcomes?

Our community colleges' collective mission of open access is a gateway to the American Dream for all we serve. We meet students where they are, remove barriers to their success, and help them achieve their dreams and goals. Like all of the students, faculty, staff, trustees, and others who comprise our nation's community college family, it is an honor to be involved in a profession that is transformational and life-changing for millions of Americans, including our most marginalized and under-represented communities.

I am the president of Hudson County Community College (HCCC) in Jersey City, Union City, and Secaucus, NJ. We serve approximately 18,000 credit and noncredit students annually in one of the most diverse and densely populated areas of the United States. I am pleased to share what I believe is a nationally distinctive project underway at HCCC. Using significant federal stimulus funding as seed investment, we have created a two-year trial initiative of bringing New Jersey's highly successful Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program to scale, with the goal of further scaling it to all HCCC students going forward.

We have created what we call the Hudson Scholars Program using the highly successful elements of New Jersey's EOF Program, and the City University of New York's (CUNY's) Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP). The Hudson Scholars Program is a tripartite model of focused and engaging student support that provides proactive advisement, financial stipends, and early academic intervention. The program has been designed to ensure that a greater number of students facing financial challenges, language barriers, developmental needs, employment concerns, family responsibilities, and other whole-life issues complete their college educations.

During the 2021-22 academic year, we served 800 students new to HCCC in our first cohort of Hudson Scholars – four times the number of students enrolled in HCCC's EOF program, impacting nearly 1,000 HCCC students combined. We hired five new fixed-term, full-time counselors to provide high-touch mentoring and advisement of Hudson Scholars students. We are measuring the retention impact of the program for these students in comparison to students not involved in Hudson Scholars or EOF.

The program is open to incoming students enrolled for at least nine credit-hours of coursework, including students in their final semester of the English as a Second Language (ESL) program, and all levels of Academic Foundations English. Hudson Scholars students meet regularly with Hudson Scholars academic counselors, whose caseloads are 80 percent less than those of other advisors, and who mentor, coach, and keep students on track with an early-alert system developed specifically for this program. Counselors prompt students to complete assigned tasks; assist in setting academic and career goals; monitor outside factors that may impact students' progress; and make referrals to on-campus support such as tutoring and other wholistic support services.

Hudson Scholars students are further incentivized to participate in high-impact practices each month, and receive stipends of up to \$250 monthly for completing designated tasks and achieving important academic milestones. Students use these stipends to pay for books and supplies and pay for food, transportation, housing, tuition, childcare, and other needs.

One year into the Hudson Scholars initiative, the results are meeting and exceeding our expectations. The retention of Hudson Scholars students from fall 2021 to spring 2022 replicated the high ongoing retention rates of HCCC's EOF students, which are at least three times better than the retention rates of students not involved in these programs. Fall-to-spring retention increased 51 percent for students engaged in the program compared to their peers. The fall-to-fall retention rate of the initial cohort of Hudson Scholars is similarly positive. One month prior to the start of the fall 2022 semester, the fall-to-fall retention rate of Hudson Scholars students is more than double the rate for comparison group students.

Due to the success realized in the program's first year, a second cohort of 800 additional students will be invited to participate in the Hudson Scholars Program in fall 2022, mentored and coached by five additional fixed-term, full-time counselors who have been hired in summer 2022 to join the first cohort's five counselors.

If the trends one year into the project are maintained, the lead investment of federal stimulus dollars to launch the program will have been sustained going forward through the increased revenue associated with the significantly enhanced retention of students. In turn, this increased "student success" revenue will enable HCCC to fully operationalize the Hudson Scholars Program, including the ongoing appointment of the ten Hudson Scholars counselors and further scaling of the program to virtually all students over time.

The resulting impact on our college-wide retention and completion rates could be a game changer of national interest. We all know what works, which is prevalent in the literature about student success, but the paradox experienced by so many in our community college sector is that we have been unable to secure significant lead funding to scale the high-touch, high-impact elements of these best practice models until now.

And, more important than the financial sustainability of this project are its mission-centric outcomes. More students *completing their goals and credentials, transferring to four-year and graduate programs, entering or moving up in careers paying family-sustaining wages, and achieving their dreams and goals*, means that we are more fully delivering on our respective community college missions.

In turn, strong financial outcomes are made possible and flow from this mission-centric success of retaining and supporting our students through the completion of their degrees and realization of their goals. *More students completing their degrees means that more of our nation's citizens are moving from public assistance to paying taxes and joining and contributing to the skilled workforce that our nation's future requires. It means that the nation's large investment in Pell and other student financial aid is yielding a greater return on that investment to support our nation's economic development and quality of life.*

Proven, empirically tested initiatives such as the Hudson County Community College Hudson Scholars Program can shift the perennial paradigm of how our community colleges request operational and other funding from local, state, and federal agencies. Requesting lead funding targeted to achieving specific completion outcomes that can be sustained over time is a powerful, win-win strategy for how we seek and spend critical funding in support of our students, our colleges' missions, and the communities we serve.

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