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BROWN UNIVERSITY

The Road to SUCCESS: Implementing a Comprehensive Student Support Initiative in Massachusetts Community Colleges



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Acknowledgments

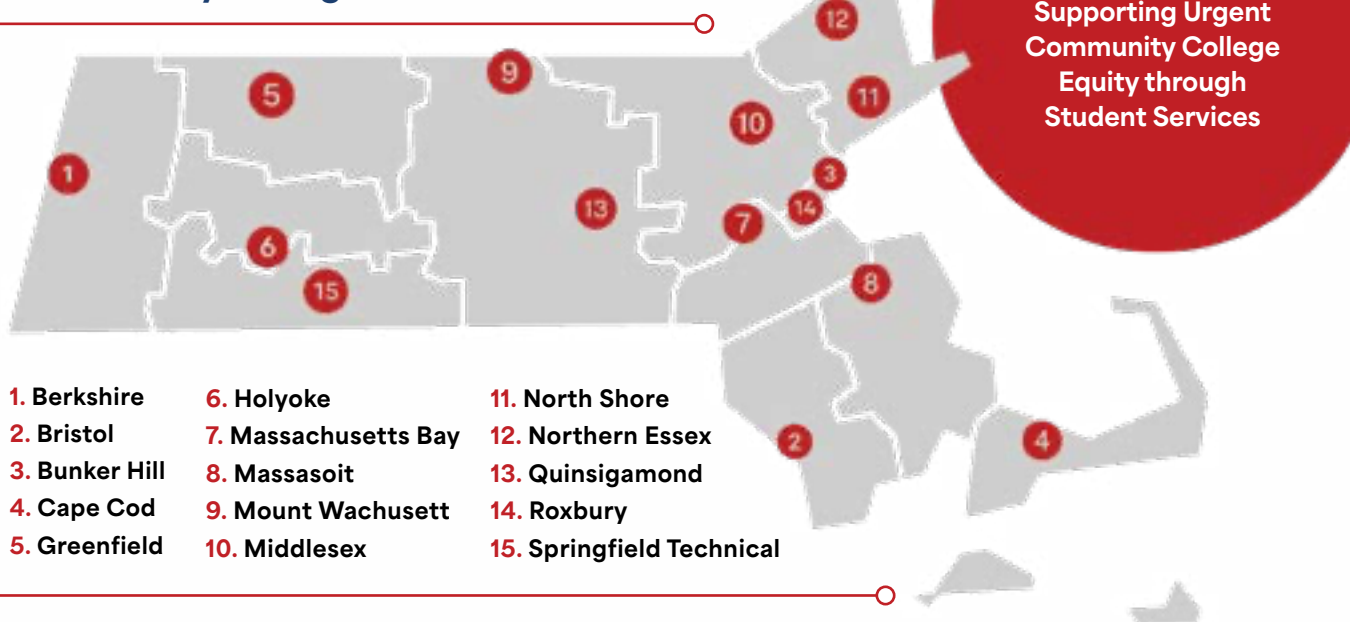
We thank the Massachusetts community colleges and their SUCCESS program leadership and staff for their time and insights in participating in this study. We are also grateful to the Massachusetts Association of Community Colleges for their support throughout this study.

We are deeply grateful to the many generous colleagues who read and provided feedback on drafts of this report: Richard Murnane, John Papay, Chris Avery, Aubrey McDonough, Ann Mantil, Emma Zorfass, Valerie Eisenson, Ian Ferguson, and James LoPresti. Their thoughtful comments and suggestions greatly strengthened the report.

This research was supported by the Lloyd G. Balfour Foundation, Bank of America, N.A., Trustee, through a grant to Brown University, as well as by a Brown University Research Seed Grant.

The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not represent the views of our funders or partners. Any remaining errors or omissions are our own.

Community Colleges of Massachusetts



Nurshatayeva, A., Bryer, E., & Page, L. (2025). *The road to SUCCESS: Implementing a comprehensive student support initiative in Massachusetts community colleges*. Annenberg Institute at Brown University.



Executive Summary

Compared to the rest of New England and the United States overall, Massachusetts' public higher education system has a long history of being underfunded. This pattern of underinvestment has contributed to some of the lowest community college graduation rates in the country, with large gaps by family income, race/ethnicity, and other factors. While recent initiatives—including significant expansion of free community college—aim to reduce financial barriers to access, policymakers and educators have increasingly recognized that financial aid alone is insufficient. Students facing systemic barriers to college completion often require comprehensive and sustained nonfinancial supports to persist and earn degrees.

In recognition of the need for such support, in 2021 Massachusetts launched the Supporting Urgent Community College Equity through Student Services (SUCCESS) initiative, a first-of-its-kind, state-funded investment to provide wraparound student support services across all 15 of the state's independently governed community colleges. With continued funding from

the state legislature, including a \$14 million appropriation in FY2026, SUCCESS aims to increase retention, persistence, and completion rates for historically underserved students by providing funding for each college to design or expand nonfinancial support programs that reflect its institutional context and student needs. Most SUCCESS programs include proactive advising, coaching, peer mentoring, and academic skills workshops.

The origins of SUCCESS reflect both innovative policy design and a considerable political breakthrough. Advocacy for SUCCESS was spearheaded by the Massachusetts Association of Community Colleges (MACC) and higher education leaders in the state, including Lane Glenn, president of Northern Essex Community College. Drawing inspiration from well-documented models, such as City University of New York's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (CUNY ASAP) and the federally funded TRIO programs, advocates made the case for a stable, centralized line item in the state budget. The Massachusetts legislature specified that funds would be distributed via a flexible formula designed to promote equity, enable colleges to serve their most vulnerable students, and demonstrate impact from the outset.

This report documents the early conceptualization and implementation of SUCCESS. Drawing on qualitative interviews with state leaders, college administrators, and SUCCESS staff as well as foundational program documents, it traces how the initiative moved from initial budget allocation to practice within a system of community colleges that vary widely in size, location, and student demographics.

SUCCESS is a first-of-its-kind, state-funded initiative providing wraparound student support services across all 15 of Massachusetts' community colleges.



Key Findings Highlight Six Core Dimensions of Implementation:

- 1 Rapid transition from concept to execution required flexibility.** Colleges had little advance notice of the funding and faced pressure to design programs, hire staff, and begin serving students within a tight timeline. Many staff members described this phase as “building the plane while flying it,” as they worked to expand existing advising and coaching models or establish new ones while simultaneously developing reporting systems and adhering to evolving program guidelines.
- 2 Colleges designed programmatic models and student-selection processes to serve different populations.** SUCCESS gives each college considerable discretion to define and identify its target population, as long as it includes vulnerable student populations. The colleges used a variety of strategies, from scaling up pre-existing comprehensive support initiatives to designing broad new programs to reach large segments of the student body. Data availability and local demographics shaped how colleges have identified eligible students. Some institutions use additional academic or enrollment criteria to prioritize students who are most at risk.
- 3 Recruiting and enrolling eligible students took time.** Campuses had to develop processes for identifying eligible students, communicating about their programs, and meeting enrollment targets. This was particularly challenging in the early stages as colleges adapted to evolving program guidance, refined their eligibility criteria, and worked to engage part-time students and other hard-to-reach groups. Over time, colleges have improved their outreach strategies and enrollment processes, which has helped stabilize participation.
- 4 Staffing was central to implementation, with varying approaches across colleges.** The SUCCESS vision hinges on expanding capacity for proactive advising and coaching. The funding formula directs the majority of each college’s budget allocation toward staffing, ensuring that new roles add to, rather than supplant, existing student services. Colleges navigated complex hiring landscapes shaped by pandemic labor market disruptions, union negotiations, and persistent uncertainty about whether SUCCESS funds would be renewed. Approaches to hiring, caseload sizes, and integration with existing services varied by campus, shaping how students experienced support and how staff navigated their roles. Over time, colleges and staff have come to view SUCCESS positions as permanent, which has improved organizational stability.



- 5 Program implementation required ongoing organizational learning and local adaptation.** The colleges' experiences illustrate how comprehensive support initiatives inevitably require changes to organizational routines, data systems, and campus culture. Some colleges developed new peer mentoring programs or embedded tutoring directly into high-enrollment courses; others focused on building stronger referral pathways among advising, financial aid, counseling, and basic needs supports. These adaptations underscore the importance of local flexibility—a feature that distinguishes SUCCESS from more prescriptive, single-model interventions.
- 6 Convenings fostered collaboration within a decentralized governance system.** Despite their autonomous governance, the 15 community colleges in Massachusetts demonstrated strong cross-institutional collaboration. Structures such as the SUCCESS Leadership Committee, the Coordinating Committee, and program administrator meetings fostered a community of practice that enabled colleges to share strategies, surface challenges, and refine local adaptations. MACC and the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education played a central role in convening these networks and aligning implementation with legislative goals.

Overall, implementation of SUCCESS demonstrates how a statewide commitment to comprehensive student supports can be tailored to a heterogeneous, decentralized higher education landscape. The initiative capitalizes on Massachusetts' history of cross-campus collaboration. Likewise, by design, SUCCESS complements recent efforts to expand free community college by pairing access with sustained, personalized supports that help students persist in and graduate from college.

Looking ahead, we recommend that other states seeking to develop or scale their own student support initiatives should consider:

- Existing governance structures and networks for communication and collaboration.
- Model comprehensive support programs while preserving flexibility to adapt program design to local contexts.
- When and how to involve colleges in advocacy and program design.
- Allowing for a scale-up or planning period to allow colleges to hire staff, develop data systems, and design programs.
- Coordinating staffing and hiring strategies across institutions to avoid within-state competition for individuals to fill similar roles.