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

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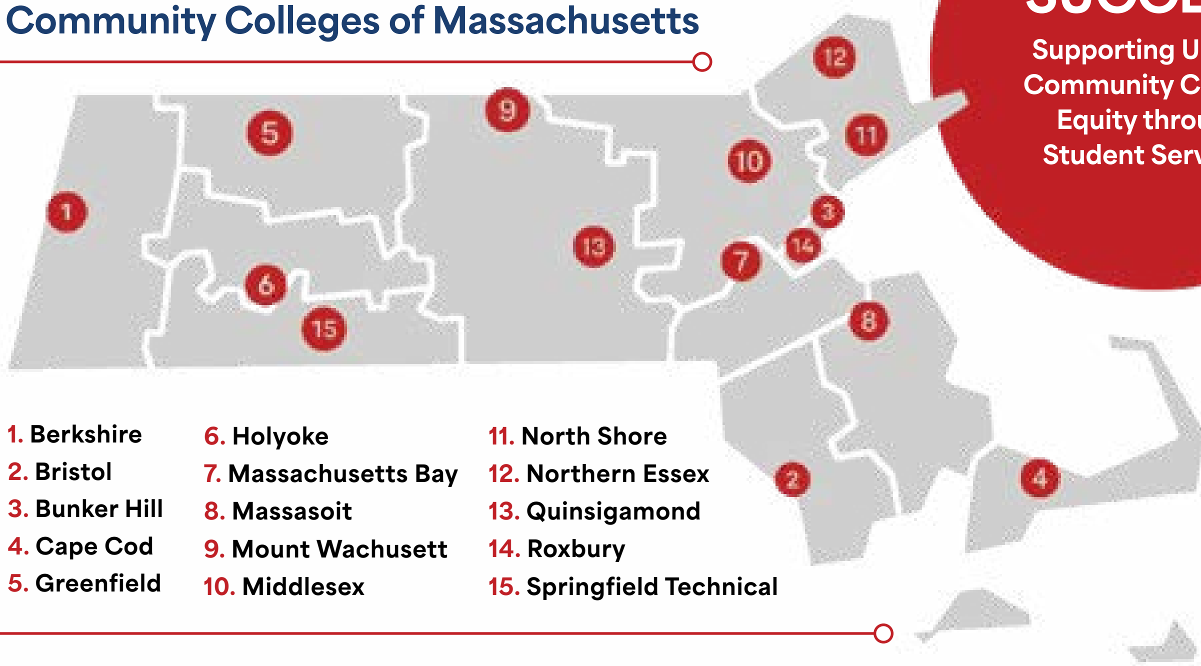
SUCCESS

Supporting Urgent Community College Equity through Student Services

Community Colleges of Massachusetts



1. **Berkshire**
2. **Bristol**
3. **Bunker Hill**
4. **Cape Cod**
5. **Greenfield**
6. **Holyoke**
7. **Massachusetts Bay**
8. **Massasoit**
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10. **Middlesex**
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12. **Northern Essex**
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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.

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

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.

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.

Introduction

In 2021, Massachusetts became the first state in the nation to establish a systemwide, state-funded comprehensive student support initiative in its community colleges. Backed by the state legislature, the Supporting Urgent Community College Equity through Student Services (SUCCESS) program provides funding to all 15 public community colleges in Massachusetts to implement evidence-based wraparound services aimed at improving student retention, persistence, and completion. Through SUCCESS, community colleges in Massachusetts can implement or expand evidence-based support strategies, such as proactive advising, coaching, and peer mentoring.

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SUCCESS is not a single, uniform intervention. Instead, it provides funding for each college to design or expand nonfinancial support programs that reflect its institutional context and student needs. The initiative is specifically designed to support historically underserved students, including those who are economically disadvantaged, first-generation, and from minoritized backgrounds. With continued funding from the state legislature, including a $14 million appropriation in FY2026, SUCCESS represents a substantial state investment in enhancing community college student support at scale.

Like their peers nationwide, community college students in Massachusetts face significant economic and structural barriers that hinder their ability to persist and complete their education. Many juggle coursework alongside work obligations, caregiving responsibilities, and struggles with basic needs such as food, housing, and transportation—challenges that were further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic (Imboden, 2023; Modestino & Forman, 2021). These obstacles are reflected in persistently low completion rates: Only 37.6% of Massachusetts students who begin at a public 2-year college earn a 2- or 4-year degree within 6 years, ranking the state 6th lowest in the nation (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2024). The disparities are even more pronounced for Black, Hispanic, and low-income students, who are significantly less likely to earn their credentials than peers in the same college with similar levels of academic preparation (Murnane et al., 2022). By addressing these barriers through comprehensive, evidence-based support, SUCCESS seeks to improve educational outcomes and equity for community college students across the state. In doing so, it has the potential to also yield broader benefits, as higher persistence and graduation rates can translate into better employment prospects, higher earnings, improved health, and other long-term social and economic gains (Meyer et al., 2025).

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Research supports the effectiveness of comprehensive student support programs. The most well-documented model is City University of New York's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (CUNY ASAP), a comprehensive support initiative designed to improve community college completion rates. Launched in 2007, CUNY ASAP provides an organized suite of services, including intensive academic advising, career counseling, tuition waivers, free public transportation (MetroCards), and financial assistance for books. It increased 3-year degree completion by 16–18 percentage points and 6-year completion by over 10 percentage points (Weiss et al., 2019).Its proven effectiveness and successful replication in several Ohio community colleges (Miller & Weiss, 2022) led to its expansion to additional community colleges in multiple other states, including Pennsylvania, Tennessee, North Carolina, and West Virginia.[1]

Despite strong evidence supporting the effectiveness of comprehensive student support programs, comparatively little research exists on their implementation, leaving policymakers and practitioners with limited guidance. While some publications discuss implementation, systematic evidence on the practical reality of implementing large postsecondary interventions remains scarce (Meyer et al., 2025; Mowreader, 2024; Ratledge & Wavelet, 2021). Moreover, the broader literature on evidence-based public policy indicates that even well-established models can yield mixed results when scaled or applied in new settings, as their effectiveness often diminishes when adapted to different contexts (Cartwright & Hardie, 2012; List, 2022).

Insights from implementation research help explain why. Sustained, successful implementation of evidence-based practices at scale is a complex, iterative process—one that relies not just on the strength of a given intervention but also on organizational capacity, strong leadership, and thoughtful adaptation to local conditions (Horner et al., 2017). Echoing these insights, economic research on the diffusion of new technologies points to a "productivity J-curve," wherein gains often lag behind adoption because early stages of implementation require substantial intangible investments—such as redesigning organizational processes, training staff, and building institutional capacity—that are not immediately reflected in performance metrics (Brynjolfsson et al., 2021). In other words, effective implementation is hard, demanding complex, often invisible organizational change that is essential for new practices to take root and thrive.

The complexity of large-scale, multisite initiatives like SUCCESS makes understanding their implementation even more critical. Implementation quality shapes both programmatic impact (i.e., whether a program achieves its intended outcomes) and efficiency (i.e., whether resources are used effectively). Indeed, comprehensive student support programs require new forms of collaboration, information sharing, and decision making across multiple administrative units and stakeholder levels. Yet, community colleges—like most higher education institutions—are highly decentralized, with siloed processes that make institutional change difficult to coordinate and sustain (Kirst & Stevens, 2015; Meyer et al., 2025; Weick, 1976). Therefore, understanding how comprehensive student support programs like SUCCESS are implemented is an essential precursor to understanding their impact and informing their sustainability and scalability.

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This report aims to provide these necessary insights by examining the advocacy for and rollout of the SUCCESS initiative in Massachusetts. Drawing on qualitative analysis of interviews with initiative administrators and staff as well as analysis of program documents, we trace the story of SUCCESS—how the funding originated, how it was distributed to colleges, and how institutions designed and implemented their support programs. By capturing the perspectives of those directly involved, we shed light on early days of SUCCESS implementation, the strategies colleges adopted, and the challenges they encountered to inform future efforts to scale and sustain similar initiatives.

This report represents the first phase of a larger, mixed-methods project that will explore SUCCESS service take-up and student engagement across the 15 colleges and ultimately measure its impact on student outcomes. The findings presented here offer timely insights for policymakers and education leaders aiming to address persistent gaps in college-going outcomes through wraparound supports. As the first statewide initiative of its kind, the implementation of SUCCESS has implications for policy and practice within and beyond Massachusetts. Our hope is that this report will be relevant not only to state officials overseeing the program but also to higher education planners, community college administrators, and advocacy groups nationwide who are exploring similar efforts to boost student success.

The report proceeds as follows:

- Section 2 outlines the historical and policy context of Massachusetts community colleges, tracing the system's development from the 1960s to the present and highlighting the structural conditions that have shaped the implementation of SUCCESS.
- Section 3 introduces the SUCCESS initiative, describing its legislative origins, funding and governance structures, and variation in target populations and services across colleges, as well as its place within the broader landscape of student support programs nationally.
- Section 4 details the study's qualitative methodology, including data collection, sampling, and coding strategies.
- Section 5 presents findings on the vision and early implementation of SUCCESS, including how colleges interpreted the policy, made design choices, and navigated early challenges.
- Section 6 explores how implementation varied across institutional contexts, focusing on differences in target populations, program goals, and the practical realities of local adaptation.
- Section 7 provides a synthesis of key takeaways, lessons for other states considering similar programs, and a preview of next steps for research.

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POLICY CONTEXT

Policy Context: History and Background of Massachusetts Community Colleges

This section describes the historical and policy context of the Massachusetts community college system in order to situate the challenges and opportunities facing initiatives like SUCCESS. It outlines the system's origins, key policy and economic milestones, shifts in institutional roles and governance, and recent efforts to expand access and support. Readers already familiar with the state's higher education history or looking for program-specific findings may wish to skip ahead to Section 3.

Early Years (Late 1950s to Early 1970s): Foundation and Shift Towards Vocationalization

In 1958, the Massachusetts state legislature established the Massachusetts Board of Regional Community Colleges, laying the foundation for the state's community college system. Berkshire Community College was the first to open its doors in 1960, followed by nine additional colleges within 5 years (see Table 1 for details). Between 1960 and 1971, enrollment in community colleges surged from 151 to 21,300 students, representing about 25% of total enrollment in the public higher education sector in Massachusetts (Murphy, 1974). By the 1970s, the system had grown to include 15 institutions, all of which remain in operation today (Massachusetts Association of Community Colleges [MACC], 2025a).

Compared to midwestern and western states, such as Illinois and California, where community or "junior" colleges emerged in the early 20th century, Massachusetts was slow to establish its community college system. And while public higher education in Massachusetts has historically operated under conditions of fiscal austerity, the 1960s marked a notable exception, as the state made significant investments that led to the creation of community colleges, the expansion of UMass Amherst, and the founding of UMass Boston. Yet, even during this so-called "golden age," Massachusetts lagged behind other states, allocating $635 (~$5,964 in 2024 dollars) per community college student in the mid-1960s, compared to $900 (~$8,453 in 2024 dollars) or more in many other states (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Despite state appropriations for public higher education increasing from 4% of the state budget in 1960 to 9% by 1973, Massachusetts still ranked 49th nationally in per capita higher education spending in 1972 (Academy for Educational Development, 1973). For decades, Massachusetts continued to allocate a smaller share of its tax revenue to public higher education compared to other states (Long, 2009).

Table 1

Massachusetts Community College Founding Years and Campus Locations			
COLLEGE	**YEAR OF FOUNDING**	**LOCATION(S) OF MAIN CAMPUS(ES)**	**OTHER LOCATIONS (E.G., SATELLITE TRAINING CENTERS)**
Berkshire Community College	1960	Pittsfield	
Bristol Community College	1965	Fall River, New Bedford, Attleboro	Taunton
Bunker Hill Community College	1973	Charlestown (Boston), Chelsea	Chinatown, East Boston, Everett, Malden, Quincy, South End
Cape Cod Community College	1961	West Barnstable	Hyannis, Plymouth, Bridgewater, Oak Bluffs
Greenfield Community College	1962	Greenfield	Northampton
Holyoke Community College[A]	1964	Holyoke	Ludlow, Ware
Massachusetts Bay Community College	1961	Wellesley Hills, Framingham	Ashland
Massasoit Community College	1966	Brockton, Canton	Middleborough
Middlesex Community College	1970	Bedford, Lowell	
Mount Wachusett Community College	1966	Gardner, Leominster	Fitchburg
North Shore Community College	1965	Danvers, Lynn	
Northern Essex Community College	1961	Haverhill, Lawrence	
Quinsigamond Community College	1963	Worcester	Assabet, Burncoat, Millbury, Southbridge
Roxbury Community College	1973	Roxbury Crossing	
Springfield Technical Community College [B]	1967	Springfield	

A Holyoke Public Schools offered college-level classes through Holyoke Junior College, established by the school board in 1946; it became Holyoke Community College in 1964.

B Originally Springfield Technical Institute, founded in 1964.

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The comparatively slow creation of the state's community college system and overall fiscal austerity toward public higher education has been attributed to the influence of elite private institutions, such as Harvard, Amherst, and Williams, which dominated the state's higher education landscape and shaped public policy decisions.[2] These institutions wielded significant political and cultural influence, prioritizing their interests and limiting the development of public higher education. Similar trends were evident in other states that had a significant presence of private colleges in the early 20th century (Goldin & Katz, 1998). Nonetheless, by the 1960s Massachusetts private colleges largely welcomed the establishment of public community colleges, as these institutions helped reinforce and secure the dominance of elite private colleges rather than competing directly with them (Groeger, 2022).

Like their counterparts nationwide, Massachusetts community colleges enrolled disproportionately more students from lower- and middle-income backgrounds.

Massachusetts community colleges were viewed as nonthreatening by private colleges for several reasons. First, like their counterparts nationwide, they enrolled disproportionately more students from lower- and middle-income backgrounds, while 4-year institutions tended to attract wealthier students. Many community college students were the first in their families to pursue higher education, highlighting the critical role these institutions played in expanding access (Brint & Karabel, 1989).[3] Second, both private colleges and public community colleges in the state benefited from federal policies: The Higher Education Act HEA of 1965 established federal involvement in higher education and introduced guaranteed student loans, while the 1972 reauthorization created the Pell Grant, providing critical support for low-income students, who mostly attended community colleges (Fuller, 2014).

Third, like their counterparts across the United States during this period, Massachusetts community colleges underwent a significant shift toward vocationalization, moving away from their original focus on general or liberal arts education designed to replicate the first 2 years of a 4-year college degree program. Across the country, these "junior colleges" initially prioritized preparing students for transfer to 4-year colleges and universities, expanding access to higher education during a time of growing demand (Kisker et al., 2023). Over time, however, a focus on vocational training and workforce readiness grew. Community colleges responded to industrial needs and economic pressures by evolving into comprehensive institutions offering terminal, 2-year degrees, carving out a distinct niche within the higher education landscape (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Nationally and in Massachusetts, this vocational shift was fueled by energetic leadership, budgetary funding incentives, and favorable local labor market conditions. By the early 1970s, enrollment in vocational programs at Massachusetts community colleges had grown significantly, with many enrolling up to around 40% of their students in such programs, and some seeing enrollment levels in vocational programs reaching or exceeding 50%–up from just 15% in 1964 (Brint & Karabel, 1989).

Workers For the Miracle (1970s to 1980s): Community Colleges and Economic Development

Following a prolonged period of industrial decline marked by the deindustrialization of Massachusetts' traditional sectors like textiles, the 1970s and 1980s ushered in a transformative era of rapid economic growth in the state. This period, often referred to as the "Massachusetts Miracle," was fueled by federal defense spending and bolstered by the presence of world-class research institutions such as Harvard and MIT. The economic boom was characterized by the rise of high-tech and service industries, low unemployment rates, and increasing income levels (Tager, 1991). Route 128, the primary beltway around the city of Boston, emerged as a hub of innovation, driving significant job creation, including 100,000 new positions in the high-tech sector between 1975 and 1980 (Best & Forrant, 2000).

Amid chronic labor shortages, the state turned to community colleges and their vocational training programs to provide workers with the mid-level skills needed to support emerging industries. Public-private partnerships and targeted training initiatives gained momentum, further advancing the vocationalization that had begun in the 1960s. This period was not without challenges, however. Mismatches between training outputs and industry needs highlighted the difficulties of aligning educational programming with the rapidly evolving demands of "new-tech" industries and a shifting economic landscape (Moussouris, 1998).

The Massachusetts Miracle ended somewhat abruptly in the late 1980s and early 1990s, triggered by a national recession, reductions in federal defense spending, and declining tax revenues. These factors exposed the state's economic vulnerability, particularly its overdependence on federal military procurement and highly specialized sectors like minicomputers (Harrison & Kluver, 1989). Between the mid-1980s and early 1990s, employment in the high-tech sector plummeted from nearly 250,000 to 150,000 jobs, and the number of electronics firms along Route 128 dwindled from 14 to just four (Best & Forrant, 2000). Unemployment in Massachusetts rose sharply, from 3.3% in the 1980s to 6.7% by 1990 (Williams, 1999).

Simultaneously, federal funding for higher education diminished, the enrollment boom slowed, and public support for higher education waned following student protests and desegregation debates (Groeger, 2022). Unsurprisingly, the economic downturn precipitated a fiscal crisis that forced budget cuts in higher education, leading to steep tuition increases at the state's public 2- and 4-year institutions to offset funding reductions (Slavet et al., 1990). Despite these challenges, state officials continued to emphasize the economic relevance of higher education institutions, including community colleges, as vital contributors to economic recovery. Policymakers promoted the idea that community colleges could play an active role in revitalizing the workforce by aligning academic programs with industry needs; claims that training deficits hindered the growth of knowledge-based industries, particularly in biotechnology, became common during this period (Moussouris, 1998).

Community colleges responded by embracing the designation of economic change agent, providing specialized training and support for the Massachusetts industrial base. They partnered with local companies to offer contract training, conducted regional labor market assessments despite challenges posed by firms' reluctance to share competitive information, and developed tailored occupational training programs. Nevertheless, despite structural and economic uncertainties, community colleges continued to pursue state policy objectives by addressing mid-level skills gaps, and they played an important role in equipping students with valuable skills that translated into economic benefits.

Challenges and Reform (1990s to Early 2000s): Continued Underfunding and Governance Changes

In the aftermath of the economic downturn following the Massachusetts Miracle, and amidst a labor market reshaped by technological advancements and the rise of the internet, Massachusetts faced the challenge of adapting its education system to meet the demands of a rapidly changing economy. The tech sector remained a significant influence on education policy during this period, exemplified by critiques such as the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education's 1991 report *Every Child is a Winner,* which argued that the state's education system was unprepared for a technology-driven economy. This echoed national debates about the perceived decline of American public education, spurred by the 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report (Chester, 2014). Concurrently, federal efforts under the Clinton administration focused on financial aid reform, resulting in (a) the 1993 Student Loan Reform Act, which expanded direct federal lending for higher education and introduced tax credits for college expenses, and (b) the 1996 launch of 529 College Savings Plans, enabling tax-exempt savings for higher education (Fuller, 2014). At the state level, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court's decision in *McDuffy v. Robertson* established state standards for evaluating education reform efforts (McDermott, 2004). Together, these developments set the stage for the Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA) of 1993, landmark legislation led by Governor William Weld to strengthen public K–12 education in a state emerging from a fiscal crisis.

Recognizing that a high school diploma was no longer sufficient in a rapidly evolving labor market, MERA sought to better prepare students for postsecondary education and employment opportunities. It paired educational standards, assessments, and accountability with a commitment to increased and more equitable state funding (Chester, 2014). Central to implementation was the creation of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), designed as a consistent statewide measure of K–12 district performance. By 2001, passing the 10th-grade MCAS became a requirement for high school graduation, alongside local district requirements—a policy that remained in place until 2024. This launched 2 decades of K–12 progress, propelling Massachusetts to a leading position on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP; Donahue, 2024). The 2024 NAEP showed Massachusetts firmly in the top position among all states in both reading and mathematics scores (Belsha & Meltzer, 2025). Although critics of the MCAS have pointed to barriers it may impose on less advantaged students (Larkin, 2022), research suggests that improvements in MCAS performance have led to better college readiness, higher college success rates, and improved labor market outcomes (Donahue, 2024; Papay et al., 2020, 2024). Overall, the Massachusetts K-12 education system is now among the strongest in the nation, and MERA stands as a path-breaking education reform in the state's recent history (Papay et al., 2020).

MERA's implementation also highlighted systemic challenges within higher education, such as underfunded mandates and capacity constraints. Between 1987 and 2006, Massachusetts state spending on public higher education declined by more than $300 million, a 25% reduction (Huff, 2008). These cuts, which were deeper during economic downturns and only modestly restored during recovery periods,[4] placed significant strain on public colleges and universities.[5] The resulting shortfalls forced community colleges to increase tuition and fees. By 2006, the cost of attendance at Massachusetts community colleges was 59% higher than the national average (Long et al., 2006). At the same time, 3-year graduation rates remained low and continued to lag behind the national average in the mid-2000s (Lassen, 2007).[6]

The state's community colleges also experienced significant governance reform during this period.[7] Until the 1980s, they were governed centrally by the State Board of Regional Community Colleges, which oversaw policy and outcomes. The 1991 establishment of the Massachusetts Higher Education Coordinating Council, later renamed the Board and then the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education (DHE), shifted operational authority to individual college boards of trustees.[8] These boards—each with 11 members appointed by the governor, including a student and alumnus—were granted full control over institutional operations. By the early 2010s, this decentralized governance model was firmly established, with the DHE overseeing policy, program approval, financial aid, and workforce development; operational control remained with institutional boards (Allsid et al., 2011).

Massachusetts community colleges also had to contend with other policy changes (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Chester, 2014; McDermott, 2004). For example, a policy introduced during this period limited the percentage of students requiring remedial coursework in state 4-year colleges to 10% or less, redirecting the overflow of students to community colleges for remediation. The state supported this shift with grants and encouraged partnerships between 4-year institutions and community colleges, ultimately aiming to eliminate remedial education at 4-year institutions altogether. The share of students needing to take remedial courses dropped at 4-year colleges—from 24% in 1995 to 10% in 1997 and 5% in 1998 (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003). This placed additional burdens on community colleges by increasing the educational needs of their student populations. Though data on remedial enrollment is scarce, particularly regarding the impact of specific policies, it appears that the effect of the policy limiting the share of remedial students in 4-year public institutions was temporary: As of 2013, at least 60% of community college students, 22% of state university students, and 10% of those in the UMass system took remedial coursework (DHE, n.d.).

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After the Great Recession (Late 2000s to 2010s): Still Underfunded as Enrollment Surges

In the aftermath of the 2008 Great Recession, Massachusetts community colleges experienced a significant enrollment surge, with an increase of 18,000 students (15%) between 2008 and 2013 (Kendall & Marinova, 2018). But state funding of community colleges, which in 2008 had only returned to 2001 levels, declined by 22% between 2008 and 2010. Funding began to recover in the following years as the economy improved (Kendall & Marinova, 2018). This combination of larger enrollment and limited funding, along with increased national attention on community colleges, catalyzed several key initiatives in Massachusetts.

First, in 2010, Governor Deval Patrick launched the Vision Project to align public higher education with workforce demands (Crosson & Orcutt, 2014). Supported by the Vision Project Performance Incentive Fund, public colleges were encouraged to pursue systemic reforms and consistently assess performance outcomes (DHE, 2014). Initiatives such as guided pathways, STEM Starter Academy, dual-enrollment programs, and mentoring services were implemented with the goal of boosting completion rates, but in 2014 only five community colleges (Berkshire, Cape Cod, Middlesex, North Shore, and Mt. Wachusett) met or exceeded the Vision Project's expectations of improvement in 6-year success rates at a rate of 1 percentage point per year (DHE, 2014).[9]

Among the initiatives begun during this period, STEM Starter Academy stands out. Launched in 2014 and implemented at all 15 community colleges, it provides students with STEM-focused curricula, remedial math courses (as needed), industry exposure, and wraparound support services. In an evaluation by the UMass Donahue Institute, participants demonstrated higher enrollment and credential completion rates compared to a matched sample of nonparticipating students (Johnson et al., 2022). Another innovative program, Early College High Schools, was introduced in 2018 to improve equity in educational attainment. Unlike traditional dual-enrollment programs, this program targets historically underrepresented students, offering college-level courses during high school together with comprehensive onboarding and support services; by 2022, 44 high schools across the state were participating in this program (Lucien et al., 2024).

Second, Massachusetts implemented a new funding formula for community colleges in 2012, establishing a baseline subsidy of $4.5 million per institution, with additional funds distributed based on enrollment and outcome metrics (Kendall & Marinova, 2018). Although this formula was applied mainly to distributing additional funding rather than reallocating the entire budget, it successfully directed more resources to colleges serving high-need populations, such as Bunker Hill, Quinsigamond, and Bristol (Kendall & Marinova, 2018). Today, Massachusetts employs a hybrid funding approach for its community colleges, incorporating direct funding and performance-based allocations (Lingo et al., 2021).

Third, the MassTransfer initiative was established in response to longstanding challenges faced by students seeking to transfer from Massachusetts community colleges to 4-year public institutions. In 2007, the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education convened the

Commonwealth Transfer Advisory Group to assess transfer policies and recommend improvements (Murnane et al., 2022). This effort culminated in the 2008 adoption of MassTransfer, a comprehensive framework designed to streamline credit transfer, ensure course equivalencies, and reduce financial barriers for students.[10] By 2009, a General Education Foundation Block was introduced, setting common requirements across public institutions, followed by the launch of the MassTransfer website (Murnane et al., 2022). Over the next decade, the initiative expanded with Associate to Bachelor's (A2B) pathways, which guarantee credit transfer in specific fields and waive application fees and essays (DHE, 2022).

Massachusetts employs a hybrid funding approach for its community colleges, incorporating direct funding and performance-based allocations.

With these efforts, the community college system adapted to changing conditions, though gains in student outcomes remained modest. By 2013, the 3-year graduation rate across Massachusetts community colleges hovered below 20%, still below the national average (Kendall & Marinova, 2018). In the same year, approximately 62% of first-time, full-time degree-seeking students who graduated from the state's public high schools and enrolled in community colleges needed remedial coursework upon enrollment (DHE, 2014). A large share of these students were from low-income backgrounds and were students of color (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2014).

Reflecting the growing diversity of the state and its community college population in the 2000s and 2010s, institutions such as Northern Essex Community College and Springfield Technical Community College have met criteria to be classified as Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), and Bunker Hill Community College and Middlesex Community College have been recognized as Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs).[11] Several community-based organizations have launched efforts to support this increasingly diverse student population. A 2016 report on college access programs in Boston identified nearly 40 initiatives serving approximately 7,000 students annually, offering services such as academic advising, career placement, and college success coaching (Levine et al., 2018).

A particularly notable program is Success Boston, launched in 2008 with support from The Boston Foundation, Boston Public Schools, the City of Boston, community-based organizations, and higher education institutions led by UMass Boston and Bunker Hill Community College. It targets Boston Public Schools graduates from economically disadvantaged and underrepresented backgrounds and addresses academic, financial, and personal challenges to improve college completion. Intensive transition support via coaching—from a student's final year of high school through their first 2 years of college—helps them enroll in and succeed at 2- and 4-year colleges. Since the program's inception, over 7,000 BPS students have participated, resulting in higher college enrollment, persistence, and completion rates (Lack et al., 2023; McLaughlin et al., 2016). Currently, 49% of coached students graduate from college, up from 35% at the initiative's start, and the initiative remains committed to reaching an ambitious 70% college completion rate (Lack et al., 2023; Lack & Acheson-Field, 2025).

Post-Pandemic Revival (2022-Present): Toward Free Community College

In the decade between 2013 and 2023, Massachusetts community colleges experienced a substantial enrollment decline, from over 60,000 full-time equivalent students in 2013 to fewer than 40,000 in 2023—a drop of over 30% (Agha & Imboden, 2023). Like the rest of the country, Massachusetts saw enrollment declines during the Covid-19 pandemic, but the downward trend had been underway for years before the pandemic hit.[12] Currently, about 20% of both full- and part-time students enrolled in degree or certificate programs at Massachusetts community colleges attain a degree or certificate within 3 years, and fewer than 20% of low-income community college students earn a degree or certificate within 6 years of graduating high school (Hildreth Institute, 2024b). These completion rates are misaligned with the labor market needs of Massachusetts, where more than 70% of jobs are projected to require at least some postsecondary education by 2030 (Hildreth Institute, 2024b), with particularly strong employment growth in STEM and healthcare fields (Murnane et al., 2024).

These challenges are underscored by a long history of underfunding public higher education in the state. Between 2001 and 2020, tuition and fees at Massachusetts state 2- and 4-year colleges increased by over 50%, while inflation-adjusted per-student state public higher education funding declined by 20% (Imboden, 2022). By 2020, Massachusetts ranked among the bottom 15 states and territories in state financial aid spending, providing less than $500 per full-time student. An average college student in the state faced the fifth highest debt levels nationwide (Imboden, 2023).

Massachusetts' renewed commitment to public higher education marks a turning point after decades of underfunding and rising costs.

Against this backdrop, the 2022 passage of the Fair Share Amendment—a "millionaires' tax" introducing a 4% levy on annual incomes over $1 million—created a critical revenue source for public higher education. This funding allowed Massachusetts to expand financial aid funding from $121 million in 2020 to $404 million in 2024 (Hildreth Institute, 2024a).[13] This revenue has supported programs like MassReconnect and MassEducate, which together form the cornerstone of the state's recent free community college initiative designed to remove financial barriers to access.

MassReconnect, launched in 2023, targets adults aged 25 or older with no previously earned associate or bachelor's degree; it covers tuition and fees at Massachusetts community colleges for full- and part-time students and provides a stipend of up to $1,200 per academic year for books and supplies (DHE, 2024b). The potential reach of this program is substantial, given that nearly half of adults in Massachusetts do not have a college degree (Hildreth Institute, 2024b). Initial results from the fall 2023 entering cohort show a 12% increase in overall adult student enrollment and a nearly 45% rise in new student enrollment at community colleges. Despite these substantial increases, many eligible students have missed out on MassReconnect support due to failure to complete the FAFSA, a key requirement for accessing any financial aid. This highlights the potential benefit of improved support to navigate the financial aid process (DHE, 2024c).

MassEducate, introduced in 2024, is a $93 million initiative that extends free tuition and fees to all community college students who complete the FAFSA in Massachusetts, regardless of age or income. It also provides stipends of up to $1,200 per year for books and supplies for students at or below 125% of the state median income (DHE, 2024a). The stipend component might be particularly important for reducing the financial burden of direct college costs: Nearly 90% of community college students in Massachusetts had unmet financial need—primarily related to housing, food, transportation, and childcare—right before MassReconnect and MassEducate rollout (Imboden, 2023).

The success of these financial aid initiatives in improving retention and completion rates also depends on addressing barriers beyond college cost. Approximately 30% of MassReconnect participants have discontinued college after their first semester, underscoring the need for robust student support services (Hildreth Institute, 2024a). Massachusetts' renewed commitment to public higher education marks a turning point after decades of underfunding and rising costs. However, its success will require sustained investment, careful attention to equity, and a focus on addressing broader structural barriers that have historically constrained community colleges' transformative potential.

Summing Up

The early years of Massachusetts community colleges in the 1960s were marked by significant expansion and an unusual period of generous state funding. However, the public higher education system was constrained by the dominance of elite private institutions and a history of fiscal austerity. Over the decades that followed, the system adapted to changing economic landscapes by emphasizing vocational training and workforce development. These adaptations helped meet the demands of emerging industries but also highlighted persistent challenges in aligning educational programming with evolving labor market needs.

While the decentralized governance model of Massachusetts community colleges allows flexibility to address local needs, it also amplifies differences in enrollment, demographics, and outcomes across institutions. Funding challenges have been consistent, with state appropriations limited, especially during economic downturns, and colleges have had to rely heavily on tuition, fees, and grants. These systemic factors have shaped how community colleges have responded to rising costs and shifting community demands.

Nevertheless, community colleges in Massachusetts have remained vital engines of opportunity. Recent financial aid expansions, such as MassReconnect and MassEducate, represent historic increases in funding of public higher education in the state. These programs aim to eliminate cost barriers, but their success will depend on whether broader structural issues are addressed. This makes SUCCESS a critically important program for addressing equity gaps and improving student outcomes.

The SUCCESS Initiative: One Framework, Many Models

This section introduces the SUCCESS initiative and describes the legislative framework, funding structure, governance roles, and variation in target populations and program services across Massachusetts community colleges. It situates SUCCESS within the national landscape of student support programs, highlighting its unique emphasis on nonfinancial supports and local adaptability.

The SUCCESS initiative, launched by the Massachusetts legislature in FY2021, provides funding to the state's 15 community colleges for comprehensive, nonfinancial supports aimed at improving outcomes such as retention, persistence, and completion for students facing systemic barriers in higher education. Since its inception, annual funding for SUCCESS has doubled—from $7 million in FY2021 to $14 million in FY2026 (The Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2020, 2025).[14] The number of students served by SUCCESS grew from 6,359 in the 2021-2022 academic year to 9,723 in 2023-2024—roughly 15% of all community college students in the state (MACC, 2023b, 2025c).

Legislative Blueprint for Success: Roles, Rules, and Room to Innovate

The legislative language that established SUCCESS strikes a balance between structure and flexibility. It sets broad student eligibility criteria, outlines a collaborative process for designing the funding formula, and defines a menu of allowable supports and services, granting a degree of autonomy to colleges in implementation.

- **Funds disbursement:** The legislative language directs that the funding formula and disbursement criteria be developed by DHE in consultation with MACC, a coordinating body that represents and advocates on behalf of the 15 community colleges in Massachusetts.
- **Eligible students:** SUCCESS funds are intended to support Massachusetts' most vulnerable community college students, including those who are economically disadvantaged, first-generation, and minoritized, those who have disabilities, and LGBTQ and questioning students (The Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2020).
- **Eligible supports and services:** Colleges may use funds for a broad range of services, such as peer mentoring, academic workshops, campus visits to 4-year institutions, and targeted advising related to academics, careers, transfers, and scholarships (The Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2020).

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Massachusetts community colleges range in size from about 1,500 to over 8,000 students and serve distinct student bodies. As such, facilitating differentiation while promoting equitable outcomes across institutions is part of the stated goal of SUCCESS.

Fueling SUCCESS: How Funding Flows

Together with the initial budget allocation, the state legislature stated that SUCCESS funding would (a) be disbursed to campuses via a formula created by MACC and DHE; (b) support "wraparound" services for students; and (c) promote equity in student outcomes (The Commonwealth of Massachusetts 2020). Together, MACC and DHE developed a formula on which funding for these wraparound supports and services would depend. The original formula accounted for the wide variation in size of the community colleges and largely depended on enrollment of the target groups that were specified in the legislation and could be measured uniformly. Together, MACC and DHE have updated this formula as needed.

As of spring 2025, this formula provides each college with a baseline allocation corresponding to serving 250 students; additional funds are distributed based on the total number of students who could be eligible for SUCCESS in every college. With program sizes between 400 and 1,000 students, the average expenditure per SUCCESS-eligible student ranges from $1,500 to $2,000 (MACC, 2023b). At least 80% of SUCCESS funds are required to be spent on personnel (MACC, 2025c).

Building SUCCESS Together: Shared Governance

At its core, SUCCESS is a collaborative initiative led by the 15 Massachusetts community colleges, in partnership with MACC and DHE. Colleges actively shape their program design, implementation, and ongoing development through the SUCCESS Leadership and Coordinating Committees, SUCCESS Data Professionals Forum, SUCCESS Program Administrators Team, and regular cross-college convenings of initiative staff. This infrastructure fosters collective ownership, continuous improvement, and peer learning across institutions. Additionally, the 15 community college presidents play a strategic and operational role in supporting coordinated implementation across the system.

Defining SUCCESS: Creating Target Populations

Legislative language defines student eligibility for SUCCESS to include economically disadvantaged, first-generation, minoritized, disabled, and LGBTQ and questioning students. Building on this foundation, guidance from MACC and DHE directed colleges to serve matriculated, certificate- and degree-seeking students who fall into one or more of these prescribed categories. Within this broad framework, colleges have had considerable autonomy to define their priority populations and tailor programs to their local contexts.[15]

Table 2

SUCCESS Programs at Massachusetts Community Colleges	
COLLEGE	**SUCCESS PROGRAM NAME: DESCRIPTION OF STUDENTS SERVED**
Berkshire CC	**SUCCESS:** same criteria as prescribed by the legislature
Bristol CC	**SUCCESS:** same criteria as prescribed by the legislature
Bunker Hill CC	**Halting Oppressive Pathways through Education (HOPE) Initiative:** Black, Indigenous, and Latino males
Cape Cod CC	**4Cs4U:** historically underserved students who do not place directly into entry-level college mathematics and who have not yet completed college-level math for their degree program
Greenfield CC	**SUCCESS:** economically disadvantaged, first-generation, minoritized students and students with disabilities
Holyoke CC	**1. ALANA Men in Motion:** Asian, Latino, African, and Native American men **2. Student Ambassadors Mentorship Program (SAMP):** women, nonbinary, and transgender students enrolled in at least six credits women, nonbinary, and transgender students enrolled in at least six credits
Massasoit CC	**SUCCESS Scholars:** part-time students
MassBay CC	**SUCCESS Initiative:** students who hit at least two criteria of those prescribed by the legislature
Middlesex CC	**SUCCESS Scholars:** Asian American, Black, African American, Latinx, Undocumented, and LGBTQ+ students
Mount Wachusett CC	**SUCCESS Scholar Program:** students new to the college or new by transfer; some continuing students; Pell-eligible; first-generation; students with disabilities; minoritized students; LGBTQIA+
North Shore CC	**Realizing & Inspiring Student Excellence (RISE):** students who identify as Black, African American, African, Latina/o/é, and/or 2SLGTBQI+; students with disabilities enrolled in a certificate or degree program
Northern Essex CC	**Seize Opportunities Aspire to Rise (SOAR):** students enrolled in a degree-earning program; first-generation; low-income based on Pell eligibility; low-SES; Hispanic; with high school GPA <2.7; placed in developmental courses; LGBTQIA students
Quinsigamond CC	**SUCCESS Scholars:** part-time students with a specific focus on Black and Latinx students, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students
Roxbury CC	**SUCCESS:** English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), men of color, LGBTQ+ students, and others who could benefit from supports that will keep them on track for retention and graduation
Springfield Technical CC	**1. LEAD–Female Leadership and Mentoring Program:** female-identifying students **2. MILE–Male Initiative for Leadership and Education:** male-identifying students

Note. *This table reflects program descriptions as of Summer 2025. Table contents are based on program descriptions from college and MACC websites, supplemented by information gathered through interviews with community college staff.*

Table 2 outlines the names and target populations of SUCCESS programs across institutions, with links to program websites where available. All colleges have programs designed with the legislative populations in mind, and most have a campus-specific layer of focus, aligning program design with specific institutional needs. For example, Bunker Hill's HOPE Initiative centers on Black, Indigenous, and Latino male students; Northern Essex's SOAR program includes students with high school GPAs below 2.7 or those enrolled in developmental courses; and Cape Cod's 4Cs4U focuses on students needing support to reach college-level math proficiency. These targeted models illustrate how colleges have leveraged the initiative's flexibility to serve their students' most pressing needs.

Another facet of flexibility is the number of programs offered within a single college. Two colleges have implemented more than one SUCCESS-funded initiative: Holyoke introduced both ALANA Men in Motion and the Student Ambassadors Mentorship Program, while Springfield Technical developed the LEAD (Female Leadership and Mentoring Program) and the MILE (Male Initiative for Leadership and Education). These variations underscore the adaptability of SUCCESS as a framework for meeting diverse institutional and student needs.

What SUCCESS Offers: Supports and Services

The wording of the legislation establishing SUCCESS prescribes that supports and services include (but are not limited to) peer mentoring, academic workshops, visits to 4-year institutions, and targeted advising for academics, careers, transfers, and scholarships. This enables colleges to implement a broad range of evidence-based supports aligned with their students' needs.

In the 2023-2024 academic year, all 15 community colleges offered case management, coaching, career advising, and transfer advising. All but one college also provided academic advising, academic support workshops, basic needs counseling, community events, and student planning. More than half of the colleges have offered affinity groups, financial counseling, scholarship advising, tutoring and/or study groups, field trips to 4-year colleges and universities, peer mentoring or other mentoring, assessments, and publications (e.g., newsletters or blog posts). Discussion groups and counseling were less common but have still been implemented by at least six colleges. Overall, the colleges' SUCCESS supports and services align with the broad categories outlined in the legislation and extend into areas not explicitly named in order to meet student needs—some grounded in existing campus infrastructure, others newly introduced through SUCCESS.

Opt-In or Opt-Out: How Students Join SUCCESS

Across varied implementations, one programmatic distinction lies in whether colleges have adopted an opt-out, opt-in, or hybrid approach to student participation. In an opt-out model, all eligible students—as defined by the college—are automatically considered part of the SUCCESS program. Staff proactively reach out to offer supports and services, and students remain in the program unless they explicitly decline to participate.

In contrast, opt-in models require students to actively express interest—sometimes through an application process—before receiving any supports. There is also a hybrid approach wherein all eligible new freshmen are automatically enrolled in SUCCESS, while continuing students have the option to opt in. As of spring 2025, most SUCCESS programs had adopted the opt-out approach.

SUCCESS and the National Landscape: A Distinct Model

Nonfinancial Supports Only

The SUCCESS initiative shares important features with other comprehensive student support programs for community college students, but it also diverges in meaningful ways. Most notably, the Massachusetts legislature explicitly mandated that SUCCESS provide only nonfinancial supports, setting it apart from other widely known, rigorously evaluated programs that have demonstrated effectiveness in improving community college students' persistence and graduation rates. The most prominent national models combine nonfinancial supports with financial aid. For example:

- **CUNY ASAP**—one of the most extensively researched and replicated models—pairs supports including intensive advising, enhanced career services, and tutoring with tuition and fee waivers, free textbooks, and transportation assistance (Miller & Weiss, 2022);
- **Stay the Course** offers emergency financial aid alongside intensive case management (Evans et al., 2020);
- **Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement** provides financial support alongside full-time enrollment requirements, counseling, wraparound services, and a College Prep Academy (Rolston et al., 2021); and
- **One Million Degrees** combines financial aid with skill-building workshops, coaching, and academic advising (Hallberg et al., 2023).

Other comprehensive student support programs offer financial incentives to encourage participation or engagement. Examples include the following:

- **The Scaling Up College Completion Efforts for Student Success (SUCCESS)** program (distinct from SUCCESS) offers financial incentives tied to meeting program milestones, along with coaching and full-time enrollment support (Sommo et al., 2023); and
- **Opening Doors** provides intensive counseling paired with stipends to encourage participation (Barrow et al., 2014).

In sum, the SUCCESS initiative includes a commitment to robust nonfinancial supports, such as advising, coaching, and academic workshops, but it uniquely excludes both financial aid and financial incentives. At present, MassReconnect and MassEducate aim to improve affordability and expand financial aid for community college students across Massachusetts, but these programs are administered separately from SUCCESS.

Flexibility of Program Features

The substantial institutional flexibility of SUCCESS results in a constellation of distinct, locally responsive programs that fall under a common umbrella of supporting students facing systemic barriers in higher education. This autonomy comes without the technical assistance or guardrails offered by more strictly defined programs like CUNY ASAP, but it encourages innovation and local adaptation, which are important for ensuring relevance, effectiveness, and institutional buy-in.

The remainder of this report examines how SUCCESS has been implemented on the ground—capturing the richness, diversity, and complexity of how Massachusetts community colleges translated the common framework of SUCCESS into locally responsive designs.

4 Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine the conceptualization and implementation of the SUCCESS initiative. We conducted 43 hour-long semistructured interviews with program directors and staff from SUCCESS programs at all 15 Massachusetts community colleges, members of the SUCCESS Coordinating Committee, and staff from DHE and MACC.

Between November 2023 and August 2024, we interviewed two to four staff members at each community college, representing a range of specific job titles, such as program director, dean, and SUCCESS coach. These interviews were conducted over Zoom, with the exception of two that took place in person after a statewide convening. Interviews with representatives from DHE and MACC were conducted between August 2024 and May 2025.

Interviews with program staff focused on their SUCCESS program details (e.g., objectives, services, target population) as well as their perceptions of impacts, challenges, and the implementation process. Interviews with administrators (i.e., DHE and MACC representatives) focused on the origins of and advocacy for SUCCESS as well as its implementation and evolution. Sections of the report that address advocacy for and early design of SUCCESS necessarily draw more on interviews with administrators who were present at the time; sections that describe SUCCESS programs draw more on college-level staff interviews.

Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and transcribed. During transcription, all identifying details were replaced with study ID numbers. To protect respondents' confidentiality, we use "SUCCESS administrator" to refer to any DHE or MACC staff member and "SUCCESS staff member" to refer to program directors and staff at the community colleges. We occasionally name specific institutions when referencing our analysis of foundational program documents but do not identify institutions to which direct quotes pertain.

We employed a flexible coding approach (Deterding & Waters, 2021) to first index the transcripts using codes that corresponded to the sections of the interview guide. While index coding, we wrote memos about emergent themes, patterns, and typologies (Miles et al., 2014). Next, we applied analytic codes to subsets of the index-coded data in order to address particular research questions. We selected the quotes presented in the sections that follow to illustrate both broad themes and variation across community colleges.

Early Implementation of SUCCESS

This section draws on qualitative interviews to describe early conceptualization and implementation of SUCCESS. This empirical section focuses on key aspects of early implementation common to all 15 colleges: program design, collaboration, hiring, and staffing.

Origins of Funding: A Rare Opportunity

MACC and Lane Glenn, president of Northern Essex Community College, are credited with leading the advocacy efforts for SUCCESS funding. In a Commonwealth Beacon article, Glenn (2019) introduced the idea of targeted state funding for student success at Massachusetts community colleges. He connected this idea to support services offered by CUNY ASAP and drew on two examples of federally funded TRIO programs at Massachusetts community colleges–the PACE Program at Northern Essex Community College and the STRIVE program at Holyoke Community College–to illustrate the potential of state investment in similar student supports at an estimated level of $1,500 per student.[16]

Given the decentralized governance structure of Massachusetts community colleges, advocating for centralized SUCCESS funding meant treading new territory. In addition to the uncertainty of proposing a new, shared initiative across decentralized colleges, SUCCESS funding seemed especially unlikely given that early advocacy coincided with the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic. Ultimately, however, the funding arrived at the end of 2020, following a delayed budget cycle. A SUCCESS administrator recalled:

> *"[In 20]20, most state budgets were late. Ours was December, right?...The fiscal year starts on July 1, ours was December. Yeah. We learned right around Christmas time, just before Christmas, that we were going to get $7.5 million for this program....We had no structure in place yet. For this, I mean, it was a long shot, and...there were so many other priorities that were going on [in 2020], obviously."*

Another SUCCESS administrator similarly emphasized how unusual it was to have the state's commitment for a finite program: "To get a new line item put into the budget is herculean–like, it doesn't happen very often." Indeed, this is particularly notable for community colleges, which have received declining per-student investment from Massachusetts for the last 2 decades (Imboden, 2022).

Soon after the legislature allocated funds for the initiative, staff from DHE, MACC, and the SUCCESS Leadership Committee quickly developed structures to enable community colleges to develop and implement programs that aligned with the stated goals and to demonstrate impact. A SUCCESS administrator described this as the pressure to "prove your worth from the very beginning. Set yourselves up to prove your worth. Otherwise, when the downturn comes, your money will go away."

Since its early conceptualization, SUCCESS has included a focus on equity, evident in budget advocacy documents and the budget itself. For example, the two TRIO programs highlighted in President Glenn's initial advocacy, which served as models for the original funding level and program design, aim to improve outcomes among marginalized student populations, including low-income students, first-generation students, and students with disabilities. Similarly, MACC's original budget request for FY2021 articulates an "urgent need for equity" and likewise mentions low-income students, students of color, and disabled students (MACC, 2020). Ultimately, the FY2021 Massachusetts General Appropriations Act stated that the funding for community colleges was intended to "improve outcomes for their most vulnerable populations including, but not limited to, low-income, first-generation, minority, and disabled students and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning students" (The Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2020).

From Concept to Preparing for Implementation

Following the budget passing in December 2020, MACC and DHE moved to develop plans to implement SUCCESS across colleges. However, both in Massachusetts (e.g., STEM Starter Academy) and outside of it (e.g., CUNY ASAP in Ohio), early implementation of large multisite postsecondary interventions is inherently complicated (Meyer et al., 2025; Mowreader, 2024; Ratledge & Wavelet, 2021). Colleges and universities are complex organizations with siloed administrative units (Kirst & Stevens, 2015; Meyer et al., 2025; Weick, 1976). Thus, new initiatives require new forms of collaboration, information sharing, and decision making across units and involving multiple stakeholders (Morton et al., 2021). This section discusses the efforts of the SUCCESS administrators to prepare for differentiated implementation at the colleges. It covers the roughly 9-month period between the inclusion of SUCCESS in the state budget and the arrival of funds at community colleges.

As described above, funding for SUCCESS arrived after a protracted state budget process and during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. As the likelihood of funding was uncertain, the colleges were not involved in advocacy efforts. Leaders of the advocacy work described not wanting to place pressures on staff members' time and not wanting to get their hopes up only to be disappointed. The result was that the colleges had little forewarning regarding the funding and the work that it was intended to support. A SUCCESS administrator explains, "I don't want to say it came out of the blue, but a little bit."

After the funding was allocated in the state budget, DHE, in collaboration with MACC, developed a formula for distributing SUCCESS funds. Despite the legislative language, funding cannot be allocated based on students with disabilities and LGBTQ+ students, as student-level data about these groups is documented inconsistently across the colleges and privacy-protected when it is collected (see Section 6 below for a discussion of how colleges defined their target populations).

By FY2024, SUCCESS funding supported between 400 and 1,000 students per college, depending on institution size, with an estimated allocation of $1,500 to $2,000 per student (MACC, 2025c).

Because SUCCESS funding criteria were designed to allow variation in program structure, characteristics of students served, and the specific needs and contexts of each community college, MACC was preparing to support 15 distinct programs using the funding in different ways. An administrator described this challenge:

> *"How do you make it flexible enough to be done at 15 different colleges that...have varied differences and varied structures, even on the advising front, and yet also make it [alike] enough to push back against any critique that this is just a slush fund?"*

Additionally, MACC and other higher education leaders in the state were careful to ensure that SUCCESS funding *increased* student support services on campus, as a SUCCESS administrator explains:

> *"One of the things that we looked at was making sure that we were not supplanting efforts already underway, that you weren't gonna just move three advisors you had over to SUCCESS and be like, "Boom, we got SUCCESS advisors," right? This is about increasing capacity and increasing headcount....So...how do we establish ground rules? At first they were rather informal, and since then have become much more formal, with like five or six pages of funding guidelines now."*

Indeed, MACC's funding guidance document specifies that (a) SUCCESS funds should be used to hire new staff who directly serve students and (b) ideally, SUCCESS cohorts should comprise students who are not also receiving services from other similar programs such as TRIO and the STEM Starter Academy (MACC, 2023c).[17]

While awaiting receipt of funds, community colleges planned and proposed their potential SUCCESS programs. Those with existing TRIO programs or advising/mentorship programs with documented improvement in student outcomes were encouraged to scale these programs up; those that did not were encouraged to borrow inspiration from those that did or from well-regarded programs like CUNY ASAP. As a SUCCESS administrator explained:

> *"This was not about trying anything new....Oftentimes grants, startups...you're piloting, you're trying new stuff. The instructions we gave campuses from the beginning included "don't experiment–either scale up something you have proven it works, and if you don't have something, borrow it from somewhere else, right? Take something that is working at another college and do it yourself."*

In March 2021, MACC hired a new executive director who would focus on funding allocation and advocacy for FY2022. This effort was successful, and colleges received 2 years of funding in fall of 2021. At that point, colleges were asked to hire and start their programs, spending down 2 years of funding in a compressed time frame. A SUCCESS administrator described it as a "huge, huge challenge" because it meant that colleges had to decide "how are they going to spend this money, and responsibly?"

Indeed, given the need to spend down and the rarity of the line-item allocation, SUCCESS administrators and college staff described the urgency to learn the parameters, design a program, and prepare to spend appropriately. A SUCCESS administrator explained: "We were crystal clear that we needed to be responsible with the money, because if we messed that up, we wouldn't get any more. So, we were very careful not to spend [in] places we shouldn't spend."

Collaboration and Coordination

Early implementation of SUCCESS benefited from a collaborative culture among community colleges. Despite decentralized governance structures, SUCCESS administrators described pre-existing partnerships and collegiality across institutions:

> *"There's a history of initiatives that embrace all of the community colleges....There has been a community of practice that has developed at the community colleges....They have an annual conference focused on student success....They come together as a group or as a segment when it comes to sharing best practices related to student success."*

Another administrator described a sense of equal partnership among the community colleges:

> *"There's uniqueness amongst the institutions, but it really does feel like each institution is on a level playing field....They each have different enrollments....They're different and unique, but they feel like they are equal partners amongst each other."*

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From the beginning, cross-institutional collaboration was embedded in the governance structure. One SUCCESS administrator explained that “The Presidents Council had agreed that the Leadership Committee would act on behalf of all 15 community college presidents. So the people that they identified were really crucial.” The resulting committee, composed of provosts and presidents as well as representatives from MACC and DHE, facilitated the later development of program-focused meetings.

Several SUCCESS administrators agreed that the collaboration and coordination inherent in the Leadership Committee set the tone for the development of SUCCESS. When asked for his advice for other states considering implementing something like SUCCESS, one administrator pointed to this aspect:

> *"I mean having the Leadership Team, and then the Coordinating Committee, dedicated and focused early on, even developed in the design of the program, helps to then get the buy-in. I think everybody in the leadership team believed that this is the way to structure SUCCESS."*

The Leadership Committee still meets monthly to discuss the budget and scope at a high level, and there are additional formal structures of collaboration. A group focused on technical aspects of SUCCESS data and reporting, the Data Professionals Forum, now meets quarterly (MACC, 2023a). A SUCCESS administrator described these additional committees:

> *"We have our monthly Coordinating Committee meeting...that brings together our key points of contact from each school to kind of discuss our policies, our program design, our implementation, things that are going well, challenges, and successes. And then also we have our monthly program administrator meetings where we really just meet with the directors, program managers, coordinators, more on the day-to-day operational component of success. That’s where we really get into the weeds... data-related issues, reporting issues, campus culture issues, all of these things."*

SUCCESS staff and administrators alike described the Coordinating Committee as “egalitarian,” a “community,” and “a chance to learn from the experiences and perspectives of others.” Given that program staff on the Coordinating Committee represent 15 independent institutions, administrators expressed surprise that, in these settings, program staff feel comfortable sharing their successes and frustrations in order to strengthen the initiative as a whole.

Staffing Up

All along, the vision for SUCCESS was for community colleges to have the freedom to build on existing programs that support student success while sticking to the intended parameters for the target population and key outcomes of persistence, retention, and completion. The original proposal to the legislature and official budget allocation were intentionally straightforward (The Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2020). However, moving from concept to implementation across 15 diverse community colleges required the articulation of guidelines, rules, and requirements in codified program documentation.

The initial conception of SUCCESS strongly emphasized advising and mentorship. Although each college already had professional advisors, the funding could be used to increase advising capacity or support existing advising offices focused on the SUCCESS cohort or a specific aspect of the student experience, such as financial aid or academics. Originally, the funding formula stipulated that at least 65% of SUCCESS funding should support SUCCESS-specific personnel (MACC, 2022), and this was increased to 80% in FY2023 (MACC, 2023b). This necessitated a period of hiring across the colleges. As a SUCCESS administrator explained, “There is no secret sauce. It’s people, right? It’s people who innovate. It’s people who support. It’s people who help the students across the finish line.” Another administrator echoed this sentiment: “If you want it to work, you have to invest in people that are able to help make it work.”

Advising staff are at the core of any large-scale student support program; thus, hiring is a common need and challenge early in implementation (Cormier et al., 2019, Weiss et al., 2019).[18] In the case of SUCCESS, the hiring period began as the colleges were still navigating the uncertainties of the pandemic. Unsurprisingly, every administrator and most staff members mentioned challenges associated with hiring and achieving steady staffing over this period.

SUCCESS staff at the colleges used the “building the plane while flying” metaphor to describe their experience designing, hiring for, and beginning to implement their programs in a short period of time. As one SUCCESS staff member put it,

> *"We had all this money at the beginning that we needed to spend....And, you know, hiring is hard, and higher ed doesn’t pay very much [laughing]. So it was really hard to get quality people onboarded and...you’re building the plane while you’re flying it.”*

The specifics of hiring challenges varied across the state. For example, a SUCCESS staff member at a rural college explained that in some ways hiring was easier for them:

> *"Institutions closer to Boston were competing with one another for people. We’re fairly isolated, so we didn’t have that competition issue; however, it’s not that easy in, you know, a more rural area to find qualified people that are looking for...jobs [right away]."*

In addition to the routine challenges of hiring full-time staff in public higher education institutions (e.g., writing position descriptions for new roles; aligning pay bands in relation to other advising staff, union processes; Zahneis, 2023), it took time for colleges to view SUCCESS as a budget allocation rather than a grant—in other words, to trust that it would remain stably supported. One SUCCESS administrator described this shift:

> *"It took us almost 2 years to move away from the idea that this is not a grant. It is permanent...with our CFOs and HR offices as well....And then every year, because the program was new, there was a sense of, “Do I need to be putting my resume out there, because I might not have a job on July 1st?”...And now [we are in] a place where all the employees are permanent full-time employees or part-time employees."*

In fact, the perception that SUCCESS was a grant, or that the funding would otherwise be temporary, made it challenging to attract and retain advisors early on.

Program Oversight

As each college was hiring, MACC also needed to increase its own capacity for SUCCESS administration, oversight, and program evaluation. A SUCCESS administrator explained:

"We were successful in getting additional funding or continuation funding into the FY22 budget...so summer 2021. And at that point in time we had not hired anybody to work on this centrally, and it became clear to me that for this to be successful, we needed capacity. Luckily...that was already part of the plan. And as we delved into that a bit more, we realized we would also need someone to do [data analysis and program evaluation] if we were going to be serious about, you know, analyzing this work."

As such, MACC added two staff positions: a senior project director in fall 2021 and an institutional research analyst in winter 2022. They built systems and processes for programmatic approval, budget allocation, reporting, and documentation as the colleges were beginning to implement their programs.

After the colleges received Year 1 and Year 2 funds, early implementation was a time for trying different programmatic features, asking questions, learning from each other, and refining their models. For example, several colleges added a peer mentoring component following encouragement from MACC and in response to promising patterns at other institutions.

At this point, MACC began facilitating connections across the colleges to help them learn from one another and develop institutional memory. Several structures facilitated collaboration, including meetings among the 15 college presidents, among the colleges' SUCCESS staff, and of the central Coordinating Committee.

MACC serves in a connecting role, providing common guidance to the otherwise independently governed community colleges and monitoring each college's program design, spending, and the relationship between the two. However, because colleges are not required to build their SUCCESS programs through any kind of mandate, there is a delicate balance between facilitating autonomy and adhering to program guidelines. A SUCCESS administrator explained:

"There's no mandate, right?...Of course, we can reduce their funding if, you know, they're not adhering to the guidelines, but there's no mandate....It's very decentralized, and everyone has autonomy, but everyone kind of works together, they work with us. We're kind of this magnet that connects everyone, and then they're running things by us."

Another SUCCESS administrator discussed the tensions that can arise, using the example of colleges that hoped to provide financial or in-kind supports for students:

> *"And part of my role, even now, is again bringing people back to the scope. So people had all these ideas: "Hey, we want to do this with the money," "We want to do that with the money." And I have to tell them, "No, you can't really do that because, you know, it's not meeting the legislative language guidelines." So really helping them figure out how do they spend that money for hiring more people and then also for non-personnel expenses that really were tied to student supports. You know, we couldn't use that money to then give everyone a laptop....That's not really what that money was for. We can't use it for direct financial supports for students....We understand students need basic needs and housing and all of these other things, but that's not what this money is specifically for. We have other pools of money for those parts."*

These are high-stakes distinctions. Massachusetts community colleges serve populations of students with diverse needs. SUCCESS program staff interact with those needs on a daily basis and can feel understandably frustrated when initiative funding cannot be used to directly address immediate challenges such as transportation and other basic needs. MACC staff members also recognize these needs, but they are responsible for ensuring that all community colleges spend their SUCCESS funds appropriately and build and sustain programs that are in line with the initiative's mission and legislative intent.

The "building the plane while flying" metaphor also applied to program-related reporting and data sharing. MACC developed reporting and data collection guidelines as colleges had already begun collecting data. A SUCCESS administrator noted that other states that implement comprehensive support programs may already have more established data-sharing processes if their community colleges operate as a single system: "I believe CUNY ASAP, that whole system, it has the advantage of being a system. So everybody is on EAB Navigate."[19]

Systems for tracking student interactions with new support services and reporting on specific outcomes take time to develop and refine. As a SUCCESS administrator described, "We didn't have different FAQs to help guide the data collections....Colleges, while they really value the flexibility, they also have been looking for answers and structure and guidance, understandably." This administrator went on to describe how, with additional years of data collection and accumulated questions about implementation, SUCCESS guidance documents have developed:

> *"I have been grateful that it's been there as questions come in, especially if the same question comes in or it seems like a campus isn't understanding or has kind of started veering off the wrong path. I can refer them to "FAQ Number 11 says this!"*

5

Sustained Staffing

Advisors, and the development of long-term student-advisor relationships, are crucial to the design and delivery of SUCCESS services. Thus, after initially launching their SUCCESS programs, colleges shifted focus toward sustaining staffing as they built institutional memory and cohesive programs. This section discusses colleges' efforts toward this end. Many of the challenges discussed pertain to higher education staffing in general but are especially consequential for understanding the early years of SUCCESS implementation.

A SUCCESS administrator summarized the changes in the initiative's hiring landscape 4 years after initial funding, saying that it has gotten better, but community colleges face an additional problem:

> *"That is, our salaries are so miserable that turnover is frequent. And at smaller colleges that is incredibly destructive. So at the colleges with 2,000 or fewer students, where the staffing is already pretty skeletal, you lose your SUCCESS coordinator and spend months drifting....And that has happened to some of the larger institutions, too, where they've lost some key staff and have taken months to replace them."*

Respondents perceived a high amount of turnover across higher education generally and in their community colleges specifically. Losing a SUCCESS coordinator, especially in the early implementation phase, impacted a program's ability to function and continue developing. As a SUCCESS staff member summarized, "Hiring, that always takes a while....In fact, we hired someone [5 months ago]. They've already left, and so we're in the middle of a new hiring." Another described how SUCCESS advising positions are commonly viewed as temporary or as "stepping stones" to other positions within the same institution or at another institution:

> *"We had a period of time where we had 100% turnover, but all for very good reasons. It wasn't that people were burnt out and tired of doing this work. Three of the five SUCCESS coaches moved on to advising positions here; one moved on to an assistant director externally, and one moved to another sort of SUCCESS-adjacent position, also externally. So they were folks who remained in the work....We didn't have retention problems based on the scope of what SUCCESS was doing, but more because it really is designed to be a...stepping stone to something else, particularly in higher ed. "*

As colleges began to implement their SUCCESS programs, they learned more about the qualities that make for successful new hires. One staff member described learning from initial challenges hiring coaches and subsequently attracted more candidates by revising the qualifications:

> *"We failed a couple of searches at the beginning because we wanted...a pool of applicants that were good enough to run a search. So we looked at the qualifications...and we're a union environment, so it was hard to look at that. I brought in HR, and we started looking at the Grade 5 job description. And we tweaked it to, instead of requiring a master's degree for a coach, we now have it as a bachelor's with 3 years' experience in higher ed. And that was the best thing we did. It opened up to so much more talent."*

Changes in Remote Work

Most of the colleges began hiring for their SUCCESS programs in the fall of 2021, still an uncertain time in education, given the pandemic and the prevalence of remote work. Overall, it was unclear how long staff would be working remotely and how much of their advising responsibilities would take place virtually.

Some SUCCESS programs hired advisors thinking that they could work remotely indefinitely. However, after some colleges ended remote or hybrid work policies that were begun during the pandemic, not all advisors could relocate or shift their childcare arrangements. In fact, at least two institutions lost advisors with the return to in-person operations. As one SUCCESS staff member explained:

> *"[One] thing that has come up a lot is our remote work....The administration took away remote work for like half the fall semester....Going forward, we are still suspending remote work for periods of time, but it's going to be less. We were able to give people more notice. But it still is a point of contention among all advisors, not just SUCCESS coaches. But basically, the coaches that we lost...we probably wouldn't have if the remote work didn't play out the way it did."*

Beyond official policy shifts, the pandemic also changed other aspects of student life and campus programming. Advisors also adapted to students' comfort being on campus and meeting on Zoom:

> *"When we created this, we were still in this Zoom hybrid world. So some students were reluctant to come to campus still, they didn't want to have a Zoom meeting. If they met with us, they wanted to have their camera off....Our programming, we had to move everything to virtual, and then we started doing hybrid, and then straight to in-person."*

Even in the first few years of SUCCESS, coaches' job duties shifted due to factors such as student disengagement with virtual learning (Kinzie, 2023) and an increasing number of on-campus events and in-person student meetings.

Funding Shifts

It took time and consistency for colleges and SUCCESS staff and applicants to view the initiative as more than a temporary grant. In fact, a SUCCESS administrator described classifying all full-time SUCCESS staff as permanent, full-time employees as a key milestone:

> *"[We are] now to a place where all the [SUCCESS] employees are permanent full-time employees or part-time employees....If you're in a union and you're listed as grant-funded, as soon as the grant goes away, your job can be gone....So for the unionized employees, they now have rights within their union rank the way anyone else who works in advising might at the college, right?....It took some time to get there, but we finally turned the corner on it."*

Several administrators and staff shared the perspective that more permanent job descriptions likely improved hiring and retention of SUCCESS staff at the colleges. They also represent a key milestone in the perception of SUCCESS as a lasting commitment from the state. That said, one staff member pointed to the ongoing struggle of budget uncertainty, even with permanent positions:

> *"In those first couple of years, it was down to the wire....We'd be in mid-June wondering if we were going to get reappointed. Like, I wasn't as worried about it... but one of our [staff] members left because it was too uncertain. And then after the second year, the college institutionalized the positions, so they're no longer year-to-year grant funded, but it's still related to the money that's coming into the college from the state. And so if those monies were to go away, then there still could be layoffs."*

Even though colleges have shifted away from perceiving SUCCESS as a temporary grant, they have still had to prepare for annual and mid-year swings in the budget. With at least 65%–and later, 80%–of each college's SUCCESS funds allocated to staffing, annual shifts or delays in the state budget (as well as the governor's cuts to address budget shortfalls) have threatened staffing at the colleges. Such cuts, termed 9C cuts in Massachusetts, occurred during SUCCESS implementation in January 2024, and one SUCCESS staff member described the level of institutional coordination required to weather these budget shifts:

> *"In terms of the budget, I've gotten really good at...being able to shift on a dime in terms of figuring out what can be spent, what needs to be spent, moving money around....I'm working with the director...and creating a system where we're, every month reconciling things and making sure we're up to speed, so in case we do have a cut like the 9C...we're able to adapt. And I'm pretty open with our cabinet and president, saying, "Hey, if we don't get the funding, this is really important work. How are we going to continue to do it and support it?"*

SUCCESS staff on other campuses similarly described efforts to "build a moat" around the work and to prepare for a range of budget scenarios that would support sustained staffing. While awaiting the FY2025 budget, which was ultimately level-funded, one campus drafted several job descriptions in the hopes that there would be a funding increase:

> *"We had been working for months to draft the job postings and to inform our human resources folks, like, "If the high number comes through, these are the positions that we want."...We were in a place where we were ready to hit the ground running."*

Other changes, such as union-negotiated raises[20] for SUCCESS staff–"When you have [raises] and you're fully staffed, now you're over budget!"–and guidance from SUCCESS administrators on allowable spending for personnel meant that the community colleges continuously prepared for multiple budget scenarios and aimed for flexibility.

5

Within-Campus Coordination

Just as campuses had autonomy in designing their programs, they also had autonomy in deciding whether and how SUCCESS funds and staff would be integrated with existing institutional units. For example, SUCCESS-funded staff may function as one unit or be dispersed across the institution. In any case, some staff described internal tensions between new SUCCESS coaches and existing professional advising staff. For example:

> *"When [SUCCESS] started, we couldn't have [SUCCESS] advisors in the advising office....It couldn't be a role that you already had, which made everybody report to the [SUCCESS] director. And then we had shadow advising, and it was confusing, and it was upsetting to my long-time advising staff, because all you hear is "SUCCESS, SUCCESS, SUCCESS" when they're doing the same job, but they're getting all the accolades, and the folks that have been here 20 years are not. So now, all the advisors report through to our director of advising....[The director] can take credit for what's happening there now, which I think was huge."*

Rule changes on the kinds of positions that SUCCESS funding could support contributed to this tension and also helped to relieve it when SUCCESS advisors and existing advising staff could be a part of the same internal unit. At this staff member's college and others, increased collaboration between SUCCESS staff and professional advising staff eased tensions and helped advising staff to see the benefits of having expanded capacity through SUCCESS funds. However, colleges that had structural barriers to collaboration between advisors and SUCCESS coaches (e.g., union challenges, pay bands) continued to struggle with morale and retention.

6

VARIATION ACROSS COLLEGE CONTEXTS

Variation Across College Contexts

This section draws on qualitative interviews with community college staff to describe the range of strategies that colleges used to (a) define and identify a target populations and (b) identify and promote the goals of their SUCCESS programs.

How Do Community Colleges Define Their Target Populations?

The community colleges used several different strategies and considerations in defining their specific target populations and identifying the students who would likely benefit most from receiving SUCCESS services. Some took a filtering approach, using additional criteria to narrow down a too-large pool of students who could be eligible for SUCCESS based on legislative criteria; others invested in an existing identity-based program that fit SUCCESS criteria or provided broad access to SUCCESS services and then identified a cohort for reporting. In all of these cases, data availability shaped the parameters with which students could be identified.

Data Availability Considerations

While some SUCCESS criteria, such as race and ethnicity, are routinely captured in college administrative data, others, such as LGBTQ+ identity, are generally not. Even regarding student characteristics that are universally measured, many colleges needed to create new systems to consider multiple characteristics in the same time period for a given student body. For example, a staff member from one college elaborated on the challenges of collecting and combining relevant student data to identify a SUCCESS cohort:

"I worked very hard in the first year and a half to increase the availability of data so that we could better identify students on the front end. And so we can use Pell eligibility for our low-income students, but there's a lag on Pell eligibility. And so what we were finding is we were serving students and then checking to make sure they were Pell eligible on the back end....The challenge with [the disability data] is the lag time, because in order to get that attribute, the student actually has to be engaging in services with our disability center. And so for an incoming student, that means their documentation all has to be complete with the Disability Services Center, and that could take 6 months or more."

Understandably, colleges seek to protect students' privacy by keeping some markers separate or cloaked using a different identification scheme. When colleges are interested in explicitly including LGBTQ+ students, for example, they must determine how to systematically ask students about whether this designation applies to them. In fact, several colleges added a voluntary LGBTQ+ self-identification to their admissions forms. Efforts to collect and centralize demographic data take time. And when they require new data collections on admissions forms, only the newest incoming students have complete data.

Scaling Up Identity-Based Programs

Several colleges had existing programs that targeted support to students based on a combination of their race and gender—for example, a program targeted to men of color and a parallel program for women of color. One college with a program for men of color described the seed for it several years before the SUCCESS initiative:

> *"The [SUCCESS] initiative specifically is focused on Black and Latino males. Before we got started–this began in late 2017, when concerns were brought by faculty to upper administration about the treatment and experiences of men of color at the college....So that data showed that our Black and Latino males had the lowest rates of persistence and retention at the college. And through some qualitative data collection, we also learned that there was a self-efficacy gap as well, just in regards to feeling a sense of belonging connected to the college community."*

Colleges' unique priorities and demographic context informed their decision of whether and how to expand identity-based programming into a SUCCESS-funded program.

Using Additional Criteria

Some colleges reasoned that demographics alone were not a good indicator of who could benefit the most from the supplemental support that SUCCESS was designed to provide. Several used criteria not specified in the legislation to narrow down a pool of eligible students or to target support to eligible students with greater needs. For example, one college described using a GPA cut-off within a pool of students who meet the legislative criteria to identify who would benefit from increased academic support:

Where some colleges use academic markers to identify students who they perceive as needing the most support, others serve new students or part-time students for the same reason: to allocate scarce resources to students who need them most. For example, one college identifies new or transfer students who meet the SUCCESS criteria:

> *"These are students who may have attempted college at another institution and then have not done well and...are now going to community college, which is not an uncommon thing for us to see. So that's our target population. And then within that, we work with students who are first-generation college students, students from limited-income backgrounds...students with disabilities...students who identify as students of color, and students who identify as LGBTQIA."*

Another college described a similar rationale for working with first-time, part-time students:

> *"Most of the students at our college go part time, like a large majority. We just looked at numbers at a meeting this past week. It's like 80% of our students are part-time. So we know it's a big chunk of our population. We know they're not succeeding at the same rates. And then it's an additional layer to meet the legislative language of the funding."*

Another college described taking the broadest approach to defining the SUCCESS-eligible cohort, providing services to anyone who is eligible:

> *"We're casting the widest possible net, and that does end up sort of being the majority of our population, because by the time you say first-gen, students of color, and income-eligible...we don't have a mechanism right now to specifically filter in students with disabilities or LGBTQ....We're a pretty low-income rural area, so there's lots of low-income students. There's lots of first-gen students. And, you know, a growing number of students of color as well. So the categories overlap enough that it's a good chunk of the students, not everybody."*

While this particular program does not provide coaching services to all students at the college, they define their target population broadly and therefore give a large share of the student body access to SUCCESS-funded services.

Awareness of Pre-Existing Programs

When implementing SUCCESS, community colleges have had to be cognizant of pre-existing programs on their campuses in order to avoid duplicating services (MACC, 2023c). For several, implementation has involved expanding successful, pre-existing programs to serve more students. Importantly, funding guidance specifies that the nascent SUCCESS programs should contribute to rather than supplant colleges' existing student support offerings (MACC, 2023c).

If a subset of SUCCESS-eligible students was already being well-served by an existing program, the colleges considered how to develop a SUCCESS program to target students not receiving supplemental advising. One college explained this consideration:

> *"So we actually run a report multiple times of the year...[of] all new students that have been accepted and registered for classes....And from that list, we share it with...our TRIO program here on campus, and we allow them to review that list and find any students that meet their criteria, because their criteria are a lot stricter than ours. And if they find students that meet their criteria, they take those students, we take them off of our list."*

Another staff member described how they distribute students across existing programs:

> *"If [students] become full-time, there might be a better suited program or just in discussion, there might just be another program outside of TRIO that just works better for them. Maybe they belong in [Program 1], which, you know, caters to students that are parents, or maybe they do better in [Program 2], which caters to students taking heavy developmental courses. And even at those points, they could utilize those services from [Program 1 or 2] and still receive services from SUCCESS. The only time that we can't do that is if they are TRIO–like, you know, they would have to either pick SUCCESS or TRIO, and [we] try to do a warm transition for them."*

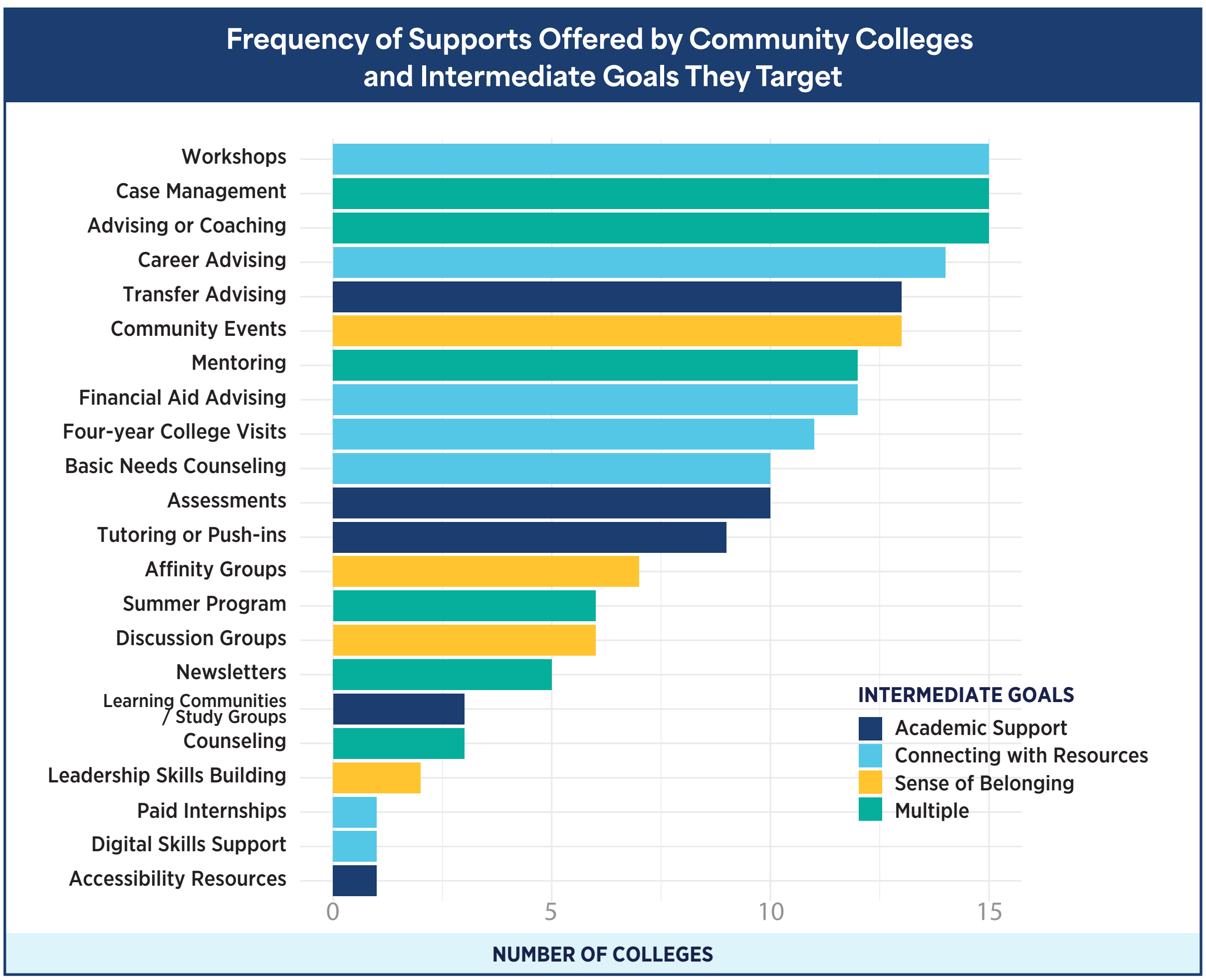
How Do Community Colleges Describe the Goals of Their Success Programs?

As a whole, the SUCCESS initiative aims to support investment in a comprehensive array of services to increase outcomes such as persistence, retention, and completion for "students facing systemic barriers" (MACC, 2025b). While the community colleges share these long-term goals, they are also tasked with expanding and/or developing programs that will support these goals for students.

Intermediate Goals

Toward the overarching goal of improving students' persistence, retention, or completion, the colleges' SUCCESS programs have a range of intermediate goals targeted by specific supports, and each program takes a different approach to achieving these goals. This subsection discusses three common categories of intermediate goals across colleges: providing academic support, connecting with resources, and developing a sense of belonging. Figure 1 shows the various supports provided by the colleges, color-coded to indicate which intermediate goals they support.

Figure 1



Source: Created by authors from program descriptions on MACC website, 2025

Providing Academic Support

All of the colleges view **advising and academic support** as a key component of their SUCCESS programs, and all offer case management and academic advising or coaching to support this goal. Advising and academic support include a variety of aims, from degree planning to course assistance, such as monitoring academic progress and facilitating academic engagement, providing math support, embedding tutoring in classrooms, and coordinating with faculty. College staff members described a sampling of these academic supports:

- **Academic advising** involves "proactively reaching out to students at key points throughout the academic year and the enrollment cycle, even like pre-enrollment, checking in, following up with any alerts that are submitted by faculty members, things like that."
- **Coaching** includes "support[ing] students in a very holistic and individualized way to either help remove barriers, to help them work through potential barriers and struggles that might keep them from persisting and...graduating and moving on to different plans. It is really meant to be very individualized, so a lot of our services are one-on-one for students and just helping them sort of figure out what their path is and what is the best way to execute that path."
- **Tutoring or push-ins** are similar to paraprofessionals at K–12 schools "who don't teach the class, but who can provide some hands-on support for students. And so we thought about that model [here] for our more developmental classes, our foundational classes, so our statistics classes, our freshman seminar...as well as our English classes. So we've put embedded tutors in there...and that's provided students with a little bit of extra support in class, so they don't have to go to tutoring afterwards if they're busy and don't understand the assignment."
- **Accessibility resources** on one campus involved a significant investment in technology, which "allows students to, on the turn of a dime, be able to attend via Zoom if they want to....Faculty are trained so they can actively participate in class [virtually]. It's not just on the professor's laptop. You know, they can raise their hand, they can hear the professors write on the board, and they can see it. So we've done that through some professional development and running faculty institutes over the summer."

Developing a Sense of Belonging

For many colleges, **self-efficacy and a sense of belonging** are key intermediate goals for students. They seek to achieve this through coaching, by providing dedicated affinity spaces, and with events that facilitate connection among students and mentors:

- **Coaching** includes "helping a student's time management. You have a whole bunch of different things going on. How do you make decisions about where to spend your time? That can be something simple as how many courses do you register for?... Helping students have a commitment to graduation....Taking agency in their own decision making and their own behavior as it relates to their kind of ultimate goal of either graduating or transferring to a 4-year institution. Which then leads to academic success to graduate."

- **Affinity groups** on one campus included "[work] with our Queer Student Group, and [we] had amazing success with them in the first year, and high engagement....We had a number of students come together for World Autism Day this past year, and they really need more connection with each other."
- **Mentoring** has included "a dedicated SUCCESS advisor for LGBTQIA students, so students in that community can opt to work with that advisor. We also have three Spanish-speaking SUCCESS advisors for those that would like to work with them."
- **Community events** "are meant to build community and a sense of belonging amongst our students. So we do fun events...like, sit in a circle and we just eat lunch.... We do movie nights, and we'll like, do like, Bingo with wings, Wingo....And, yeah, we're really just here to create a sense of community, provide them with personal, one-on-one support, and just be here for whenever they need."

Making Connections to Resources

Many colleges seek to **connect students with resources**. Whether through case management or dedicated events, SUCCESS programs often provide an array of multipronged supports to meet students' needs related to college persistence and completion. Across the 15 colleges, coaches help students navigate services across a variety of domains, including financial literacy, basic needs, and mental health—and some of these services are SUCCESS-funded. As community college students are a diverse population with many needs, coaching services are intentionally flexible and aim for a high level of communication with students:

- **Coaching** offers students a "primary point of contact...but then referring them out to services they might need. So those services might be tutoring, it might be financial aid, it might be that the student needs, maybe they need to change their class schedule, and they really need to talk to their Academic Advisor"
- **Financial aid counseling** can include helping students "with their FAFSA... [or] making an appointment with a financial aid counselor...[or helping with] how to communicate with faculty, what are office hours...So we really try to spend enough time with each individual student to understand what their goals are in order to understand what success would look like for them."
- **Multiple supports** are often provided: "The goal is to provide, obviously, the academic advising, but also provide the resource and referral, the programming focusing on academic enrichment, career readiness, mental wellness, financial wellness as well."

Creating Specialized Positions

Although colleges cannot use SUCCESS funds to directly provide financial aid or meet basic or other material needs, several have used these resources to create specialized positions, such as a basic needs navigator, a digital skills coordinator, and a financial coach:

- **Basic needs counseling** can help support social workers on campus: "It is a heavy job working with community college students. So, at the time we had a part-time social worker...and we were referring, referring, referring. Emergency grants, textbook funds..., food stamps, things like that...We were sending so many students to [the part-time social worker], we actually needed a full-time position."
- **Specialized support** can include "a digital skills coach who's embedded in our Digital Commons, which is part of the library....We have a person who's embedded in financial aid doing financial literacy and financial coaching....I think our team is well integrated across campus."

What Organizational Efforts Have Community Colleges Undertaken to Support Success?

For nearly every college, implementing SUCCESS has involved some kind of organizational change, whether they have scaled up an existing intervention or developed a new intervention. Many colleges opted to scale up existing TRIO programs in order to broaden access.[21] As one college describes, "much like our sister institutions, we have a very successful TRIO program. So I think our initial goal was to replicate some of these things that seemed to be working well in TRIO and kind of expand up access to that type of program for others."

SUCCESS funding offered colleges an exciting chance to expand programs they were proud of and confident in. However, as different funding mechanisms have different stipulations and population targets, some SUCCESS-funded programs had different foci and approaches to recruitment. As one college described:

> *"I know when I initially came into SUCCESS...one of the things I heard quite a bit was that the program was going to be modeled after TRIO....So I came from TRIO to SUCCESS. That...was like, "Oh! That's amazing, we can kind of revamp this...and make it like TRIO." But there are some things where TRIO, their caseloads are...at least for our school...are a lot smaller, a lot more manageable, and those students actually have to apply, where our students are opted in [by default]."*

At that particular college, the TRIO program had smaller cohorts that students had sought out and applied to. In comparison, this college and others intended to lower the administrative hurdle for students to receive additional support by enrolling eligible students in SUCCESS by default.

Upon receiving SUCCESS funding, other colleges developed new programs or new components of programs. For example, one developed a peer mentoring program:

> *"There was no culture of having a peer mentor at [this community college]....So, some of it was just building up, like, "Here's what a peer mentor is, and here's why you might want to talk to them."...And then we got mentioned in orientation. We started becoming more of a thing, and now I don't feel like I need to plaster the campus with, "Why should you talk to your peer mentor" anymore. It's more of a routine."*

Building a new program and creating new organizational connections and routines takes time. With stewardship and integration into the orientation process, this college created a culture of peer mentorship among the students.

Whether colleges expanded existing programs or developed new initiatives, they also sought to facilitate connections and data sharing among disparate campus units that were now supporting the SUCCESS program. One interview participant described the complexity of creating new organizational processes to identify students who could be served by SUCCESS and structure how students would be transferred among assigned advisors and SUCCESS-funded support staff:

> *"I've worked with IT to identify what the characteristics are going to be....There'll be a warm handoff from the navigator directly to the [existing] advisor.[22] The advisor will be the chief communicator with students throughout their entire experience, from the time they start to the time they graduate....We'll use the [case management] technology to say which ones we think are really the ones that we can make the most effort with.... We're gonna build an Early Alert program, it's gonna go directly to the advisor; the advisor will...then decide which students need more outreach back to the [SUCCESS] coaches; the [SUCCESS] coaches will work deeply with those students."*

Many of the other colleges described similar efforts to link siloed parts of their campuses–including financial aid, counseling, and faculty development–in order to better serve students. Changing established organizational processes and sustaining such changes is challenging (Meyer et al., 2025). However, for student supports to truly be comprehensive and cohesive, institutional processes must be accounted for. Such institutional change is not the stated goal of SUCCESS, but these changes facilitate the effective provision of case management services and distinguish SUCCESS from lighter-touch interventions.

7

CONCLUSION

Conclusion: SUCCESS in Massachusetts and Beyond

This section reviews the importance of SUCCESS for Massachusetts and, more broadly, as an example of a homegrown student support program. The section offers key takeaways from the early implementation of SUCCESS.

What Makes SUCCESS Unique?

Amid an uncertain landscape for higher education during the Covid-19 pandemic, Massachusetts invested strongly in student support and equity within its community colleges. All 15 institutions receive funds under a shared mandate to provide nonfinancial supports to students who are economically disadvantaged, first-generation, minoritized, have disabilities, or identify as LGBTQ+. Each college has flexibility to determine which student populations to prioritize and how to design, staff, and deliver allowable services.

Each SUCCESS program provides advising or coaching services in addition to a constellation of other services. To offer these services, many colleges have made complex organizational changes to support students across disparate administrative units. Whether they developed new data collection and sharing procedures or implemented new case management software, the extent and variety of these changes underscore the customizability of SUCCESS.

In the landscape of comprehensive support programs, SUCCESS's flexibility is unique. Other programs use narrow selection criteria to identify a target student population, such as requiring students to be enrolled full-time or in a certain field of study (Reber, 2024). In contrast, SUCCESS has the flexibility to support the modal community college student. This has led to variation in program design and target population.

Why is Success a Good Fit for Massachusetts?

A program that is mandated to be uniform across campuses would be a poor fit for Massachusetts community colleges, which serve diverse student bodies, vary widely in size and rurality, and are independently governed and funded. Thus, the flexibility to identify the students who will most benefit from supplemental resources is essential.

Moreover, a history of collaboration has served the state's community colleges well as they have developed their SUCCESS programs. In particular, SUCCESS capitalizes on the decentralized yet cooperative nature of community colleges in Massachusetts, for example via MACC's role advocating on their behalf. MACC was named in the General Appropriations Act to support DHE's development and administration of the SUCCESS funding formula; it continues to play a significant role in coordinating implementation, centralizing data reporting across the colleges and convening program leaders.

Likewise, while each program is unique, the institutions have all navigated similar challenges, such as hiring and retaining staff during the pandemic, creating and linking student administrative data, and confronting the urgency of designing and implementing a new program. Collaboration across institutions enabled them to learn from and support one another as they developed and expanded their unique programs. Ultimately, given the diversity of community colleges in Massachusetts, a prescribed programmatic model would be unlikely to support all institutions equally and would likely be incompatible with their pre-existing culture of collaborative independence.

Finally, the nonfinancial supports offered by SUCCESS align with the state's efforts to increase college-going rates and improve college outcomes (Tutweiler & Ortega, 2024). They are an important complement to the state's recent free community college initiatives.

What Should Other States Consider if They Want to Launch a Homegrown Student Support Program?

Comprehensive support interventions can increase completion rates for college students, which have plateaued across the country (Dynarski et al., 2023). The early implementation of SUCCESS illuminates several key considerations for other states or systems that are interested in developing their own state-funded student support initiatives:

- **Consider existing governance and communication structures.** Massachusetts has a host of pre-existing and SUCCESS-specific routines through which community college leaders can convene. For example, community college presidents already had channels of communication and, through MACC, joint advocacy in the state legislature. Along with DHE and MACC staff, several of these presidents serve on the SUCCESS-specific Leadership Committee. A collaborative culture and structures for communication across independently governed institutions enable flexibility and real-time adjustments.

- **Consider model programs.** Several well-known and effective comprehensive student support initiatives can serve as models for new initiatives (Meyer et al., 2025; Reber, 2024). States and systems should consider modeling student support programs on other initiatives that have worked well in their particular contexts. For example, in Massachusetts, the development of SUCCESS was informed by TRIO programs offered at some community colleges and by the statewide STEM Starter Academy initiative.

- **Consider when to involve colleges.** Advocating for sustained governmental funding for a new initiative is inherently uncertain. Those involved in early advocacy for SUCCESS funding spoke about the tension between alerting colleges of their initial advocacy and overpromising funding that they may have been unlikely to receive. Ultimately, they recommended that other states and systems share information about the kinds of initiatives they are advocating for with key college staff as early as possible.

- **Consider a planning year.** This report describes the many moving parts involved in building and implementing a new program; coordinating across multiple institutions, hiring new state employees, and reworking organizational routines is inherently complex. Many of the people we spoke to about the origins of SUCCESS described the early years as "building the plane while flying it." They recommended that other states considering something similar include a planning year for colleges to hire new staff, design their programs, and prepare for data reporting and evaluation. While attending carefully to privacy concerns, state agencies could consider whether to require the collection of any new data elements mentioned in legislation or appropriations. This planning year would also facilitate hiring by allowing time for approval of job descriptions and recruitment.

- **Consider a coordinated hiring and staffing strategy.** Hiring and staffing are challenging across higher education, especially for full-time positions in public institutions. But dedicated, in-person staff are a key ingredient in highly effective comprehensive student support programs (Meyer et al., 2025). If staff positions are not temporary, job postings should make this known as early as possible in order to support hiring and retention. Additionally, colleges should strategize about how to avoid competition across institutions hiring for similar roles in the same labor market at the same time. A coordinating body can support these efforts by giving standardized guidance about hiring practices.

What Are the Next Steps for this Research?

This report described the first phase of a larger, mixed-methods project. The next phase will explore SUCCESS service take-up and engagement across the 15 community colleges. We know that eligibility requirements, program design features, and local context are all likely to shape who receives supports and to drive variation in program reach and impact (Cartwright & Hardie, 2012). We will ask how students who most need supplemental, proactive support have come to be served by SUCCESS and how they have experienced its various supports.

We hope our investigation will also include an impact study, as deeply understanding implementation and variation across colleges is a critical step in this work. Rigorous evaluations of comprehensive student support programs in community colleges demonstrate that when institutions are able to invest in sustained, proactive supports—such as intensive advising or coaching—academic, persistence, and degree completion outcomes significantly improve. With a strong base of evidence on the effectiveness of these programs, a key question is how these efforts can be replicated and scaled in ways that preserve their impact (Meyer et al., 2025).

Additionally, existing literature provides little systematic evidence on important aspects of these programs' early implementation, such as their original conception, advocacy, and challenges scaling and sustaining such efforts across multiple institutional contexts. The U.S. community college sector is vast and heterogeneous, and real-life implementation of evidence-based comprehensive student support services happens in community colleges with different capacities, varying organizational practices, and often drastically differing student bodies. Colleges tailor comprehensive student support initiatives to their specific contexts, which results in a kaleidoscope of program elements. This study represents an effort to understand how a complex, multicomponent intervention was conceptualized and implemented in the unique context of Massachusetts community colleges.

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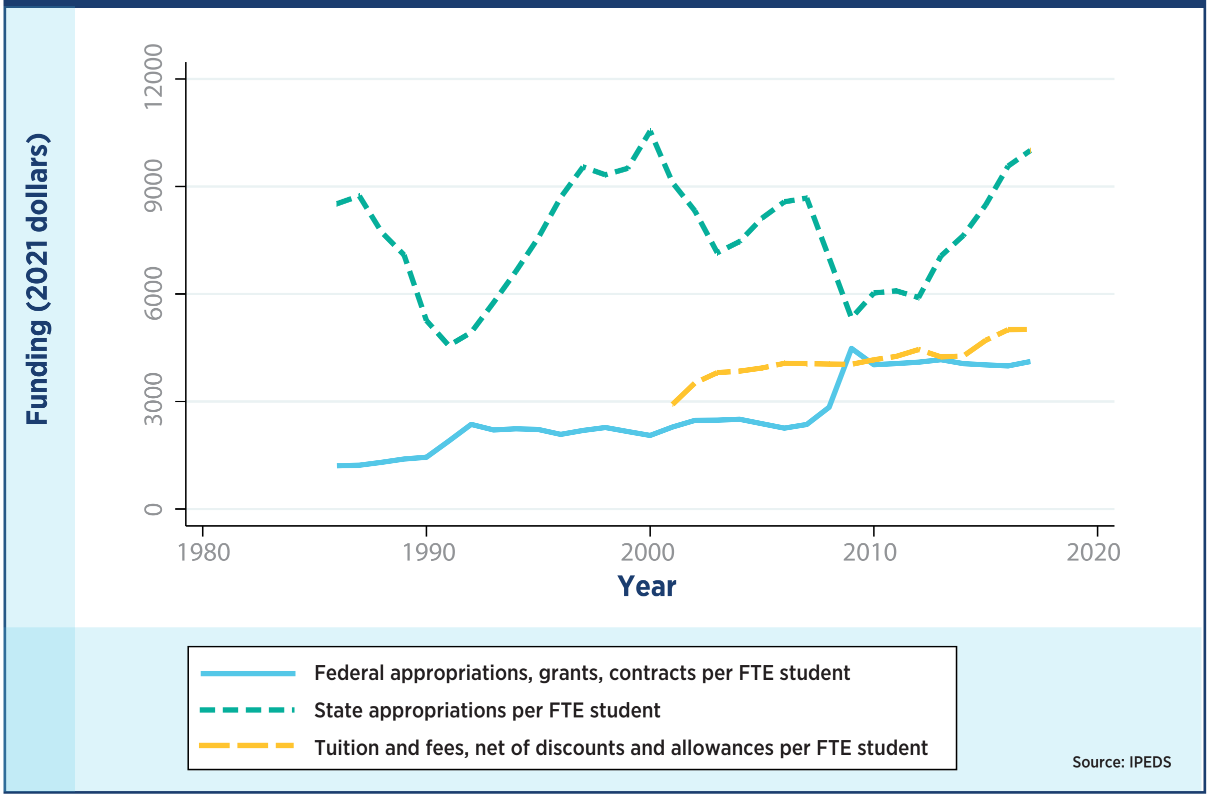
Appendix

Trends in Funding, Enrollment, Retention, and Graduation of Massachusetts Community Colleges Using IPEDS Data

Figure A1

Trends in Funding per FTE Student in Massachusetts Community Colleges (1986-2017)



Key Trends Illustrated in Figure A1

Federal Funding

- Federal revenue per student increased between 1987 and the early 1990s, then remained relatively stable until the 2008 recession.
- During the Great Recession, federal funding rose sharply and has since remained at an elevated level.

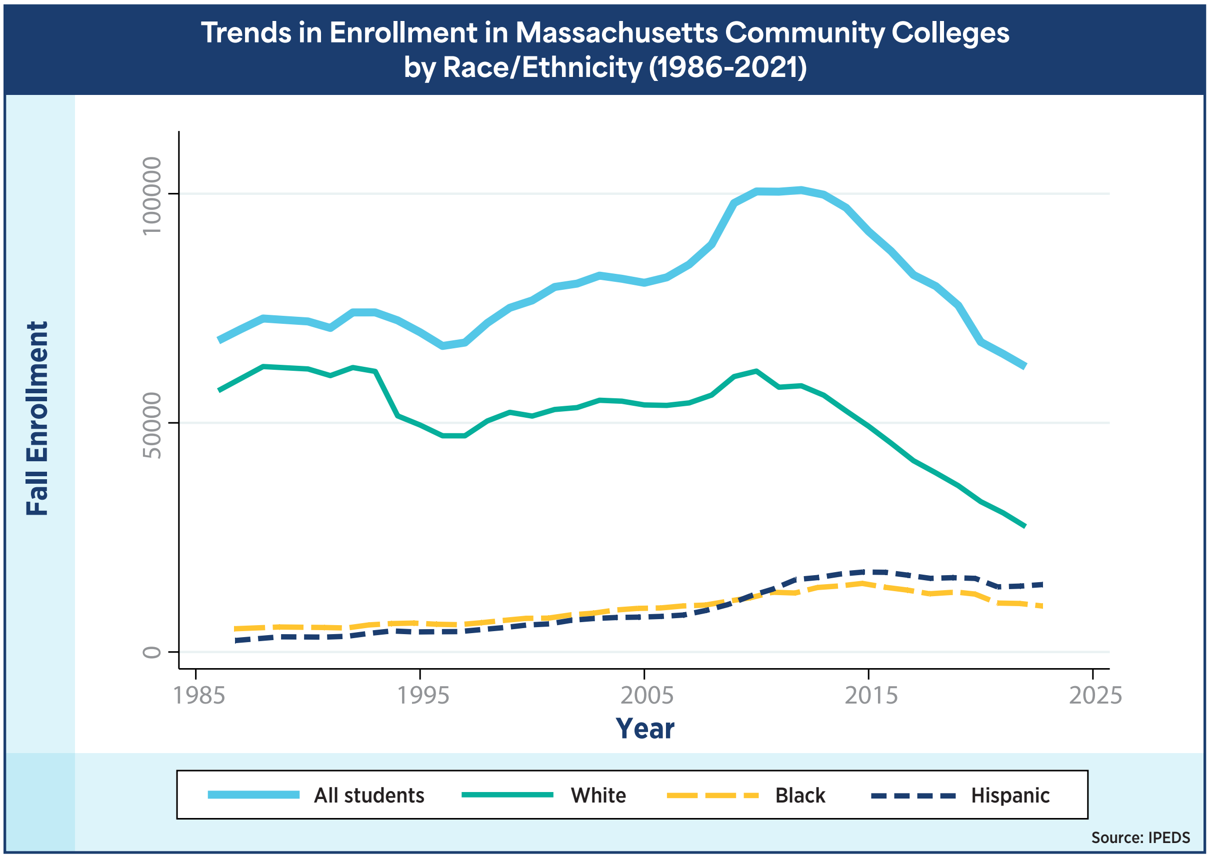
State Funding

- State spending on public higher education declined between 1987 and the mid-2000s, though not uniformly. Funding fluctuated, with sharper cuts during economic downturns and only partial recoveries during periods of growth. For example, state funding increased between 1992 and 2001 before declining again.
- Following the 2008 Great Recession, state funding for community colleges dropped sharply. As the economy recovered, funding gradually rebounded in subsequent years.
- Since around 2012, state funding has steadily increased but has only returned to early 2000s levels.

Tuition And Fees Revenue

- Since 2001, tuition revenue has shown a modest but steady increase, reflecting rising tuition and fees.

Figure A2



Key Trends Illustrated in Figure A2

Gradual Growth

- Between 1986 and the mid-2000s, enrollment showed gradual growth with some fluctuations.

Post-recession Enrollment Surge

- Following the 2008 Great Recession, enrollment surged.

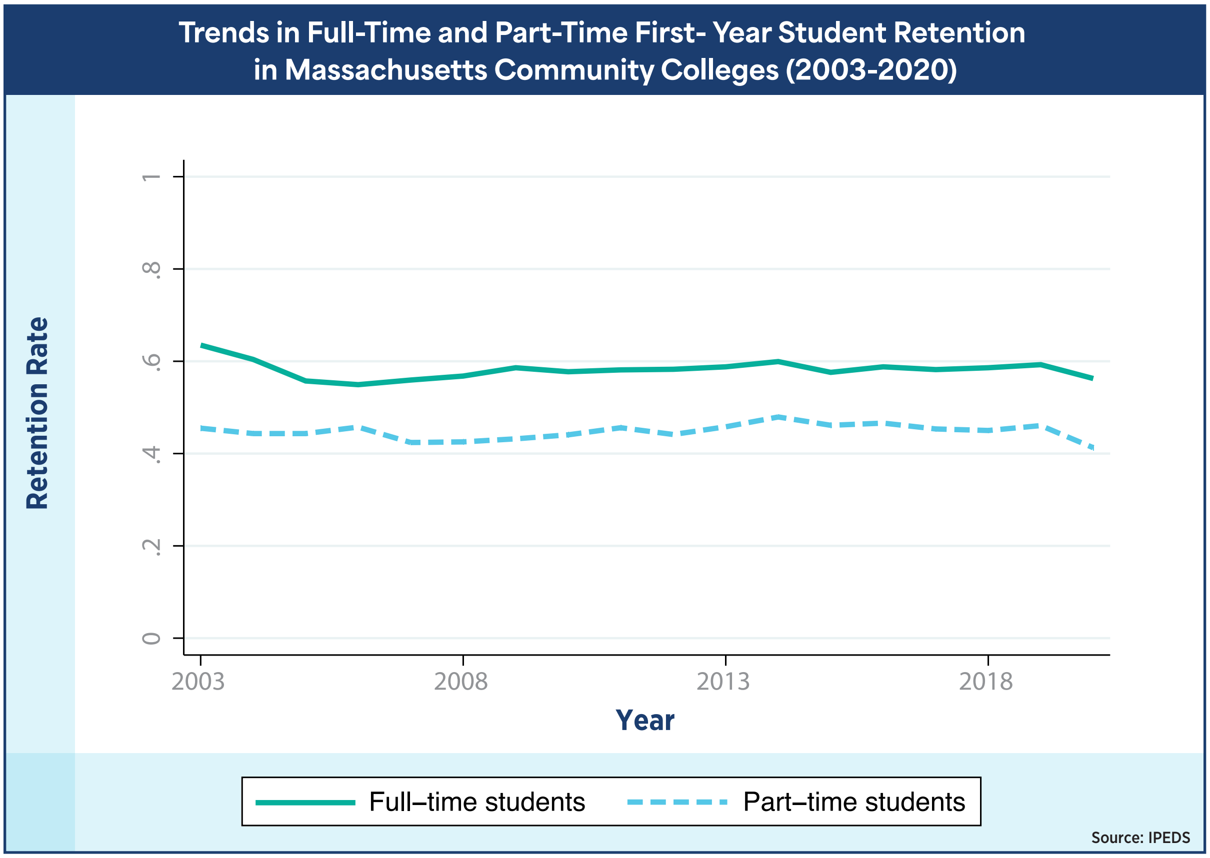
Enrollment Decline Since 2013

- After peaking around 2013, enrollment declined by approximately 30%, marking a sustained downward trend in recent years.

Shifts by Race/Ethnicity

- White student enrollment has historically been highest compared to other groups, and has seen the most significant decline, particularly after 2013.
- Hispanic and Black enrollment have increased steadily over time but have recently plateaued.

Figure A3



Note. *Retention rate reflects the percentage of first-year students who persist or complete their program one year later.*

Key Trends Illustrated in Figure A3

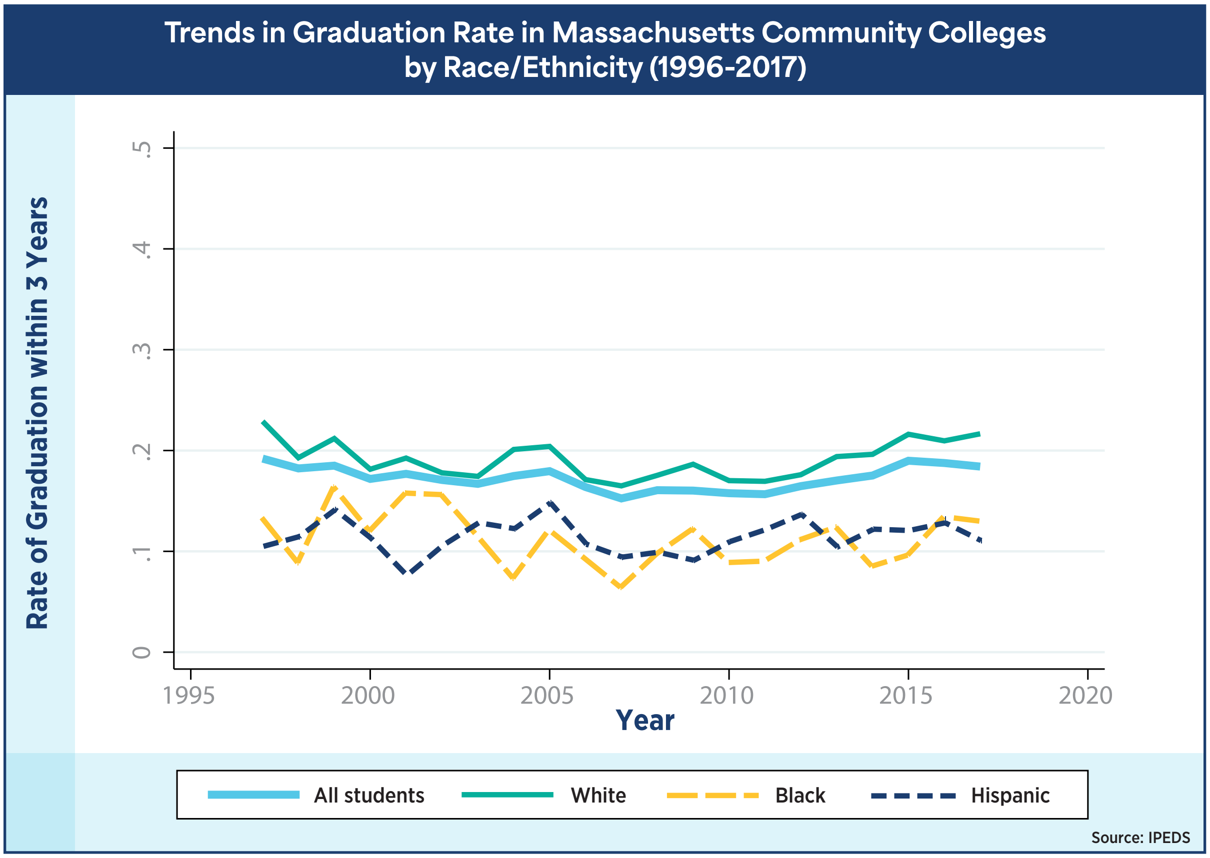
Stable Retention Rates Over Time

- Retention rates have remained relatively stable over time, with minor fluctuations but no significant upward or downward trends.

Gap Between Full-Time and Part-Time Student Retention

- Full-time students have had higher retention rates compared to part-time students throughout the observed period (2003-2020).

Figure A4



Key Trends Illustrated in Figure A4

Stable Retention Rates Over Time

- Graduation rates for all students have remained relatively low and stable over the observed period (1996-2017).

Gap Between Full-Time and Part-Time Student Retention

- White students have historically had the highest graduation rates, while Black and Hispanic students have had persistently lower rates.

Table A1

Student Enrollment at Massachusetts Community Colleges by Enrollment Type						
INSTITUTION	TOTAL ENROLLMENT (#)	% OF TOTAL ENROLLMENT				
		PART TIME	FULL TIME	DEGREE SEEKING[A]	DEGREE SEEKING FULL TIME	DEGREE SEEKING PART TIME
Berkshire Community College	1,572	78	22	70	21	49
Bristol Community College	6,096	66	34	83	33	50
Bunker Hill Community College	8,545	63	37	86	36	50
Cape Cod Community College	2,604	76	24	85	23	63
Greenfield Community College	1,544	75	25	80	23	57
Holyoke Community College	3,706	67	33	85	32	53
Massachusetts Bay Community College	3,973	66	34	79	32	47
Massasoit Community College	5,029	66	34	74	29	44
Middlesex Community College	8,280	80	20	56	19	38
Mount Wachusett Community College	3,204	72	28	80	24	55
North Shore Community College	4,833	74	26	84	25	58
Northern Essex Community College	4,510	75	25	74	24	51
Quinsigamond Community College	6,930	72	28	78	27	51
Roxbury Community College	1,631	73	27	97	27	70
Springfield Technical Community College	4,561	63	37	87	36	51
Average	**4,468**	**71**	**29**	**80**	**27**	**52**

Note. Source is 2023 IPEDS data.
[A] Degree-seeking includes those seeking certificates.

Table A2

Student Demographics at Massachusetts Community Colleges						
INSTITUTION	% OF TOTAL ENROLLMENT					
	BLACK	HISPANIC/ LATINO	WHITE	WOMEN	AGES 25-64	PERCENTAGE OF FULL-TIME, FIRST-TIME STUDENTS AWARDED PELL GRANTS
Berkshire Community College	8	13	67	67	34	53
Bristol Community College	12	15	56	66	41	55
Bunker Hill Community College	22	30	17	59	39	54
Cape Cod Community College	10	13	64	64	42	41
Greenfield Community College	5	13	68	63	43	34
Holyoke Community College	7	32	51	66	37	52
Massachusetts Bay Community College	16	24	40	59	40	42
Massasoit Community College	34	12	40	61	34	45
Middlesex Community College	9	19	45	58	24	42
Mount Wachusett Community College	10	23	58	66	37	45
North Shore Community College	9	34	38	64	37	50
Northern Essex Community College	5	48	38	63	29	49
Quinsigamond Community College	16	24	42	61	36	50
Roxbury Community College	43	16	4	67	54	47
Springfield Technical Community College	14	34	36	61	40	57
Average	**15**	**23**	**44**	**63**	**38**	**48**

Note. Source is 2023 IPEDS data.

Endnotes

1 For more details on CUNY ASAP replications, see https://www.cuny.edu/about/administration/offices/student-success-initiatives/asap/replication/for-policymakers-and-advocates/

2 Overall, Massachusetts public higher education developed slowly compared to other states. Midwestern and western states like Michigan and California established degree-granting state universities with professional and graduate programs in the 1870s. Massachusetts opened its state-funded agricultural college (originally named Massachusetts Agricultural College)in 1867, but it did not transition into a public university until 1947 (Groeger, 2022). Despite being home to 30%-50% of the state's population between 1880 and 1980, the Boston area did not have a public institution with general degree-granting authority until the 1960s (Groeger, 2022).

3 Enrollment among racial-ethnic minorities remained limited, reflecting broader demographic patterns in higher education at the time.

4 For example, Long (2009) notes that state funding for public higher education increased between 1992 and 2001.

5 See Figure A1 in Appendix for trends in Massachusetts community college funding based on IPEDS data from 1979 to 2017.

6 See Figures A2-A4 in Appendix for trends in enrollment, retention, and graduation rates in Massachusetts community colleges based on IPEDS data.

7 The 1991 reforms extended the governance changes to 4-year public colleges as well. Key measures included merging two state universities into the University of Massachusetts system, replacing a consolidated board with a coordinating board, and granting UMass authority over tuition (McLendon et al., 2007).

8 Notably, before this shift, the centralized governance of the 1970s and 1980s was widely seen as inefficient and heavily shaped by political dynamics (Tandberg & Anderson, 2012).

9 Success rates were defined in the Vision Project as the percentage of students who, within 6 years of enrollment, either earned an associate degree or certificate, transferred to a 4-year institution, or remained enrolled with at least 30 credits earned (DHE, 2014).

10 Murnane et al. (2022) found that MassTransfer helped more students, especially higher income and female students, transfer and earn bachelor's degrees; however, low-income and racial-ethnic minority students continued to face challenges due to financial, personal, and institutional barriers.

11 HSIs are colleges and universities where at least 25% of undergraduate students identify as Hispanic. Bunker Hill Community College received HSI designation in 2020. The AANAPISI designation is for institutions where at least 10% of undergraduates are from Asian American and Pacific Islander backgrounds. To obtain HSI or AANAPISI status, colleges must submit an application to the U.S. Department of Education.

12 Post-pandemic enrollment trends for Massachusetts community colleges can be viewed in the IPEDS-based visualization tool created by the Community College Resource Center: https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/easyblog/how-many-community-colleges-fully-recovered-their-enrollments-three-years-after-the-pandemic-too-few.html

13 Furthermore, the Tuition Equity Law expanded access by granting undocumented students in-state tuition and eligibility for state financial aid (Hildreth Institute, 2024a).

14 Dollar amounts are not reported in constant dollars.

15 Guidance to the SUCCESS Coordinating Committee updated in April 2025 states that colleges should promote their programs widely and clearly communicate that they are open to all students while continuing to serve special populations as intended and reinforcing the initiative's inclusive, equity-focused mission (MACC, 2025d).

16 TRIO is a suite of eight programs (originally three programs), including educational opportunity centers, student support services, and Upward Bound programs, designed to support low-income students, first-generation college students, and students with disabilities in progressing through education. TRIO grants are made to institutions of higher education, secondary schools, public and private agencies, or some combination of these organizations to support eligible students (U.S. Department of Education, 2024).

17 Prior to FY25, SUCCESS programs could serve students who were being served by other programs if they tracked duplication of services or demonstrated that there was no duplication (MACC, 20236). By FY25, the guidance asked colleges to track whether students received other services and whether there is any duplication (MACC, 2024b).

18 Beyond guidance on the share of SUCCESS funds to be used for new staff positions, there were no guidelines on the number of staff positions. In 2022-2023, SUCCESS supported 379 full-time and part-time staff members across the 15 colleges (MACC, 2024a).

19 EAB Navigate is case management software that allows college staff to schedule meetings with students, track student data, and manage student progress toward specific goals. Many Massachusetts colleges adopted this software to facilitate and manage data for the SUCCESS program.

20 Some, but not all, SUCCESS-funded positions belong to a union.

21 TRIO programs serve students who are low-income, are first-generation, and/or have a documented disability. SUCCESS can be targeted to a wider range of potential students.

22 A *navigator* is a new, SUCCESS-funded position at this college. Their role is to connect all new students to services on campus.