This case study is part of an eight-part series under APLU’s Guided Pathways for 4-Year Institutions model.

To view the model and other case studies, visit www.aplu.org/guidedpathways
4-Year Guided Pathways Case Study: Completion Grants

Introduction

Unmet financial need remains a significant barrier to degree completion for many low-income students, especially those in their final year of college—when savings are often exhausted and traditional need-based financial aid proves insufficient in covering students’ expenses. Nearly 15 percent of students with three-quarters of their required credits fulfilled leave college without degrees, often due to financial constraints.

To ensure students with unmet financial need and a proven record of academic success do not drop out for financial reasons, a growing number of colleges and universities are offering completion grants, often only a thousand dollars, to help students make tuition payments as they near graduation.

Description of Strategy

Originally coined by the Association of Public & Land-grant Universities (APLU) and the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities (USU), and based upon similar programs at Georgia State University, IUPUI and others, “completion” grants are delivered to students who have made substantial progress in college but still face financial hurdles to degree completion. Most completion grant programs target students who are within 25% of degree completion; in other words, students typically thought of as “seniors”.

Completion grants are considered micro-grants and are usually fairly small, some as low as $500 and up to $2,000. In some cases, these grants are available to cover a balance on the students’ college account (e.g., for tuition and fees), and in other cases, they are also available to cover additional expenses of attending college (e.g., living costs or books). Many institutions delivering completion grants report high rates of graduation among students receiving the grants.

Though still relatively new, completion grants programs have been proliferated at more than a dozen institutions. With each new program variation in their design occurs; however, a study is currently underway (2018-2022) by researchers at Temple University’s Hope Center and APLU to examine the efficacy, financial and resource costs, and implementation effects of these programs.

Relation to the Model

As mentioned above completion grants target students in the advanced progress phase, seeking to support students’ degree completion and movement into the transition phase. Completion grant programs are arguably stop-gap interventions that help to address issues with the current financial aid systems. Institutions who develop completion grant programs should consider how their financial aid systems might be improved such that the system can automatically support the affordability of students from various backgrounds.

Historically, financial aid has been shaped by two significant drivers: (1) the need to increase access to higher education - most notably signified by the Higher Education Act of 1965; and (2), increasing competition for students, especially in the 1980s, leading to the use of financial aid packages as recruitment tools. These forces have converged with changing demographics of American college students resulting in some major affordability issues. Case in point, many college students find that as they progress through their academic programs that their unmet financial need grows, creating a funding gap. While most students can address this gap, cost-sensitive students and families can find even a small increase detrimental. Completion grants are one intervention that can be applied as an intermediary step to address these situations.

Resources

- HOPE Center’s Innovating Financial Aid: Testing The Efficacy of Completion Grants
- Policy Brief: A College Affordability Innovation Worthy of Public Investment?
- APLU’s Completion Grant Projects
  - Completion Grants: Lessons from a Pilot Program
  - Foiling the Drop Out Trap: Completion Grant Practices for Retaining and Graduating Students