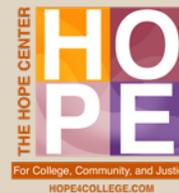


Completion Grants

A PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE

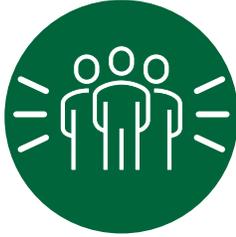


Overview

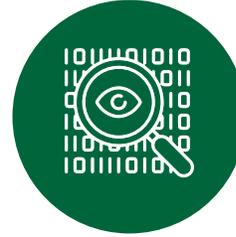
EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS AND INSTITUTIONAL ALIGNMENT



Gain institutional buy-in by piloting your grant approach first.



Seek cross-campus partnerships.

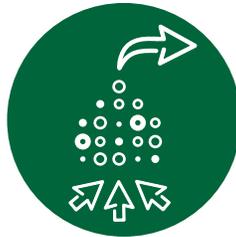


Look for champions in unexpected places.

DATA-INFORMED APPROACHES



Define and measure success.



Use data to drive decision-making.



Broadcast impact using qualitative and quantitative data.



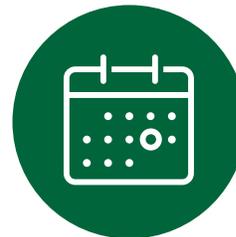
AWARD ELIGIBILITY AND DISBURSEMENT



Define “near completion” by using degree maps.



Bundle completion grants with other financial and support resources.



Award as early as possible.

STUDENT-CENTERED IMPLEMENTATION



Understand the many indicators of student financial need.



Remove administrative hurdles for recipients.



Clearly communicate grant eligibility and terms to students.



Maintain communication with students.



Introduction

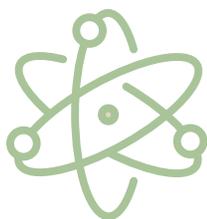
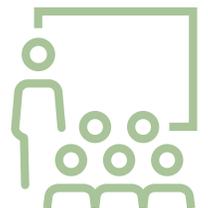
Within the last decade, completion grants (a small amount of funding provided to students with demonstrated need for the last leg of their academic journey) have gained popularity as a financial aid approach to increase student degree completion. First coined by The Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) and the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities (USU) in 2015, and popularized by Georgia State University's Panther Grants, completion grants have been increasingly adopted and implemented by public four-year universities. In 2016, APLU and USU [released a brief](#) on the impact of completion grants, finding that 93% of awardees had graduated or remained enrolled one year after receiving a grant. While promising, these results spurred research questions regarding this emerging financial aid approach. Specifically, would rigorously designed research support the use of completion grants at urban and open-access public research universities? Temple University's The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice led a five-year, randomized control trial (RCT) study of completion grants across 11 APLU institutions. This effort, funded through the US Department of Education's Institute for Education Science (IES), was one of several studies in the institute's College Completion Network, meant to bolster research-based student success efforts.

A full report on the RCT, [An Experimental Study of Completion Grants at Accessible Public Universities](#) (2022) authored by Sara Goldrick-Rab, Christine Baker-Smith, Travis T. York, Kallie Clark, Douglas Webber, and Christel Perkins was released in December 2022. It relates findings from the implementation of completion grants according to RCT guidelines in fall 2018. Despite finding that receiving a completion grant did not improve graduation rates over 3 academic years, subsequent APLU and USU conversations

with participating universities revealed that: 1) the majority of universities continue to offer completion grants; 2) of those with completion grant programs, all have shifted their implementation strategies in ways that differ from the RCT-required guidelines, and; 3) many have since indicated positive impact on student completion. This practitioner's guide is meant to disseminate findings from a qualitative inquiry into the administration and impact of completion grants at participating institutions. As such, the purpose of this guide is to:

1. Highlight current completion grant practices at urban and open-access public research universities. *How do universities administer completion grants?*
2. Provide recommendations/considerations for completion grant implementation. *What elements may contribute to a successful completion grants program?*
3. Signal a need for continued research and understanding of completion grants. *What do practitioners and researchers need to investigate further?*

The qualitative inquiry phase of this research study was completed in the fall of 2022. Seven of the original 11 institutions opted to participate in this phase, completing focus groups or interviews about completion grant implementation outside the RCT study—that is, how completion grants are currently administered and evaluated at their institutions. Profiles of participating universities are found in this guide and provide unique perspectives on grant implementation and effectiveness on their campuses. Drawing from these interviews and focus groups, this guide provides a list of recommendations for institutions that aim to establish completion grant programs.



Recommendations



Effective Partnerships and Institutional Alignment



Gain institutional buy-in by piloting your grant approach first.

While the promise of completion grants is enticing, jumping into administering these awards without first gaining institutional buy-in is not advised. Participants appreciated the RCT phase because it forced important conversations among institutional stakeholders about how and why these grants would be awarded. Piloting completion grants with a subset of the student population was critical to gaining on-campus buy-in for continuing the approach post-RCT. Each of the seven universities has adapted and scaled their completion grant programs post-RCT, using lessons learned from RCT implementation to tweak their approaches to match their campus and student needs.



Seek cross-campus partnerships. Participants recommended strengthening relationships with key institutional stakeholders, who can be instrumental in successful implementation. Due to their close relationships with students, academic advisors were identified as key partners. Advisors are effective in both identifying completion concerns and also referring students to on- and off-campus resources. Participants described academic advisors' use of management systems to flag indicators of financial, academic, and non-academic needs—which are then used in the award decision-making process.

Participants also advise building a strong partnership with the Office of Institutional Research (IR). Meeting regularly with IR ensured access to relevant data on student progress toward completion, predictive analytics, and financial aid/accounts, all of which were critical in determining which students would benefit most from a completion grant.



Look for champions in unexpected places. The majority of post-RCT completion grant programs were funded through unused financial aid dollars, Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) monies from pandemic relief legislation, or alumni donations. Participants mentioned fundraising through their development office as the long-term strategy for maintaining funding for completion grants. However, newer sources of financial support have arrived in the form of local companies and organizations. Unexpected champions include local banks and key regional employers, such as University of Memphis's partnership with FedEx, who see the direct benefit of boosting students' chances of graduating and entering the local work force.

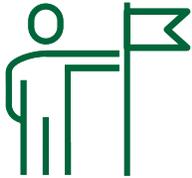
“We partner with the academic advisors, since a lot of [them] know their students best in terms of their pathway to graduation. So they may be more in tune with the students and [can help] provide input to us on how best to use the completion money that we do have available.”

EVAN UDOWITCH
Virginia Commonwealth
University

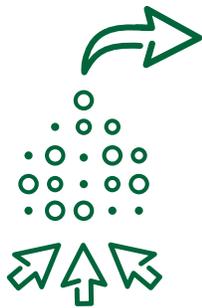
Recommendations



Data-Informed Approaches



Define and measure success. The majority of participating universities did not have a formalized plan to assess the impact of completion grant programs. When we queried each university about how they knew whether their program was successful or not, we received several data points, including semester-to-semester retention, credit accumulation, and graduation within a certain number of semesters, but these points were not always monitored regularly. We recommend that practitioners create an evaluation plan for their completion grants efforts, including clearly defining implementation strategies and success metrics, as well as regularly reviewing data and processes for improvement.



Use data to drive decision-making. Knowing that institutional funds for completion grants are limited and will not reach every student in need, practitioners must make decisions about which students receive grants. Participants described several data points on which they rely to make award decisions, including FAFSA data, enrollment reports, academic progress (both GPA and credit accumulation), student account balances, and notations from academic advisors. Virginia Commonwealth University uses predictive analytics software to determine which students are at the highest risk for non-completion and awards grants using pre-set parameters. Practitioners should consider integrating data sources from several campus partners to make data-informed and holistically-minded award decisions.



Broadcast impact using qualitative and quantitative data. Student anecdotes, collected through surveys or individual conversations with advisors or other university staff, may help contextualize quantitative data regarding student progress to completion. Among participants, success was primarily communicated through student anecdotes. Student stories were particularly effective for engaging donors; however, none of the universities have a robust, publicly accessible report or data repository on the impact of completion grants. We recommend that qualitative and quantitative data be shared broadly with on- and off-campus stakeholders to increase scaling and sustainability efforts.

“I think what was success for us was some of the feedback we got from students. They were thanking us, but also, they were quantifying it by making statements such as ‘This now saved me X amount of hours of overtime work I do not have to do.’”

MELISSA PIZZO
Arizona State University

Recommendations



Award Eligibility and Disbursement



Define “near completion” by using degree maps. The RGT required students to be within 25% of the credits required for graduation. However, participating universities explained how this measurement does not necessarily mean a student is on track to graduate within a year. Although the typical four-year degree takes 120 credits to complete, the average student graduates with 135 credits (Complete College America, 2022), the result of taking courses that do not apply to their major, changing majors or programs, or transferring. Practitioners should consider contextualizing credit accumulation numbers with a review of student degree maps, which are more accurate indicators of how close a student is to graduation.



Bundle completion grants with other financial and support resources. Each of the participating universities uses completion grants as one of many interrelated financial support strategies. Participants reported that students who received completion grants were also likely to request emergency aid to remedy acute financial barriers to student success, such as basic needs insecurities and other non-academic factors (Hope Center, 2021). Two universities reported requiring or referring students to financial wellness resources via online modules. Rather than treating them as a stand alone stop-gap, completion grants should be used in tandem with holistic supports.



Award as early as possible. Universities that continued their use of completion grants stressed the need to make award decisions, ideally, before the semester begins. Institutions often require students to exhaust their maximum federal loan amounts before qualifying for completion grants, which prevents the university from making award decisions until after students have matriculated for the semester. We know that financially stressed students obtain additional employment (full- or part-time), take out personal (and often predatory) loans, or borrow from family (Perna & Odle, 2020). Completion grants are designed to help students avoid those situations, so to maximize impact, these grants should be disbursed before the semester starts.

“We require all of our recipients to attend financial wellness coaching. And if they don’t attend coaching, we have a survey that we ask them to fill out to make sure that we can get them any support services that we need”

BRIDGETTE CRAM
Florida International University

Recommendations



Student-Centered Implementation



Understand the many indicators of student financial need. Participants recommended moving toward a more complex conceptualization of student financial need when awarding grants. While unpaid account balances may be indicative of financial stress, research shows several other warning signs that practitioners should recognize and consider when determining student eligibility. These may include: 1) taking on additional employment to pay bills, 2) applying for emergency aid, 3) utilizing on-campus resources such as food pantries or clothing closets, 4) decreased academic engagement, 5) dropping courses or stopping out for a semester, 6) decreased academic performance, and 7) exhibiting signs of psychosomatic or mental health distress (e.g. falling asleep in class, depression).



Remove administrative hurdles for recipients. Key to the design of each participating university's completion grants administration was done through an auto-award process. Rather than requiring students to complete an application, interview, or another burdensome task to demonstrate need, institutions should automatically disburse completion grants to a student's university account, thereby eliminating additional barriers for students to access these funds.



Clearly communicate grant eligibility and terms to students.

Although most participants do not advertise the availability of completion grants to students, participating institutions mentioned the importance—once a student is identified as eligible—of providing clear details regarding the grants. We recommend that students be told why they are receiving a grant, what requirements they must meet, and what additional support services are available to meet their completion goals.



Maintain communication with students.

Many of the participating institutions continued to interact with students who received grants after the grant was disbursed. As students' financial issues can stem from a variety of complex issues, participants recommended that practitioners engage in conversations with students to get a better understanding of additional supports, beyond the grant money, that could help them succeed. Much of this communication is done through email, text messages, and in-person meetings.

“We are doing all sorts of contact and reach out to [eligible students]. We’re emailing them, we’ve used our call center. We’ve done texting campaigns, I mean, just it’s extremely touch heavy.”

CASSIE GROVE
Indiana University-Purdue
University Indianapolis

Final Thoughts

Our research shows that completion grants are a tool universities are using to spur degree completion among students with financial need. There is no national standard for implementing completion grants, and our participating universities demonstrate several different ways that public, open-access universities are designing and delivering these grants. Moreover, completion grants should not be the only tool used to encourage degree completion; our universities stressed the need to consider grants as one part of a suite of degree-completion tactics at practitioners' disposal. Completion grants are neither a one-size-fits-all approach nor are they a panacea for degree completion among low-income or financially stressed students.

Ultimately, further research is needed into the implementation and effectiveness of these grants to scale up award processes that are evidence-based. Additionally, it is important to consider whether other types of microgrants could be effective in increasing degree completion. Participating universities indicated a desire to measure the impact of retention grants (awarded earlier in the academic journey, such as sophomore year), and/or come-back grants (awarded to former students who have stopped out for two or more semesters) in increasing degree completion. Given that the "some college no degree" (SCND) population has grown to 39 million Americans (National Student Clearinghouse, 2022) and is steadily expanding, retention, persistence, and re-enrollment are critical pieces of the degree completion puzzle on which practitioners should focus in the future.



PHOTO COURTESY OF VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY



University Examples

Profiles of universities with current completion grants efforts:



PHOTO COURTESY OF INDIANA UNIVERSITY-PURDUE UNIVERSITY INDIANAPOLIS

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis's (IUPUI) completion grants program awards about 200 grants per year at an average of \$5,000 per student. Success for this program is measured using retention and degree completion data, as well as stories of success from students who received the grants. IUPUI's completion grants program is unique in that it is an initiative of Mayor Joe Hogsett, [Indy Achieves](#), to make postsecondary education a reality for all Marion County residents. Through Indy Achieves, Marion County residents attending IUPUI qualify for additional financial assistance and wrap-around services.

University of Memphis

University of Memphis' [completion grants program](#) awards between 66 and 70 grants per year at an average of \$1,500 per student. The Memphis completion grants program is unique because they partner with FedEx to support African American men by providing grants, as well as workforce opportunities at the FedEx hub in Memphis. Memphis also frames its program as a pre-graduation celebration for grant recipients. Through induction ceremonies, dinners, and receptions, Memphis allows grantees to celebrate their successes and connect with other students facing similar challenges.



PHOTO COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY OF MEMPHIS

University of North Carolina at Charlotte

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte's (UNCC) [Gold Rush Completion Grant](#) program awards about 200 grants per year at an average of \$1,500 per student. The Gold Rush Completion Grant program is noteworthy because it encourages additional programming for grant recipients to help with financial literacy and degree mapping. To provide some of this programming, Gold Rush hosts a [week-long series of workshops](#) each semester to welcome new and returning students and expose students to campus resources and opportunities. Workshops include a session with the University Center for Academic Excellence to provide newly admitted transfer students with the full set of campus resources, a Gold Rush Resource Fair that introduces them to departments and available services, and a Niner Finances Scavenger Hunt, in which students compete for prizes by finding fliers posted around campus and answering the financial literacy questions each poses.



PHOTO COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHARLOTTE



PHOTO COURTESY OF FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Florida International University

Florida International University's (FIU) completion grants program awards about 560 grants per year at an average of \$1,200 per student. Success for this program is measured using retention and graduation statistics for one year following the grant. [FIU's completion grants program](#) requires students to attend financial wellness coaching, in addition to receiving funds. FIU also continues to provide more support services, including group coaching and financial wellness workshops.

Portland State University

Portland State University's (PSU) completion grants program is run through PSU's [Financial Wellness Center](#) and awards about 60 grants per year at an average of \$1,200 per student. Success for this program is measured using graduation status. Students are tracked to verify whether they earn their degree, apply for graduation, or cancel their degree application. PSU's completion grants program is unique in that it focuses primarily on retention and graduation rates for PSU's Pell-eligible transfer students.



PHOTO COURTESY OF FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

List of Participating Universities

- Arizona State University
- Florida International University
- Florida State University
- Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis
- Portland State University
- Rutgers University-Newark
- University of Colorado Denver
- University of Illinois Chicago
- University of Memphis
- University of North Carolina Charlotte
- Virginia Commonwealth University

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