



CASE
STUDY

Texas Student Success Programs Poised for Impact

Highlighting High Potential

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ITHAKA S+R

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Introduction

Each student enters college with their own unique set of goals, lived experiences, challenges, and hopes. Postsecondary institutions are challenged to build robust student supports that help these students each achieve their own version of success. This requires developing supports that work for a wide variety of target populations, such as for traditional-aged students entering college directly after high school as well as for returning adults seeking to build on credits they earned elsewhere a decade ago. In Texas, the state's Building a Talent Strong Texas strategic plan seeks to increase the number of adults earning credentials, particularly those that lead to successful careers. Texas postsecondary institutions have developed a large number of student success initiatives that offer targeted support to diverse populations across a wide range of practice areas. In 2022, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) contracted with Ithaka S+R to identify these student success programs and compile them into the Texas Student Success Program Inventory (TX SSPI).¹

Building upon the initial launch of the inventory, this brief highlights a few specific programs that have high potential for significant impact on student success. Student success programs generally incorporate high-impact or promising practices to improve student outcomes on (1) persistence/retention, (2) credential attainment, (3) academic achievement, (4) student advancement post-graduation, or (5) students' holistic development.² Our team examined five different programs included in the inventory, drawn from four institutions, that stood out as innovative and demonstrated strength in at least one of these dimensions. In selecting these programs, we sought to represent geographic and institutional diversity in the state as well as a variety of program practices and target populations. Through this examination, we hoped to better

¹ For more information on the Texas Student Success Program Inventory, please see: Christy McDaniel, Bethany Lewis, Madeline Joy Trimble, and James Dean Ward, "The Texas Student Success Program Inventory: How Public Undergraduate Institutions Are Supporting Student Success Across the State of Texas," *Ithaka S+R*, 9 March 2023, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.318523>.

² For more information on how we define student success programs, please see "The Texas Student Success Program Inventory: How Public Undergraduate Institutions Are Supporting Student Success Across the State of Texas," <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.318523>.

understand some of the factors that help student success programs achieve their goals.

Through semi-structured conversations with various program stakeholders, we identified five different elements that were integral to these programs' high potential for impact: use of data-informed practices, holistic support and building connections, participant autonomy and leadership development, institutional support and sustainability, and a culture of continuous improvement. In this case study, we first describe the selected programs, then share themes that surfaced across programs, and conclude with some final takeaways.

About the Programs

Rainy Day Savings Program at ACC

The Rainy Day Savings Program is a financial wellness program based at Austin Community College. The program arose in response to the results of a Trellis financial wellness survey of Austin Community College students, which revealed that more than half of students would have trouble coming up with \$500 to meet an unexpected need.³ To help ACC students prepare for financial emergencies, the Rainy Day Savings Program partnered with University Federal Credit Union to help students set up a savings account and grow their emergency savings. The program provides additional incentives to promote responsible financial practices. If students set up direct deposit and attend a welcome session, they receive a \$150 deposit in their emergency savings account, and they can earn an additional \$50 if they accumulate a balance of \$500 or greater by the end of the program. Students are also required to participate in at least one financial coaching session.

The Rainy Day Savings Program is available on a first-come, first-served

³ According to institution-specific results shared by program stakeholders; for aggregated Student Financial Wellness Survey results from all participating institutions, see Carla Fletcher, Jeff Webster, Allyson Cornett, Aaron Niznik, Tanya Gardner, and Cassandra Knaf, "Student Financial Wellness Survey: Fall 2021 Survey Results," *Trellis Company*, November 2022, <https://www.trelliscompany.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/SFWS-Report-Fall-2021.pdf>.

basis to all ACC students who meet the few program requirements, which include being enrolled in at least six credit hours during the semester and planning to enroll in at least six credit hours the following semester.⁴ However, program leaders market the program to students who are early in their academic career or enrolled in a student success course. The program serves about 100 additional students per year, and 661 students are actively saving as of Fall 2023.⁵ Though the number of students served fluctuates each year based on the grant funding available, program administrators have never had to turn away students.

ACC Career Scholars

Also based at Austin Community College, Career Scholars is a holistic scholarship program that provides both financial and academic support to students in high-demand, high-wage fields as identified by the Texas Workforce Commission.⁶ The initiative came out of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's 60x30TX strategic plan, which sought to equip at least 60 percent of Texans ages 25-34 with a postsecondary credential or degree by 2030; the latest version of the strategic plan expands that 60 percent goal to apply to Texans aged 25-64. In addition to covering the cost of tuition and fees for up to three years, Career Scholars offers academic support through supplemental instruction workshops and embedded tutors. It also employs a case management model to provide participating students with a host of wraparound services and offers a variety of career services, including resume building and interview preparation.

Career Scholars is targeted to underrepresented students, including low-income students and minority students, who are interested in ACC's workforce programs. The program initially recruited from seven high schools, but now conducts outreach at all high schools in the surrounding area and includes two separate cohorts—one for high school students and one for adult learners. ACC Career Scholars serves about 300 students

⁴ For more information on eligibility and program requirements for Rainy Day Savings, please see "About the Rainy Day Savings Program," Student Money Management Office, Austin Community College, <https://sites.austincc.edu/money/about-rainy-day/>.

⁵ According to participation statistics shared through "About the Rainy Day Savings Program," <https://sites.austincc.edu/money/about-rainy-day/>.

⁶ For more program information, please see "Career Scholars," Austin Community College, <https://students.austincc.edu/scholarships/career-scholars/>.

per year, with 150 students in each cohort.

The TECHniques Center at Texas Tech

Founded in 1999, the TECHniques Center is a fee-for-service tutoring program at Texas Tech University for students with learning disabilities, ADHD, and/or Autism spectrum disorders.⁷ The Center offers relatively high-touch programming, with at least five hours per week of one-on-one tutoring as well as weekly academic counseling. Students who are interested must apply to the TECHniques Center, as well as apply to and obtain approval for services with Student Disability Services. In addition, Texas Tech students can become peer tutors in the Center, where they receive paid training, professional development opportunities, and earn College Reading & Learning Association certification as a tutor. Overall, this program provides targeted and intensive support to help students with unique challenges thrive in college.

The TECHniques Center was established to promote the retention of students with learning disabilities, ADHD, and Autism at Texas Tech but also, according to its website, to “support students in becoming independent, self-advocates, accomplishing their educational goals, and making education accessible to those who learn differently.” Student outcomes data for participants are very strong; according to the center, Texas Tech students who complete a semester with the TECHniques Center have an average fall-to-spring retention rate between 97 and 99 percent.

Scholar Enrichment Program at the University of Houston

The Scholar Enrichment Program (SEP) at the University of Houston is a 30-year-old program that aims to create “a learning community for students in high-risk classes, with workshops designed to enhance learning and problem-solving skills.”⁸ The four pillars of its program are: 1)

⁷ For more detailed program information, please see “TECHniques Center,” Texas Tech University, <https://www.depts.ttu.edu/techniques/>.

⁸ For more information about the Scholar Enrichment Program, please see “Scholar Enrichment Program,” University of Houston, <https://www.uh.edu/nsm/scholar-enrichment/>.

Financial support; 2) Academic support; 3) Community building; and 4) Leadership building. SEP offers financial support through stipends for those students who enroll in its Summer Scholars bridge program, which is mostly composed of students from under-resourced high schools. After the summer program, the program offers participants opportunities for paid work, such as administrative aids, tutors, assistant facilitators, or lead facilitators, and participants tend to work their way up the ranks throughout their time in the program.

Student facilitators lead workshops related to high DFW (drop, fail, withdraw) classes that are open to any students enrolled in the affiliated course. In addition to financial support, these employment opportunities allow the participants to develop leadership and professional skills. This is part of SEP's Collaborative Learning Model, whereby peers can teach and learn from one another. SEP assesses the program by comparing the grades of those who attend these student-led workshops with those who do not—those who participate consistently have better academic outcomes.

Because community building is a pillar of the program, SEP has a designated, physical space, which fosters students' sense of belonging. Since students can join the program as early as the summer before their first year and stay on until they graduate, one program leader described SEP as being a constant for the students, which is key to their success. SEP is funded by several different entities, including National Science Foundation (NSF) grants, private donors like TC Energy, and the institution itself. Despite its expansion over the years, its budget has not kept pace with its growth, which poses challenges to sustainability that leaders have been able to meet thus far.

Course Transformation Program at Texas State

The Course Transformation for High DFW Courses Project at Texas State University is aimed at helping faculty improve student academic outcomes through a collaborative and data-informed course redesign process. Participating faculty members meet regularly to incorporate best practices in pedagogy and course design into their courses, reviewing student data to align existing research with the actual needs of their specific student population. Due to the intensive nature of this work, faculty receive a stipend for participation. The program is relatively new and began its pilot

year with general chemistry sequences in the summer and fall of 2022, which resulted in substantial changes to the course syllabi, structure, and teaching practices for participating faculty. Texas State University has begun to expand the program to include biology in the 2023-2024 academic year.

The program relies heavily on external and internal sources to meet its goal, including literature on pedagogy and course design that help faculty adjust their syllabi and classroom practices. Faculty also use detailed student data to iteratively make changes throughout the course. For example, in response to a drop in student attendance after the second exam, chemistry faculty offered a “zero exam” that would only count minimally toward students’ final grade. In preliminary findings on program outcomes, DFW rates of courses taught by professors participating in the Course Transformations program dropped 10 percent in the first year in Chemistry 1 and 14 percent in Chemistry 2. The program is funded through grants and receives institutional support from the dean of science and engineering and the provost’s office.

Emerging Themes

After speaking with program directors, program staff, individuals involved with program evaluation, and higher-level leadership across these five promising student success programs, our team identified a few key program features that support the ability of these programs to have an impact on student success and are integral to their long-term viability.

Data-Informed Practices

Incorporating data into program design and implementation decisions is one way student success programs can draw upon previously identified best practices and respond to the unique needs of their own student population. Though the five programs vary widely in terms of their approach to supporting students, each relies on data in some capacity to guide its design, implementation, and/or progression.

Problem Identification and Program Initiation

For some programs, data collected by the institution allowed campus leadership to initially identify a problem, which served as the impetus for a new student success program. The Rainy Day Savings Program and the Course Transformation Program, for example, arose in response to data suggesting that a subset of students was struggling academically or financially.

Program Design

Data can also be used to inform the design of a program, allowing staff to structure it in a way that is likely to have a greater reach or impact. For the Course Transformation Program, the program leader identified evidence-based practices about student performance in gateway courses by reading literature on course design, scalability, student perceptions of STEM faculty, and course transformation. In the case of ACC Career Scholars, staff used labor market data from the Texas Workforce Commission to select eligible programs to ensure that the program's design helped students complete programs that lead to high-demand, well-paying jobs.

Program Implementation

Course Transformation and Rainy Day Savings showcase how student success programs can incorporate data-informed practices throughout implementation. Though the Rainy Day Savings program partners with an external financial institution that manages students' savings accounts, program staff conducted interviews with students to identify their needs and researched various features of savings accounts to better understand what type would be best suited for their students. They also drew on research about best practices in individual development accounts from other sectors to apply to their own savings account design. In the Course Transformation program, faculty participants continue to incorporate data and evidence in multiple aspects of their work. Not only do they borrow from prior research to incorporate best practices in pedagogy and course design, participating faculty also use student data—DFW rates, attendance, instructor self reflections, and student grades—to continuously monitor their progress and iterate on their approach.

Program Evaluation

All five of the programs use data to evaluate their programs, though their approaches to program evaluation vary. In the case of ACC Career

Scholars, the Scholar Enrichment Program, Course Transformation, and the TECHniques Center, program staff collect data on student outcomes such as retention rates, grades, and attendance. Program staff in these programs use these data to understand whether and how they are impacting student success. These data also provide staff with valuable information that can be used to adjust or improve future program design or implementation.

Rainy Day Savings is unique in that it partnered with a third-party evaluator, the Ray Marshall Center, to conduct a quasi-experimental evaluation of the program.⁹ Results of the external evaluation were promising, showing that participants' perception of their financial well-being increased after enrolling, though comparisons on key outcomes to a matched comparison group were mostly positive but not statistically significant. The evaluation also suggests potential positive impacts on retention and credential attainment for particular student subgroups, including Hispanic students, working students, and female students. In addition to gaining a better understanding of how the Rainy Day Savings program is impacting students, staff can use the results of the third-party evaluation to secure additional funding.

While many programs don't have the resources to conduct an external evaluation, the Scholar Enrichment Program is a good example of a program that uses the resources it does have to make the best use of the data it collects. In addition to data from student surveys and interviews, SEP staff have access to rich longitudinal administrative data that allows them to track students from K-12 through their postsecondary years and even examine their workforce outcomes. Because program staff do not have the internal capacity to analyze this data, they partner with post-docs who can provide analytic support. This has resulted in published research on the impact of aspects of the SEP.¹⁰ SEP's program lead also refers to literature and attends sessions on education research and statistics to better understand how to analyze and report the data her team is

⁹ Ashweeta Patnaik and Greg Cumpton, "Research Study of Austin Community College's Rainy Day Savings Program: Year One Report," Ray Marshall Center for the Study of Human Resources, April 2022, <https://sites.utexas.edu/raymarshallcenter/files/2022/06/ACC-Rainy-Day-Savings-Year-1-Report.pdf>.

¹⁰ Dina Ghazzawi, Donna Pattison, Catherine Horn, "Persistent of Underrepresented Minorities in STEM Fields: Are Summer Bridge Programs Sufficient?" *Frontiers in Education* 6, no. 630529 (5 July 2021), <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2021.630529/full>.

collecting.

Holistic Support and Building Connections

Evidence-based student success programming may connote a focus on “data,” but it need not come at the expense of building connections across students, staff, and faculty. Our conversations highlighted the importance of facilitating connections between students and the faculty and staff they interact with as well as between administrators, faculty, and staff who are involved in designing and implementing student success programs. In the paper, *Texas’s Student Success Acceleration Programs*, researchers at MDRC found that more comprehensive programs (i.e., those that had more components) had larger impacts on student success outcome measures, lending support to the importance of holistic student support.¹¹

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At the TECHniques Center, program staff pointed toward the extremely supportive, high-touch, and individualized nature of the tutoring program as a key feature of its success. According to a program leader, “It's those little things that some of the other programs overlook when they're trying to create these models of effectiveness. They leave out the human aspect. And when you start doing that, you can make all the great plans you want, but if you leave that part out, you're not going to be very successful.” This leader emphasized that students need holistic supports that attend to their needs beyond the classroom, referencing his “peanut butter and jelly theory.” He found that offering students peanut butter and jelly

¹¹ For more information, see Dorimé-Williams, Marjorie, Dan Cullinan, Claudia Escobar, Sabrina Klein, Lena Novak, Stanley Dai, Parker Cellura, and Makoto Toyoda, “Texas’s Student Success Acceleration Programs,” *MDRC*, August 2023, <https://www.mdrc.org/publication/texas-s-student-success-acceleration-programs>.

sandwiches before tutoring sessions allowed students who were hungry to focus better, noting, “It was amazing the difference that made in their attitude toward their tutor, because all of a sudden, they were addressing their immediate human needs, and it was allowing them to focus much more clearly.” Similarly, both the ACC Career Scholars program and the SEP program provide support to students across a variety of domains, incorporating both direct financial support and academic support.

Building connection and a sense of personal investment among institutional leaders, program leaders, and staff is also essential to building the potential for impact. At Texas Tech, it was a personal connection to the cause that led one senior leader to first conceptualize the TECHniques Center; this personal motivation provided a foundation upon which the program could be developed. Faculty buy-in was also an important element of the Scholar Enrichment Program. A program leader there noted that greater and earlier involvement of faculty was beneficial for both the faculty and the program. Strong interdepartmental institutional partnerships are also important. A program leader of Course Transformation mentioned that support from senior leadership was integral to the program’s success. Similarly, SEP’s program leader noted that the program remains stable even as certain funding sources decrease because of how closely they work with the university’s development team to find alternative funding opportunities.

Because student success programs often impact and involve multiple stakeholders, relationship-building is necessary. Participants and leaders of Course Transformation highlighted the ability of a department to work as a team as a key component of success for the pilot. A program leader emphasized, “I wanted buy-in from the get-go. And it wasn’t buy-in like, ‘Will you accept what I’m selling?’ It’s, ‘We’re going to do this as a team.’” Stakeholders noted that a high level of departmental cohesion was necessary for success, and thus the program might not be an appropriate fit for all faculty or for all departments as it expands.

The importance of strong institutional partnerships also arose in relation to the programs’ ability to evaluate their success. Staff involved in the external evaluation of Rainy Day Savings mentioned that the strong institutional partnerships their research center had cultivated with ACC was an important factor in their ability to evaluate the program. Similarly, a postdoctoral researcher involved in evaluating SEP commented that “there’s always been a real bidirectional respect and interest in the

expertise of the other to really try and make sure that we're combining superpowers to work toward a program that really is doing the best work on behalf of students.”

Participant Autonomy and Leadership Development

“Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.” This aphorism was evident across all five programs in the form of an emphasis on skill-building and leadership development.

Autonomy and skill building were central themes across all five programs, though the types of skills being taught varied. The Rainy Day Savings program emphasizes financial autonomy and skill building, in contrast to emergency savings funds that provide one-time payments to students. While the program does award up to \$200 to students who complete a series of initial tasks, the primary goal of the program is to encourage students to save their own money and learn how to manage a savings account so they can learn to be financially self-sufficient. The Scholar Enrichment Program and the TECHniques Center, on the other hand, both place an emphasis on academic skill building that can be applied throughout students' academic careers. ACC Career Scholars provides academic and financial support for its participants as well, but career support is at the heart of the program, offering students guidance on job searching, resume building, and interview preparation.

The Scholar Enrichment Program and the TECHniques Center also both place a strong emphasis on leadership development by incorporating peer tutoring into their programs. For the SEP program in particular, leadership building is one of the program's four pillars. The Collaborative Learning Groups—where peers can teach and learn from one another—allow participating students to both learn from their peers and gain leadership experience as they teach their peers. Students' progression from learning to teaching is a key feature of the program.

While the Course Transformation program is unique in that its participants are faculty, it also includes a strong emphasis on skill building. In addition to making changes to course design, the program builds the pedagogical skills of participating faculty as well as supporting their ability to be

adaptable and responsive to changing student needs based on data. Program stakeholders reported that they expected these skills to be applicable to other courses taught by those faculty, not just to the specific high-DFW courses targeted by the program.

Institutional Support and Sustainability

An evaluator of the Rainy Day Savings program shared the importance of supporting the sustainability of effective programs, noting, “if you don’t institutionalize programs that work, they just evaporate.” Institutional support, especially financial resources, is essential to the sustainability of effective programs, which was apparent in all programs. While funding strategies varied across each of the five success programs, it was common for staff to cobble together multiple sources of funding in order to sustain their programs.

If you don’t institutionalize programs that work, they just evaporate.

Each of the five programs relied at least in part on institutional funding, though the proportion of program costs covered by the institution varied. Program staff for Rainy Day Savings and Course Transformation mentioned that their institutions provided financial support for staffing in particular. Funding for the Career Scholars program has changed over time, with initial funding based on a corporate partnership grant that required increased institutional funds as the grant period progressed, which has led to the institution’s foundation kicking in a higher proportion of the cost to run the program over time.

Sustainability may mean different things for different programs. For many programs with grant funding, finding new sources of funding is necessary to remain on campus long term. Course Transformation is an example of a program that structured its funding with sustainability in mind. A program leader commented, “We want to make sure it’s sustainable because grants go away... it needs to be kind of a shared initiative.” Because of this, program funding is a joint effort across the dean of the college of sciences and engineering and the office of the provost, in addition to external grant funding.

However, sustainability can also extend beyond a program’s campus.

When discussing expansion, staff from SEP referenced program replication at other campuses as a goal. Describing a staff member who left the campus and is now replicating SEP at an institution in another state, a program leader commented, “He came here, he learned it, and he took it with him... and they got NSF funding. So that’s what we want to see. You want to have maximum impact.”

Sometimes, adaptability is necessary for a program’s survival. The COVID-19 pandemic is, somewhat obviously, an example of a disruption that required programs to be flexible. Staff at both Rainy Day Savings and the TECHniques Center described the pandemic as a particularly tough challenge, but also that they saw their ability to effectively adapt an indication of their success. They sustained the program and continued serving students throughout and after the first years of the pandemic.

Continuous Improvement

The ability of student success programs to respond to or anticipate obstacles, change, or feedback was a recurring theme in conversations with program staff and participants. While short-term adaptations were sometimes necessary for the long-term sustainability of programs, a deeper culture of continuous improvement was apparent in how the five programs approached supporting student success.

Being intentional and proactive is one way student success programs can continuously improve and respond to the needs of changing student populations. For example, while the ACC Career Scholars program recruited only from high schools initially, staff recognition that the program might be useful for their growing adult learner population led to the development of a second cohort. This expansion both helped the program be responsive to the needs of changing student populations and double its reach.

The ability to reflect and adapt when things don’t go as planned is also integral to a culture of continuous improvement. The external evaluator of the Rainy Day Savings program noted that one of the most important elements of successful institutional partnerships is working with staff who are open to receiving uncomfortable feedback and willing to hear that their program may not demonstrate the results they were hoping for. Programs with the potential for significant impact regularly review program

data and are receptive to null or negative findings. For example, participating faculty in Course Transformation rolled back a course change after finding that it did not have its intended effect, and staff at the Scholar Enrichment Program adjusted their approach after acknowledging that aspects of the programs were increasing students' likelihood of being placed on academic probation.

In many ways, a culture of continuous improvement is the thread that ties the other elements together. The ability and willingness of program staff and participants to anticipate needs, seek opportunities for improvement, and adapt are often necessary for programs to sustain partnerships, grow, or secure long-term funding. These characteristics allowed staff at the TECHniques Center to strengthen student-tutor relationships, led the Rainy Day Savings program to gain a better understanding of their impact, and helped staff at ACC Career Scholars to expand the program.

Conclusion

In highlighting these five programs, we recognize that we do not exhaustively cover all the factors that give a student success program a high potential for impact. The Texas Student Success Program Inventory features many other programs, each with their own unique twist on helping students better achieve their educational goals. However, these highlighted programs all exemplified a thoughtful approach to programming that contributes to a culture of evidence in Texas postsecondary education. Our conversations with program leaders helped us identify themes around the common features that made these programs stand out. They used data to inform their decision making at key points of program design and implementation but didn't lose sight of the importance of the human connection in the process. Rather than providing quick, one-time interventions, they endeavored to drive sustained success by helping participants develop skills and improve their autonomy. They solicited institutional support to sustain and scale their programs. And finally, they engaged in thoughtful continuous improvement practices, drawing on both data and experience to adapt the programs as necessary in the interest of student success.

Some of the programs we examined particularly excelled in one or more of

these practices but exhibited weaknesses in other areas. This does not mean that the program does not have high potential for significant impact. Instead, there are areas for program staff and leaders to develop in their continuous improvement efforts. As different students need different levels or types of support, there is wide variation in the way programs approach student success, and there is no one-size-fits-all answer for what a student success program should look like. However, we encourage student success professionals who are engaging in the design or implementation of programs to keep the principles above in mind as they strive for exemplary potential for impact.