Crossing the Finish Line:

Overcoming Barriers to Community College Degree and Credential Attainment in Kentucky

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KENTUCKY CENTER for ECONOMIC POLICY
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Introduction

In recent years, Kentucky has set high goals for increasing the share of residents with a postsecondary degree. The Postsecondary Education Improvement Act of 1997 established the goal of raising the state’s higher education attainment rate to the national average by 2020. More recently the Kentucky legislature passed Senate Bill 1 (2009) to address the major challenge of the large number of students entering higher education without being “college ready.”

These goals resulted from the recognition that postsecondary degrees or credentials are increasingly important to the state economy and to Kentucky's citizens. One estimate projects that more than half of jobs in Kentucky will require some higher education in 2018. Studies have also shown that those with at least a postsecondary credential and a year of college credit earned substantially more than those with less education. And while college enrollment and graduation rates in Kentucky are on the rise, the rates of degree completion are still lower than those of most other states. Just 31 percent of adults 25-54 in Kentucky have an associate’s degree or higher, ranking the state fifth from the bottom on this measure. Degree attainment rates are particularly low for those who are poor, African American, Hispanic or older.

More than a lack of access to postsecondary education, a primary problem is students' lack of persistence toward a degree. 22 percent of Kentuckians 25-54 have some postsecondary education but no degree. This alarmingly high share of students who have begun postsecondary education but not completed a degree raises a number of important questions: What barriers prevent students from completing degrees after enrolling in college? What can be done to overcome these barriers? How are these issues being addressed in Kentucky as the state seeks to achieve its postsecondary education goals?
Community colleges play an important role in Kentucky’s postsecondary education challenge—and in the state’s economic future. In order for Kentucky to reach its goal for postsecondary degree attainment by 2020, the state must increase the share of adults with college degrees from the current rate of 32 percent to 43 percent, which means adding 66,825 degree-holders over the next eight years. Many of these degrees will be earned at community colleges, which tend to be the most affordable option for students and provide the minimum postsecondary degree or credential needed to obtain employment at decent wages. More than half of Kentucky’s undergraduates attending public institutions enroll in community colleges.

Community colleges also provide degrees and credentials for high-demand “middle skills” jobs, which require more than a high school education but less than a four-year degree. More than half of jobs in Kentucky are middle-skills jobs, and demand for these jobs is expected to continue once the economy fully recovers. However, only about 45 percent of the state’s workforce has the appropriate education. Community colleges are uniquely positioned to provide the necessary training and help close this skills gap.

Community college students, however, often face significant challenges in earning a degree or credential. Less than a third of those who enroll in community colleges graduate within three years. Financial responsibilities, lack of academic preparation and a need for more student and family supports can prevent students from graduating in a timely manner—or at all. The way colleges structure and deliver courses may also be a barrier to student success. For instance, courses often do not connect material to students’ career paths or other areas of immediate interest, which can hinder student learning.

**Community College Students**

Although a growing number of students from all backgrounds attend community colleges, most are adults (over age 21) and a large share are the first in their families to attend college. The majority of community college students are also economically disadvantaged—students attending community colleges are more likely to receive need-based federal grants such as the Pell Grant—than students attending four-year public universities.

Community college students are also more likely than students at other types of institutions to have characteristics—or “risk factors”—that research has shown may negatively affect college persistence and degree attainment: delayed enrollment, lacking a high school diploma, part-time enrollment, financial independence (from parents), having dependents and being single parents.

The success of Kentucky’s community college students is critical to the state’s economic future. In order to encourage community college degree and credential attainment, it is important to understand what is preventing many community college students from reaching these goals and what types of interventions can assist them.

**Barriers to Community College Degree and Credential Completion**

Why do just 55 percent of first year community college students in Kentucky return the following year? Research has shown that some of the most common barriers to degree and credential completion for community college students are: problems balancing school with financial and family responsibilities; getting derailed in developmental education courses; and having difficulty navigating college and staying on track for a degree.
Financial Responsibilities

Despite the relative affordability of community college tuition, many students face financial barriers to completing degrees and credentials. Since many community college students work at least part-time and are raising children, they typically face significant challenges in balancing these responsibilities with their academic studies.

According to the 2011 national Community College Survey of Student Engagement, Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS) students are most likely to withdraw from college because of a lack of finances. As highlighted in a previous Kentucky Center for Economic Policy report, “The College Affordability Crunch in Kentucky,” the cost of tuition at Kentucky public postsecondary institutions—including community colleges—is rising rapidly as state funding decreases. And KCTCS tuition—currently $135 per credit hour for new in-state students—is higher than the national average for community colleges. A large percentage of students at community colleges are also low-income adults who are financially independent (rather than relying on parents to pay for college).

Less than a third of those who enroll in community colleges graduate within three years.

Most community college students work while attending school, and a large percentage work full-time. Working often prevents students from attending school full-time—and full-time attendance is associated with successful degree completion. Work is also a common reason for students leaving college. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), 84 percent of community college students work—and 60 percent work at least 20 hours a week. In a 2004 survey of 1,600 former KCTCS students who did not earn a degree, the second most common reason given for leaving school was because of the “need to work and make money” while attending classes.

Developmental Education Skills Gap

Another barrier to community college degree and credential completion is students’ lack of basic academic skills when entering college. In Kentucky, students who do not have these skills are required to take developmental education courses before enrolling in credit bearing coursework. While it is important that academically underprepared students acquire the basic skills needed to be successful in college courses, many students lose momentum in meeting these requirements.

In Kentucky, as in many states, when students enroll in public postsecondary institutions they are assessed for college readiness based on standardized test scores. Those whose scores indicate that they lack basic math, reading and/or writing skills must take developmental education courses in these subject areas. Students at the state’s community colleges are particularly likely to end up in these courses.

Approximately 78 percent of entering KCTCS students are placed in developmental education courses. This is higher than the estimated national community college remediation rate of nearly 60 percent. Students test into developmental education for several reasons, including: not having acquired these basic skills in high school or while earning a GED, not adequately preparing for the placement test (and not realizing the significance of such placement testing), and having difficulty remembering these skills after being out of school for a number of years.
New higher statewide cutoff scores for college readiness are expected to further contribute to high enrollments in developmental education in Kentucky.

Only a very small percentage of students who enroll in developmental education courses complete a degree or credential. And less than 40 percent of all students nationally who are referred to developmental education courses even end up enrolling in college-level courses. Students may have difficulty passing the courses or leave school due to the significant financial and time commitments involved in completing developmental education requirements.

Of those who enter developmental education in Kentucky, just over half pass the courses: 60.2 percent in math, 64.8 percent in writing and 57.4 percent in reading. Low pass rates may be related to the quality of developmental education courses and the methods of teaching. A 2007 report by the Kentucky Developmental Education Task Force found that these courses are often taught by part-time and adjunct instructors who are provided with very little professional development.

Improving the quality of instruction and using innovative pedagogical methods in developmental education courses may improve pass rates. A promising national trend in developmental education reform is for programs to utilize contextualized instruction—integrating developmental education into occupational fields or majors in which students are interested.

In Texas, a new system for developmental math, Mathways, has been adopted throughout the community college system to address some of these issues. The approach links students’ developmental education requirements to their career goals in order to streamline developmental math. Only students who plan to major in a science- or math-based field take a traditional, algebra-based developmental course. Other students take classes in statistics or quantitative reasoning, subsets of math more relevant to their careers. Course content focuses on preparation for and application to students’ programs of study rather than attempting to re-teach a high school math curriculum.

Developmental education can also serve as a barrier to degree completion because students end up investing so much time and money in these courses that their financial resources and motivation often become depleted. Although students pay tuition for developmental education courses, they do not earn college credit by taking them—and degree seeking students cannot enroll in credit bearing college-level courses in a subject area in which they are not college ready until they complete their developmental education requirements. Completing developmental education requirements can potentially take a year or more (depending on the size of the skill gap), and many students become discouraged as they spend time away from family and work and deplete financial aid—all without earning college credit.

In addition, developmental education may be unnecessary for students who have comparatively strong academic skills. Two recent studies have shown that a significant percentage of students placed in developmental education courses could actually pass college-level courses without first taking remedial courses. For these
students, placement in developmental education may unnecessarily drain their resources and potentially derail them from attaining a degree or credential.

Need for Additional Student and Family Supports

In order for community college students to successfully complete a degree or credential, they often need supports in addition to—and/or different from—those that are available. Students may need intensive academic advising, supports that help students balance school with work and family responsibilities, and/or emergency financial aid. Unfortunately many community colleges can provide only limited student supports.

Community college students often need intensive academic advising and education/career counseling. Students who are the first in their families to attend college are especially likely to lack general knowledge about how to navigate college and specific information about how to stay on track toward a degree. As a result, these students may take courses they do not need and spend a longer period of time earning credits that financial aid will not cover.\(^{36}\) Such difficulties can lead to students dropping out. Unfortunately the student-counselor ratio at most community colleges is usually about 1,000 to one. Caseloads this high make it incredibly difficult for counselors to provide the kind of guidance many community college students need.\(^{36}\) In addition, because low-income, first generation college students are less likely to utilize existing support services, an intrusive advising model may be needed. This type of advising includes structured meetings with advisors, mandatory activities such as academic planning and tracking of student success.\(^{37}\) While this type of advising is sometimes offered to targeted groups of students, it is rarely available to all students at a community college.

Students may need intensive academic advising, supports that help students balance school with work and family responsibilities, and/or emergency financial aid. Unfortunately many community colleges can provide only limited student supports.

Some other effective student and family supports specifically focus on helping students balance school, work and family responsibilities. Approximately 35 percent of community college students in the nation are parents.\(^{38}\) And the demand of family responsibilities was the most common reason given for leaving school in the 2004 survey of 1,600 former KCTCS students who did not earn a degree.\(^{39}\) One study found that when childcare was provided on campus at a state university, student parents were more likely to remain in school, graduate in fewer years and earn higher grades.\(^{40}\) Transportation assistance can also contribute to positive academic outcomes.\(^{41}\)

Many students may be eligible for family supports through state and federal programs and not realize it, and most colleges are not well structured to facilitate students’ access to these supports. An approach developed by the Center for Working Families (CWF) bundles together three “core service elements” that work to support students: employment and career advancement services, income and work supports (including public benefits screening, assistance with benefit applications and tax assistance services) and financial services and asset-building supports. For ten colleges that have utilized the approach, participants have higher retention rates than all students at these
schools. They also report that the approach makes it easier to figure out where to find assistance for both academic and non-academic issues.\textsuperscript{42}

Additionally, emergency financial aid programs can help students persist in college by enabling them to quickly meet their financial obligations. Two such programs—Dreamkeepers and the Angel Fund, both funded by the Lumina foundation—found that students typically request money for housing and transportation. Both student aid recipients and administrators in these programs reported that the funds helped students remain enrolled in college, and data showed that emergency aid recipients reenrolled at rates comparable to the average at their campuses.\textsuperscript{43}

\section*{Kentucky’s Efforts}

Kentucky has taken some important steps toward addressing its low community college degree and credential completion rates. For instance, the state recently passed legislation setting higher goals for community colleges to successfully move students through developmental education, and KCTCS now has two programs in place—Ready to Work and Accelerating Opportunity—that provide comprehensive supports to targeted student populations. Kentucky is also one of a handful of states working to align adult education with postsecondary education in order to increase the percentage of adult education students who go on to college. While these are quite positive steps toward improving community college degree and credential completion, the state’s continued underinvestment in need-based financial aid may instead work against this goal.

\section*{Financial Aid}

Students with fewer financial pressures—and who work fewer hours—are more likely to complete degrees and credentials. Adequate financial aid, including aid that is targeted to the community college population, is therefore a large part of addressing low community college degree and credential completion rates. Research suggests that traditional need-based financial aid can promote persistence toward a degree for community college students.\textsuperscript{44} However, Kentucky continues to underfund need-based financial aid. Only 49 percent of state aid in Kentucky is based on financial need, compared to 73 percent of all US state grants, according to a study by the Brookings Institution.\textsuperscript{45} What’s more, 35 percent of what Brookings calls need-based aid in Kentucky is the Kentucky Tuition Grant (KTG) program, which is only available to private college students.\textsuperscript{46} Funds are limited and awards are made on a first-come, first-served basis, which means that a large number of qualified students are denied aid. In 2011, over 76,000 eligible students—67 percent of eligible applicants—were denied assistance from the CAP program for this reason.\textsuperscript{47} Those denied are often adult students who may not make educational decisions far in advance.

Kentucky also has the Go Higher Grant Program, a need-based aid program targeted to adults 24 and older who attend college less than half time. However, the program is limited and only lightly marketed—in 2011 only 141 students received the grant.\textsuperscript{48}

The state prioritizes above all its merit-based financial aid program, the Kentucky Educational Excellence Scholarship (KEES). In the budget passed for 2013-2014 funding for financial aid is basically frozen, which
means that KEES continues to be fully funded and the need-based programs—CAP in particular—continue to be substantially underfunded. State funding has also moved toward tuition assistance through tax credits and deductions, which tend to benefit higher-income residents who have an income tax liability. Meanwhile tuition rates continue to rise and the purchasing power of the federal Pell Grant continues to decline.

Developmental Education

In contrast to Kentucky’s financial aid trends, the state is making some important efforts related to developmental education. The state has set high goals for student success in developmental education, and KCTCS is working to improve the quality and methods of instruction in developmental education courses in several ways. These reforms will potentially have a positive impact on Kentucky’s community college degree and credential completion rates. However, a recent policy-driven change in cut-off scores for college readiness will increase the share of students enrolled in developmental education courses, which may be problematic.

Senate Bill 1, which aims primarily to increase college readiness for high school graduates in the state, includes high goals for all postsecondary institutions, including community colleges, to successfully move students through developmental education. KCTCS has developed student success goals for 2014 that are based on Senate Bill 1 criteria: to increase the percent of developmental education students who either successfully complete a developmental course or meet the college ready benchmarks on retesting by the end of the second year. By Fall 2015 KCTCS aims to move from a 60.2 percent pass rate in developmental math to 69.2 percent; from a 64.8 percent pass rate in developmental English to 77.7 percent; and from a 57.4 percent pass rate in developmental reading to 78.9 percent.

KCTCS colleges are implementing changes to their developmental education programs in order to meet these goals.

Students with fewer financial pressures—and who work fewer hours—are more likely to complete degrees and credentials.

In terms of efforts to improve the quality and methods of instruction in developmental education, KCTCS is working with the National Center for Academic Transformation (NCAT) to re-design developmental math. The math emporium model involves students spending the majority of class time in computer labs working on math problems (with guidance from an instructor) rather than listening to traditional lectures. This model also eliminates the series of courses students must move through (i.e., Prealgebra and Developmental Algebra 1), which accelerates learning. The curriculum is modularized, and students move through the various required units at their own pace. And faculty spend more time working with students one-on-one or in small groups than in traditional classrooms. The model has been implemented in colleges and universities across the country, and NCAT claims that it increases developmental math pass rates and performance in college-level math courses. This model is now in place in some capacity at most KCTCS colleges.

It is also significant that KCTCS has aligned developmental education course learning outcomes with the curricula of introductory college “gateway” courses (such as Freshman Composition). This ensures that the developmental education courses are truly preparing students for college coursework, and may increase the likelihood of students succeeding in college after passing developmental education courses.
KCTCS also offers developmental education through Learn On Demand, an on-line developmental education program that may help developmental education students with relatively higher skills reduce the amount of time and money spent on requirements. Like the math emporium model, Learn on Demand is modularized so that students can work at their own pace and also focus in on the specific areas where they need to strengthen their skills. Students pay per module, which can save money for students who only need to improve in a few areas. Students whose test scores are very close to the cut-off for being placed into developmental education courses are usually recommended to meet the developmental education requirements this way. However, the approach has challenges: it is difficult to make these credits eligible for Pell Grants and some low-skilled adult students might have difficulty accessing and navigating the program’s technology.

Adult education reform is also an important part of increasing degree and credential attainment. While historically most adult literacy providers have viewed the endpoint of their services as the GED rather than a college degree or credential, there is an increasing recognition of the importance of helping low-skilled adults enter and succeed in higher education. Kentucky is working to align adult education with postsecondary education by setting a statewide goal for the share of adults earning GEDs who transition to postsecondary education and establishing the Common Core Standards—developed by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers and adopted by 47 state public K-12 education systems—for adult education in Kentucky; instituting these standards should help ensure that the adult education curriculum is preparing students to succeed in college and beyond. In Kentucky in 2011-2012 alone, 39,487 students were enrolled in adult education, and approximately 26 percent of those who earned GEDs went on to enter postsecondary education within two years. Unfortunately the state does not currently collect data on the further academic progress and graduation rates of these students.

Despite Kentucky’s efforts, the state’s postsecondary degree completion rates remain low, and significant improvement needs to be made.

Kentucky is also one of just five states currently participating in Accelerating Opportunity, a grant-funded initiative that works to successfully move individuals from adult education to a postsecondary credential with currency in the job market (for instance, welding technology and medical assisting) in a very short period of time. Ideally these students completely bypass developmental education. The model is based on Washington State’s very successful I-BEST program. Students gain adult education competency through contextualized learning. Courses are co-taught by both technical instructors in the subject matter of their credential program and adult education instructors. As part of the Accelerating Opportunity grant, the program is operating in eight KCTCS colleges. However, KCTCS and its partners plan to scale the program to all sixteen colleges by early 2014. Currently most of the participating colleges offer just one or two credential programs through Accelerating Opportunity.

Despite these important reform efforts, there may be new challenges to achieving KCTCS’s developmental education goals. With the implementation of Senate Bill 1, KCTCS and the public universities have developed a new common definition of college readiness. In the case of the state’s community colleges, the new ACT, SAT,
COMPASS, and KYOTE test score requirements are higher than before the legislation was passed, and more students are expected to be placed into developmental education. Given this paper’s previous discussion of developmental education as a potential barrier to degree completion, this increase in the number of students in developmental education courses may negatively affect degree and credential completion rates.

Another important challenge is ensuring that developmental education reforms benefit all students. For instance, it is important that developmental education be designed for low-skilled adults—who make up a significant share of developmental education students—as well as more traditional college students. As an example, low-skilled adult students may be less comfortable using technology-based approaches to learning. Increasing the number of students who benefit from targeted approaches or programs to promote student success is another related challenge. Scaling up reforms like Accelerating Opportunity so that they benefit more than just a small number of students presents numerous challenges—including how these efforts will be funded.58

At least one KCTCS college—Owensboro Community and Technical College (OCTC)—has developed an approach to reducing the number of students in developmental education involving short-term coursework. At OCTC, students who test into developmental education courses are encouraged to retake the placement test at a later date, after brushing up on their skills. Students must participate in either adaptive computer-based tutoring provided to OCTC students and prospective students in all three subject areas or one- to two-week camps to help students prepare to retake the placement exam; there is no cost for either program. These efforts have helped many students bypass enrolling in developmental education courses.

**Student and Family Supports**

Student supports—such as academic advising and career counseling and programs that help students balance school with financial and family responsibilities—are particularly important to the success of community college students. Kentucky’s community colleges have instituted intensive supports for small, targeted groups of students, but an expansion of these types of supports throughout KCTCS institutions is needed.

Since 1999, Kentucky’s Ready to Work program has provided a system of supports for low-income students who are recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). The program is a collaboration between KCTCS and the state TANF agency, the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services, is funded with federal TANF funds and operates in all sixteen KCTCS colleges. Ready to Work provides participants with intensive case management that includes mentoring, tutoring, advising, counseling, advocacy and referrals to community and campus services (i.e., for transportation and child care subsidies). The program serves students who are likely to struggle with academic success, and has resulted in strong college retention rates and academic performance.59

In the most recently completed year, over 82 percent of the degrees, certificates and/or diplomas earned by Ready to Work students were associate degrees, a rate much higher than for the overall population of KCTCS graduates where certificates are more common. The Fall 2011 to Spring 2012 retention rate was 77 percent, which was seven percentage points higher than the statewide retention rate for that same period.60

The Accelerating Opportunity program discussed previously also includes comprehensive wrap-around services for participating students through a case management approach. While in some cases early on in the program’s implementation this role has been filled by program coordinators, the various KCTCS programs are in the process of hiring a success coach for each program. The coach will be students’ first point of contact and will help with admissions, serve as a liaison with instructors, set students up with a tutor and/or provide study tips, provide supports as needed to ensure the student can stay in school, and make campus and community
referrals. Accelerating Opportunity students also have access to a career coach who will work with the student on job search activities, resume writing and career counseling. Case management is a key part of the I-BEST model, which has been effective in increasing student educational outcomes (i.e., students continue in their educational pathway beyond the entry level certificate/s offered in the program, toward a higher credential).61

In terms of supports for the general population of students at Kentucky’s community colleges, KCTCS recently rolled out an on-line program to supplement existing student services. KCTCS believes that this program will: target support services more accurately; provide students with self-service options that include admissions, academic advising, financial aid, registration, tutorial services, retention, and technology; ease the workload on the colleges and increase student satisfaction and access; measure student service data accurately and consistently; and help attain higher enrollment, retention and completion rates.62 While these services will undoubtedly be helpful for students, they cannot replace the counseling, advising, and other in-person student support services provided by colleges.

Moving Forward

Despite Kentucky’s efforts, the state’s postsecondary degree completion rates remain low, and significant improvement needs to be made. The state and its community colleges are taking some important steps to advance community college degree and credential completion—particularly in the area of developmental education. However, in order to substantially increase community college degree and credential completion rates the state should strengthen its efforts. Moving forward, the following are some possible directions for Kentucky. While some of these options could utilize existing resources, others would require additional funding.

Financial Aid

• **Fully Fund the Need-Based College Access Program:** Financial aid is a critically important factor in students persisting toward a degree. In Kentucky’s current financial aid system—which prioritizes merit-based aid and tax credits and funds only one-third of those who qualify for the need-based CAP program—students who have the greatest financial need are often turned away due to a lack of funds. It is important that the state fully fund the need-based CAP program so that eligible students—many of whom are adult community college students—can afford to remain enrolled in college.

• **Help More Low-Income Adults Access Financial Aid:** Awarding need-based aid on a first-come, first-served basis, especially in lean budget years, means that many of the most economically disadvantaged adult students may be denied aid. The state should revisit this policy and consider waiting to disburse aid until after the financial aid deadline—and then prioritizing funding for those with the fewest economic resources.

• **Expand Financial Aid Programs Targeting Low-Income Adults Attending Part-Time:** The Go Higher Grant Program—which specifically targets low-income adults in Kentucky who attend college less than half-time—should be expanded. Such an expansion needs to include increased marketing and outreach efforts.

Developmental Education

• **Expand Developmental Education Redesign:** KCTCS’s developmental education reform efforts in math seem promising. However, not all of the KCTCS colleges are currently participating and the focus
has primarily been on math. In order for this work to have a significant impact on the persistence and graduation rates of community college students in Kentucky, a developmental education curriculum redesign would need to be implemented system wide—to all campuses and all three subject areas (reading, writing and math). Special attention should be given to making sure this redesign particularly benefits adults with very low skills.

- **Expand Contextualized Learning Efforts for Developmental Education Courses:** Accelerating Opportunity classes simultaneously teach adult education skills and subject matter relevant to students’ career goals. Expanding this approach beyond the Accelerating Opportunity program could benefit many students. Such an expansion would involve incorporating instruction for developmental math, reading and writing skills with subject matter that pertains to students’ interests, goals or experiences. Bringing the entire Accelerating Opportunity initiative to scale—so that it becomes a primary way of delivering services—is another option.

- **Discourage Developmental Education Placement:** It may be beneficial for community colleges to discourage relatively higher skilled students from enrolling in developmental education courses. Research indicates that developmental education derails many students from earning a degree—and a significant share of students placed in developmental education could have passed college-level courses without such remediation. In Kentucky, the new cut-off scores for developmental education placement, which will likely increase the number of students placed in developmental education courses in community colleges, should be reconsidered by policymakers. Lower cut-off scores or a more nuanced approach to developmental education assessment are possible options. More accurate placement might be achieved by considering several factors—which might include high school GPA and selected background characteristics (i.e., years since high school graduation, whether or not the student graduated from high school or instead earned a GED)—rather than just the placement test score.

- **Collect More Data on Adult Education Outcomes:** In order to better understand how adult education students fare once they enter college, data should be collected on academic progress and graduation rates. Currently data is only collected on college entry for adult education students who enroll within two years of attaining a GED.

**Student Supports**

- **Increase Student Supports:** In order to succeed, community college students need quality supports—including advising, counseling and financial help with housing and transportation challenges. And the state and its community colleges should invest in these supports. The Ready to Work program in particular provides a good model for how a case management approach with intensive advising can be successful for a targeted population. KCTCS may want to consider ways that elements of this approach might be expanded beyond TANF recipients. The Center for Working Families approach, which bundles services and helps students access public benefits for which they qualify, is another good model. At the very least, the state should look closely at student-to-counselor ratios and consider additional ways to increase access to counseling and advice. Kentucky should also experiment with emergency financial aid programs, which enable students facing significant financial challenges (i.e., involving housing and transportation) to stay in school and persist toward a degree.
Conclusion

Increasing degree and credential completion rates is critical to the economic future of the state and its citizens, and Kentucky’s community colleges are vital institutions for achieving those goals. Yet community college students face numerous barriers to success: financial and family responsibilities, developmental education skills gaps, and the need for additional supports. And while community colleges have made significant efforts in addressing these barriers through developmental education reform and the provision of student supports for targeted populations, much more needs to be done. Kentucky particularly needs to increase its investment in state need-based student financial aid as well as student supports and developmental education reform efforts that can lead to greater community college student success.
End Notes

1 Other recent legislation related to postsecondary degree attainment is HB 160 (2010), which mandates that for students who earn an associate’s degree at one of Kentucky’s community colleges, any university will accept their general education credits as meeting lower-division general education requirements.

2 When discussing credential completion, this paper means completion of a credential and a year of college coursework rather than any postsecondary credential. In the KCTCS system, some credentials require as few as three credit hours to complete, and research has shown that a credential and a year of college coursework are an important benchmark in postsecondary education. David Prince and Davis Jenkins, “Building Pathways to Success for Low-Skill Adult Students: Lessons for Community College Policy and Practice from a Longitudinal Student Tracking Study,” Community College Research Center, April 2005, http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Publication.asp?UID=204.


4 Prince and Jenkins, “Building Pathways to Success for Low-Skill Adult Students.”


6 Also, 27.2 percent of Kentuckians ages 18-64 have an associate’s degree or higher, also ranking KY fifth from the bottom. Working Poor Families Project, Population Reference Bureau, analysis of 2010 American Community Survey.


9 Kelly, “Realizing Kentucky’s Educational Attainment Goal.” Kentucky’s goal focuses on postsecondary degree attainment for 25 to 44 year olds. The report estimates that based on past growth rates, Kentucky would have a 37.1 percent college degree attainment rate in 2020, Kentucky’s goal is modest compared to the Obama Administration’s goal of raising the national college completion rate from 40 to 60 percent by 2020.


11 This is the percent of workers who are “middle skilled.” National Skills Coalition, “Growing Kentucky’s Economy by Investing in the Forgotten Middle.”

12 National Skills Coalition, “Growing Kentucky’s Economy.”

13 Kelly, “Realizing Kentucky’s Educational Attainment Goal.”


These are statewide policies. Students who are very close to the cutoff score can take entry-level courses as long as they are


The mean amount of unmet financial need for low-income first generation students is nearly $6,000 per year, which is half their median annual income of $12,100. Jennifer Engle and Vincent Tinto, “Moving Beyond Access: College Success for Low-Income, First-Generation College Students,” The Pell Institute, 2008, http://faculty.soey.syr.edu/vtinto/files/Moving%20Beyond%20Access.pdf.


Kentucky Community and Technical College System, “Transforming Lives, Transforming Kentucky.” These pass rates refer to the percent of students referred to developmental course who complete a developmental course in that subject or re-test at a college level by the end of the second year. Kentucky Community and Technical System, “KCTCS Strategic Plan 2010-2016,” http://www.kctcs.edu/About_KCTCS/System_Administration/~imedia/System_Office/About/Strategic20Plan20PamphletREV.ashx.


Before enrolling in developmental math, students take a mandatory student success course their first semester to help students determine their academic and career goals—and which math pathway is the best fit. For students who decide to change majors to a math or science field later on, bridge courses are available to help them make that transition. The Charles A. Dana Center, “The New Mathways Project Webinar,” April 17, 2012, http://www.utdanacenter.org/mathways/webinar/index.php.

These are statewide policies. Students who are very close to the cutoff score can take entry-level courses as long as they are either concurrently enrolled in the highest developmental education course in that subject or receive supplemental instruction. Kentucky Community and Technical College System, “Kentucky Community and Technical College Student Assessment and Placement Policy,” KCTCS Administrative Policies and Procedures, http://legacy.kctcs.edu/employee/policies/volumeII/4_13.pdf.


Morehouse, “Selected Findings: Study of Kentucky Adults With Some College.”


D. Mundel, “What Do We Know About the Impact of Grants to College Students?” In S. Baum, M. McPherson and P. Steele, eds. The Effectiveness of Student Aid Policies: What the Research Tells Us, pp. 9-38, 2008.


The amount is prorated for those enrolled less than 12 credit hours.


The award is limited to one academic year and has a maximum award amount of $1,000. Kentucky Higher Education Assistance Authority, “2011 Annual Report,” 2011, http://www.kheaa.com/pdf/annual_2011.pdf. In 2010 only 240 received it. The lack of uptake is likely due to marketing issues.


Bailey, “The College Affordability Crunch in Kentucky.”


The model was piloted in five KCTCS colleges and now all have been encouraged to experiment with the NCAT model and most are.


Most programs are one semester long. 


Even expanding the program to all 16 campuses would assist only a share of the student population that needs this approach.


1,518 TANF recipients participated in Ready to Work in Fiscal Year 2012 (to date).


Identifying and providing access to personal and family benefits is not a service covered by this system. Kentucky Community and Technical College System, “Transforming Lives, Transforming Kentucky.”

In the long run, SB1 should reduce the number of students in developmental education courses by ensuring that more students graduate from high school college ready. However, current adults will not benefit from the improvement in high school education.
