Single Stop USA's Community College Initiative

Implementation Assessment

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INTRODUCTION

Single Stop USA, a national not-for-profit, endeavors to help financially vulnerable families around the nation gain economic security by connecting them to safety net resources, tax credits, and direct social services. Single Stop's Community College Initiative partners with community colleges to do this work, currently operating in 21 community college campuses in eight states with substantial governmental and philanthropic support. Its programmatic mission is simple—to help families achieve financial stability—but the approach is multifaceted. Combining social and educational services with technology, programmatic assistance, data and evaluation services, and managerial consulting expertise, Single Stop aims to create organizational shifts in the way community colleges approach student retention, thereby affecting outcomes of both students and schools.

This formative implementation assessment, the first in a series of evaluations conducted in response to the requirements of Single Stop's first Social Innovation Fund award, focuses on the ways in which its programming has been implemented at eleven community colleges in four states: New York, Florida, Louisiana, and California. Through a comparative case study analysis, we examine how the program's theory of change is translated into practice, how the model operates at the college level, the support and supervision provided to colleges by the Single Stop national office, the scope and characteristics of the services offered to and received by students, and the perceived quality and value of these services. Furthermore, we assess the implications of the findings in these domains for the quality of data that will later be used in quantitative analyses aimed at documenting the relationship between the receipt of Single Stop services and students' access to services and educational outcomes, including annual re-enrollment and degree completion.

Background on the Community College Initiative

Single Stop was first launched in Philadelphia churches where tax, legal, and financial experts volunteered and came together at a "one-stop" to help local residents. It was incorporated and greatly expanded as a Robin Hood Foundation initiative in 2001, with its initial sites at community-based organizations, including food pantries, job training centers, and health clinics. In 2007, Single Stop was established as a national organization and began launching sites across the country. Now, it operates more than 90 sites in California, Florida, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania where in 2013 the organization served 177,000 families, drawing down approximately $526 million in benefits and services.

The subject of this assessment, the Community College Initiative, began in 2009 with three pilot sites in New York and New Jersey. The organization sought distribution channels whereby it could expand and sustain its service to low-income households across the country. Community colleges seemed to have both the population and the need for these services in order to address high rates of student attrition. At the time there was no

similar national effort at community colleges to make safety-net resources available with counseling to serve students. Executive staff conducted a comprehensive analysis of the field, focusing on comparing community colleges based on student need, size of the school and low-income populations, geography, urbanicity, geopolitics, leadership, funding formulas in the state, and other factors that would affect the return on investing in a particular institution and this process helped the organization narrow the scope of potential initial sites to about 100, which it then sought to engage. Many colleges were picked because their schools had participated in initiatives such as Achieving the Dream or Completion By Design, or were otherwise recognized by peers in the field, and their leaders were deemed "forward-thinking" by the national executive team. Additional sites have since been launched expanding Single Stop's work to the eight states in which sites currently operate. Now Single Stop uses a new and broader set of selection criteria and a rigorous diligence process to determine which colleges have both sufficient student need and the campus structures, leadership, and connections needed to bring a successful site into being. Funding pressures around retention, as well as limited state support, play a role in which colleges are most interested in pursuing a relationship with Single Stop. This evolution has been driven by a changing policy and economic context, and adaptation has been required. As Chief Executive Officer Elisabeth Mason put it, "We went from testing the model out at some sites based on need, leadership, and personal relationships to a period of rapid growth during which we have become more sophisticated and gained a deeper understanding of what we need to be doing and thinking about in this field."

The centerpiece of Single Stop's model is a "one-stop" approach coupled with additional services that contribute, and ultimately become a part of the community college infrastructure. The purpose is to provide a comprehensive approach to the student services provided by community colleges, better aligning them with the needs of families who and are often stymied by bureaucratic offices operating in silos. In the public sector, accessing benefits such as food stamps and Medicaid often requires long visits to a series of different offices. Many people are unaware that they are eligible for benefits and some feel a sense of stigma that prevents them from applying. The investment of time required to obtain benefits can also be unmanageable for students struggling to keep up with schoolwork, juggling multiple jobs, and handling family responsibilities. Single Stop responds to this problem by uniting a suite of services under one roof, using a software program known as the Benefits Enrollment Network (BEN) to synthesize thousands of pages of regulations and statutes into a single screening tool. After spending about 15 minutes with a client, site staff can use BEN to calculate a student's likely eligibility for multiple public benefits, helping to ensure that they only visit other offices if those visits are likely to pay dividends.

In addition to benefits screening, Single Stop provides the following additional services:

1. <u>Tax preparation</u>. Single Stop brings free tax preparation to the college campus. Tax preparers help clients file their taxes, ensuring that they maximize their refunds and claim all of the credits for which they are eligible, including the Earned Income Tax Credit and the American Opportunity Tax Credit.

2. <u>Financial counseling</u>. Financial counselors and coaches provide financial counseling free of charge at Single Stop sites once or twice a week. Students may receive assistance and advice on issues such as debt reduction, credit score improvement, budgeting, banking and asset building.
3. <u>Legal counseling</u>**.** Attorneys are present at Single Stop sites at least once a week. They provide free non-criminal legal counseling to students on matters such as housing, benefits, consumer law, employment, immigration, and family law.
4. <u>Case management</u>. Single Stop staff members also help students access other programs and services on campus. When appropriate, they make referrals, and also act as advocates and coaches for students who need extra assistance in order to obtain forms of help that might be available in theory but generally not easily accessible in practice.

In order to enhance the capacity for community colleges to provide and sustain these services at a larger scale, Single Stop's national office works with college administration and site coordinators to lay a strong foundation for the model before sites are up and running, provides unique and constantly improving technology, and offers technical assistance, planning and training. Moreover, the executive team meets with college administrators to consult on ways to rethink student services, leverage technology, and to embed Single Stop services fully within the college's work, ideally by finding natural and efficient ways in which services can be provided to large numbers of students. Finally, evaluation and assessment activities aim to make it possible for colleges to learn about how Single Stop's services are reaching students, what benefits are being generated, and where outreach might be leveraged to engage more students.

Improving Student Retention: Single Stop's Theory of Change

Single Stop's multipronged effort in community colleges strives to be comprehensive and yet strategic in its delivery. "We use the term 'high-tech, high-touch' to describe our approach, since people, services and community are all key to success," said Elisabeth Mason. Benefits counselors, tax preparers and legal and financial counseling providers help students access additional resources and overcome legal and financial barriers (such as eviction, consumer law issues, debt, poor credit, etc.) that research indicates can disrupt a student's college pathway. Case management services help bring students into contact with forms of assistance that they might otherwise never receive. The additional financial resources accessed, such as public benefits, bigger tax refunds, and tax credits, are intended to help students gain a more secure financial footing and deal with crises that research indicates may otherwise cause them to leave college before completing their intended credentials.

Moreover, based on theory and research, the *combination* of cash and non-cash benefits supplemented with additional information and support is expected to substantially improve retention rates, and thus reduce the costs of attrition accruing to both students and colleges. If students stay enrolled, they accumulate more credits and increase their chances of completing a degree or certificate and/or transferring to four-year institutions to obtain a bachelor's degree. In turn, these credentials can enable graduates to obtain better jobs with higher earnings and more potential for promotion. At the institutional level, community colleges could see an improvement in their graduation rates and/or a reduction in the time it takes students to obtain their degrees.

As a secondary benefit, interacting with Single Stop staff is expected to help students learn how to better navigate institutions and understand government programs. This experience may allow them to more effectively

use institutions (including but not limited to schools) throughout their lives and to make better use of available resources, resulting in improved outcomes and potentially a greater sense of self-efficacy.

These student-level impacts also have the potential to generate cross-generational benefits, particularly because many community college students are parents. Adults who come to college seeking a better life for their children are often faced with challenges and are hard-pressed to resolve these challenges quickly and effectively due to their time constraints. Single Stop is equipped to meet the needs of these students, and is willing and able to evaluate benefits eligibility for entire families. If it is effective at increasing academic success and decreasing stress for parents, Single Stop's model could benefit students' children as well.

The program has an even more ambitious goal in mind as well, seeking to help generate and support longer-term institutional changes on college campuses that can enable greater student success. Single Stop staff and site coordinators work to help the college think about how to become effective at serving *all* students and, critically, to gain confidence that it is possible to achieving positive outcomes, even with populations the schools traditionally have more difficulty bringing to completion. For example, by integrating the Single Stop office with other services on campus, such as the financial aid office, the student services center and student groups and classes, Single Stop aims to expand outreach to students and facilitate cross-referrals so students can get help in multiple ways. As Vice President of Strategy Nate Falkner explained, "We want to create seamless referral points, cohesive networks, promote integration, and help sites establish the muscle-memory of how to do this." Eventually, the hope is to work towards a graduated services model in which the neediest students receive direct service from highly trained professional social workers, while those with less pressing needs get information or support from cross-trained college staff members. Most importantly, the goal is to serve students efficiently so that large numbers of students can be supported by benefits access to prevent a financial crisis, rather than respond to one.

ASSSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

As a young program with a devolved model that continues to initiate and develop its sites in a progressive manner, an accurate and informed assessment of Single Stop's effectiveness must first consider how its intended model is translated into practice at its sites. A quantitative examination of efficacy based on outcome data at the student-level that is insufficiently informed by this initial assessment runs the risk of misestimating the model's benefits and drawbacks. Thus, the primary questions examined in this initial evaluation include:

1) How are key stakeholders (including college administrators, faculty, staff, and students) responding to Single Stop?
2) How are Single Stop's community college sites providing services and connecting students to resources?
3) How are Single Stop's community college sites using the technical assistance, planning, and/or training provided by Single Stop?

4) How are Single Stop's community college sites utilizing Single Stop's technology? In particular, how are site coordinators recording and utilizing data on their activities? What implications does this use have for quantitative evaluations of Single Stop's effectiveness?

We approached those questions utilizing a comparative case methodology in which in-depth knowledge of each site is developed (for example, by comparing information obtained across different actors within sites) with a focus on subsequent comparisons of the program attributes, actions, and outcomes across sites. This means that we engaged in frequent coding and recoding of core themes in order to identify critical points of convergence and divergence across sites. The analytic goal was to develop responses to the evaluation questions using the full body of knowledge gathered, rather than to identify, rank, or otherwise identify specific sites, since their primary analytic value is in relation to the whole of the Single Stop model.

In order to conduct the analysis, the evaluation team visited as many college sites as possible, given that the Single Stop model is intentionally adapted to college context and aimed at affecting college-level as well as student-level changes. In some cases, it was not possible to visit a site due to the evaluation's budget constraints, because the evaluators' schedules did not permit it, or because weather intervened. In these cases, the data we missed the chance to collect should be uncorrelated with Single Stop's implementation or performance at the site. However, in one case it was not possible to visit a site because at the time of the planned site visit from the evaluation team the relationship between Single Stop and the college was such that a visit could compromise program stability at that location. In another case illness of primary site staff prevented a site visit from occurring. In those cases, it is impossible to rule out the possibility that the missing data is correlated with Single Stop's implementation or performance. Thus, the sample for these site visits is best described as a convenience sample and is necessarily incomplete, and these limitations should be considered when examining the conclusions.

Site visits occurred during two time periods: winter 2013, and spring 2014. The Single Stop national staff selected the initial set of six colleges in New York and Florida for the first round of visits, and the evaluation team selected the remaining seven colleges in the second set of visits (two of which were ultimately not visited). In total, this evaluation draws on data collected across four states at 11 community college campuses, each with an independent Single Stop site:

- California: College of Marin
- Florida: Miami Dade College at the Wolfson, North, and Kendall campuses
- Louisiana: Baton Rouge Community College, Delgado Community College
- New York: City University of New York at Queensborough, Kingsborough, LaGuardia, Hostos, and Borough of Manhattan Community College

TABLE 1: DISTRIBUTION OF SERVICES PROVIDED BY SINGLE STOP USA, BY SITE

State	College	Single Stop Site Established	College Enrollment	% Pell	Number of Students Served by SS[a]	Number Screened for Benefits[b]	Number who Received Benefits[c]	Student Tax Returns Filed	Students who Received Financial Counseling	Students who Received Legal Services
CA	College of Marin	January 2012	6,620	38%	670 (10.1%)	331 (49.4%)	82 (24.8%)	339	75	31
FL	MDC Wolfson	October 2010	16,318	55%	1,628 (10.0%)	1,180 (72.5%)	384 (32.5%)	448	149	64
FL	MDC North	October 2010	18,875	61%	2,632 (13.9%)	1,985 (75.4%)	248 (12.5%)	647	108	61
FL	MDC Kendall	October 2011	27,667	49%	3,288 (11.9%)	2,799 (85.1%)	364 (13.0%)	489	192	48
LA	Baton Rouge[d]	December 2013	7,652	54%	--	--	--	--	--	--
LA	Delgado	January 2012	18,170	53%	2,186 (12.0%)	1,287 (58.9%)	167 (13.0%)	899	144	168
NY	CUNY Queensborough	January 2010	16,291	47%	1,702 (10.4%)	992 (58.3%)	253 (25.5%)	710	74	112
NY	CUNY Kingsborough	February 2009	18,409	48%	2,295 (12.5%)	1,447 (63.1%)	365 (25.2%)	848	128	124
NY	CUNY LaGuardia	January 2010	19,289	47%	2,887 (15.0%)	1,846 (63.9%)	618 (33.5%)	1,041	132	170
NY	CUNY Hostos	February 2009	6,405	67%	2,130 (33.3%)	1,439 (67.6%)	1,082 (75.2%)	691	126	228
NY	CUNY Borough of Manhattan	January 2010	22,580	65%	3,086 (13.7%)	1,893 (61.3%)	548 (28.9%)	1,193	126	143

Note: Data are from 2013; site performance data come from Single Stop USA and have not been vetted by the evaluation team

[a] Total students served by Single Stop as a percentage of total college enrollment is shown in parentheses

[b] Total students screened for benefits as a percentage of total students served is shown in parentheses

[c] Confirmed benefits receipt as a percentage of those screened for benefits is shown in parentheses

[d] Due to this Single Stop site's recent launch, data were not available.

As Table 1 illustrates, some of these colleges have well-established Single Stop sites, while at others Single Stop is still in the early stages of implementation. The analysis attempts to attend to the degree to which observed differences across sites are inherent to the program's stage of development on a given campus while maintaining site confidentiality.

At least two of the three evaluation team members visited each site. The lead evaluator, Dr. Sara Goldrick-Rab, visited all sites, so as to facilitate a strong comparative framework for analysis. Each site visit lasted between four and eight hours, with most lasting seven or eight hours. During that time, evaluators conducted semi-structured interviews with college administrators, staff, and students. A typical visit included meetings with the follow people: one or more members of the college's administration (chancellor, dean, director of student services), a director or associate director of financial aid and/or institutional research, several faculty members (particularly those focused on developmental education or college success coursework), the Single Stop site coordinator and/or director and/or associate director, one or more Single Stop service staff (attorney, financial counselor or tax preparer) and several students, some but not all of whom had used Single Stop services. Interview protocols were followed, and varied depending on the position of the person interviewed, and respondents were also given the ability to add additional information or raise new topics for discussion. All respondents were assured confidentiality by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, signed consent forms, and as such are not identified with their statements in this report. Interviews were taped and transcribed.

In addition, evaluators often conducted observations of the college and the Single Stop offices. Taking notes on the settings including the location, décor, information and accessibility and the people in each area, we focused on observable similarities and differences across sites. In addition, interviews with senior leadership staff at the Single Stop national office were conducted before the results from site visits were shared.

ADDRESSING A SIGNIFICANT NEED ON CAMPUS

The Community College Initiative is a partnership between Single Stop and community colleges across the nation. The program has a defined model and approach to serving students, but it must be tailored to fit the strengths and needs of every college. In this section we begin to describe the ways in which college administrators, faculty, and staff are responding to Single Stop's presence on their campuses.

First and most importantly, nearly every college stakeholder emphasized that before Single Stop came to their campus there was a demonstrable and substantial need for additional services for marginalized students struggling to succeed in college. They repeatedly described several challenges associated with educating students who live in poverty. At every college we visited, college presidents, deans, and faculty made it very clear that they engaged Single Stop because they had serious problems meeting their students' most basic needs, including housing, food, and safety. Some respondents summoned Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, suggesting that until they could assist students in securing sources of food and housing, they were hard-pressed to help them achieve successful academic outcomes. For example, during our visit to one college a provost described her attempts to respond to a professor who called expressing dismay that a homeless student was attracting unwanted attention

in class and she did not know what to do to help. At another college, a site coordinator told us that the lack of available Section 8 housing in his city meant that students were often living as far as two hours from campus without any transportation assistance. A senior administrator at a third college described problems that occurred when the campus library became a de facto childcare cooperative due to a lack of affordable childcare options for student parents. Even small amounts of money stymied students, noted those interviewed. "We have people living out of their cars. $100 is a lot (for them)," said one faculty member.

The students we spoke with shared their administrators' concerns. For example, a student talked about being homeless for months and finding shelter where he could on his campus, showering at the campus gym. Another talked about enduring a prolonged state of sleep deprivation while she juggled full-time study, half-time work, and caring for her three children. Many students said that they and their friends had gone hungry, skipping meals because of a lack of sufficient money to buy food while attending school. All of these students came to Single Stop seeking assistance with these difficult issues.

College administrators and faculty also consistently relayed a strong desire to improve the degree prospects and life chances of their students, and often were visibly frustrated by their seeming inability to do this with limited resources. When we asked them how they responded to students before Single Stop came to campus, their responses sometimes became emotional. Asked what he could do for students before Single Stop came to campus, one administrator simply said, "I could pray for them." Another senior member of campus administration remarked that when faced with a student with severe needs before Single Stop arrived, she sometimes cried. She explained,

> *"[Before Single Stop] When students came into our office, we referred them, to the best of our ability, to the resources that were available. They were in academic distress and did not understand all of the rules and why they were having trouble. They said things like 'Ma'am, I'm living in my car.' We are the entrée to higher education for our community…and fundamentally all we could do was just close our doors and cry."*

While some colleges said that prior to Single Stop's arrival, there were occasionally individual relationships or connections that allowed for referrals, it was also clear that they did not have a systematic way to pull resources together. In interviews, some college leaders who work directly with students reported that in an effort to cope they had resorted to informally helping their students, for example by making personal donations and loans. This is not uncommon. As Nate Falkner explained, "Community colleges are very complex in terms of culture, economic history, structural dynamics. As we come to understand these institutions we know that they see these problems but do not necessarily have the structures in place to address them."

Given the status quo, community colleges give the national leadership of Single Stop a great deal of credit for introducing them to a way of providing services in a structured way, as well as for increasing attention on campus to the existing gaps between the social safety net and postsecondary education. For example, most immediately Single Stop drew colleges' attention to the existence of underutilized services such as the free tax preparation assistance available from the Internal Revenue Service's Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program. College administrators, site coordinators, and students also tended to agreed with the need to bring public

benefits access to campus, and felt the provision of legal and financial counseling was critical, and that the tax preparation services were long overdue. Moreover, the "one stop approach" to co-locating services was lauded for its seamless approach.

But in our interviews the greatest accolades for Single Stop came when people spoke of the program's case management services, and higher-level administrators made it clear that they had come to depend on that part of the model. Single Stop site coordinators take the time to assess each new student's case and determine the right level of engagement, intervention, and support needed to create a successful outcome. College leaders compared their work to the triage performed in hospital emergency rooms, a place they argued is analogous to the role that community colleges play in today's higher education system—the only setting in which anyone has open access to pursue additional learning. With visible relief, administrators who were once left to cry or pray over their neediest students said that now they "just call Single Stop," and the site coordinator "takes care of it [the problem]." They perceive the case management effort as effective because students return to thank them for the referral, tell positive stories of the outcomes, and perhaps most importantly, do not return to them desperate for additional assistance.

PROVIDING SERVICES AND MAKING CONNECTIONS

The community colleges we visited range in size from nearly 6,500 students to more than 27,000 students and in most cases at least half of those students qualify for the Federal Pell Grant, indicating financial need. As Table 1 indicates, in 2013 Single Stop site coordinators recorded contact with 10 to 15% of undergraduates at their schools, with the number of students engaged ranging from 670 to more than 3,000 students per site. For several reasons described below, we suspect that these are underestimates of the scope of Single Stop's reach at many of its sites.

Benefits Access

Benefits screening is the central Single Stop activity and touches the largest number of students. Site coordinators are expected to screen students with brief interviews to determine their eligibility for public benefits including SNAP (food stamps), cash assistance, housing subsidies and Medicaid. As intended, these screenings are occurring at each site we visited. Among those students who interacted with Single Stop, between 58 to 85% were formally screened for benefits (many of the rest came for tax preparation services; where a site served large numbers of people this way, the resulting fraction screened for benefits was naturally diminished).

Many students reported that through these screenings they had not only learned about but also often received public benefits they had not known about or had previously thought they were ineligible for. While most site coordinators at the colleges are limited to screening for benefits and cannot process all of the paperwork required to obtain them, they are tasked with following up with students to confirm that benefits were in fact received, and troubleshoot any difficulties that arose. The fraction of students confirmed to receive benefits varied substantially across sites in 2013, from about 13% of the students screened to about 33%. This number is a function of many factors including the income profile of students at the school, the extent to which students are already accessing benefits without Single Stop's help, and the level of difficulty the site coordinator faces in confirming benefits.

When a site is well established and the student population has substantial need, Single Stop brings new resources to many students. For example, in 2013 the site at Hostos Community College (among the oldest) served one-third of all students on campus, and while the fraction of those students who were screened for benefits was not exceptional (67%), benefits receipt was confirmed for fully 75% of those screened. As a result, that site drew down additional benefits for almost 1,100 students in a single year.

Even when students felt that they were already familiar with benefits and knew how to acquire them, they often emphasized the other ways in which the site coordinator helped them. For example, they received assistance in finding work-study jobs and identifying ways to meet the work requirements associated with their food stamps. They also learned about their family member's eligibility for assistance. When students or their families obtained access to benefits through Single Stop screening, those new dollars afforded them opportunities to meet their academic needs: for example, obtaining SNAP benefits allowed them to use the saved funds to purchase textbooks. Others mentioned the relief they felt from having less financial stress and working somewhat fewer hours to make ends meet. Some students had unsuccessfully applied for benefits in the past, but with Single Stop's advocacy and support they were able to obtain them. For others, having the Single Stop office in a convenient location, staffed by a knowledgeable and trusted advocate, reduced the perceived amount of time, energy and risk needed to obtain benefits.

Tax Preparation

Tax preparation is another core element of Single Stop's program model, and because filing taxes is a nearly universal requirement and carries no associated stigma, it has often served as a critical way in which Single Stop becomes established on a given campus. Students and their families can access free tax preparation services that ensure that their returns are properly filed and that they receive, most importantly, the Earned Income Tax Credit while avoiding costly tax preparation fees. Since completing the FAFSA (and thus receiving federal financial aid) requires filing a tax return, tax preparation facilitates the receipt of other forms of federal financial support for students as well. Tax preparation was a frequent focus of conversation during many of the site visits, likely in part because several visits were conducted during the height of tax season. Students (and some faculty and academic staff who had also made use of tax preparation services) reported that it was convenient to be able to have their taxes done professionally at no cost, and moreover doing so during the course of their normal day without requiring additional travel or arrangements. Some expressed surprise that it was possible to have their taxes done for free, having paid hundreds of dollars to private preparers in prior years. In 2013, almost 7,000 students received assistance with tax preparation at the sites we visited. Single Stop values the tax preparation service itself at $125 per return filed, based on national estimates of tax preparation fees.

Demand for tax preparation services was high on campus during several of our visits. Typically, campuses set aside additional physical space for tax preparation in order to accommodate high demand, and often this space was centrally located and brightly lit, drawing attention to the available service. The model used to provide tax services differed from college to college: at some schools Single Stop contracts with existing tax preparation organizations that run Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) sites on campus, while at others an individual is contracted to recruit and manage a set of volunteer tax preparers, and in at least one case Single Stop staff

Single Stop USA's Community College Initiative

trained professors and staff at the college to oversee and manage the tax preparation work using a mixture of paid students and students doing service-learning.

It is clear that tax preparation offers an important means through which Single Stop makes its presence and role understood to various campus stakeholders: for the most part, students must file taxes annually, and doing so is a stigma-free activity. Engaging students in Single Stop initially through tax preparation creates a lower-risk way for students to learn about the program and the other services it provides. One college that recognized this strategically placed the tax preparers outside of the Single Stop offices, so that students might notice the Single Stop site coordinator while waiting for tax help or after completing those activities.

Since by law tax services are also available to family members of enrolled students (and community members at large), tax preparation services may also become a means through which potential college students become familiar with their local community college. Housing the tax preparers near the school cafeteria, allowing them to walk further into the building and past admissions and financial aid along the way increases the likelihood of this happening. Prospective students may seek out the support of Single Stop to help them enroll in college and at two colleges we visited, campaigns to help students re-file their FAFSAs were co-located with the tax preparation services. School leaders, some of whom said that they were embarrassed that it took Single Stop to convince them to host an on-campus VITA site, embrace this seemingly simple approach to recruiting and supporting students.

Legal Services

Single Stop also provides legal services to students through the use of third-party legal service providers from the communities in which the colleges are located. Single Stop supports the identification of and contracting with a local provider who sends attorneys to campus. The college provides a part-time office space for use by the attorneys when they are on campus. Sometimes the lawyer held open office hours, while on other campuses the meetings were by appointment only. Most students who used these services found them to be critical and highly valuable, noting that they needed this kind of help but would never have been able to pay for it. The lawyers handle non-criminal issues ranging from expungement, bankruptcy, immigration issues, divorce law, child support and many other challenges. Some attorneys expressed surprise at the breadth of services community college students required, stating that they never expected to see such challenges among undergraduates. They were clearly glad to be doing the work, and felt that it helped them to better understand the challenges college students are facing today.

Use of the legal services varies across sites, seemingly based on the strength and focus area or specialty of the attorney and/or legal provider and how well they are able to address the particular needs that present themselves on a campus. Many colleges reported having access to an attorney during part of each week, but all colleges said that legal help was essential for their students, and coordinators at many sites felt that increasing the hours of the attorney would help to better meet students' needs. Across colleges and types of stakeholders, legal services were recognized as a critical service for students. However, the quality of the services provided seemed to vary, at least according to student-clients. Some raved about the legal services they received, but at other colleges they gave the services a lukewarm rating. Of course, it was difficult to ascertain whether this was because of dissatisfaction with the interaction with the attorney or disappointment with the outcome—in many

cases the value of access to an attorney may be allowing the student to avoid paying substantial fees at a law firm only to discover that their issue cannot be resolved. So while a student may be dissatisfied, the alternative may have been an expensive disappointment.

Financial Counseling

Financial counseling or coaching is also offered to help students manage debt, plan budgets, and improve credit. At some schools, this element of the Single Stop model was fully implemented, while at others, it was slated to begin in the near future, or was on hold due to funding constraints. The general approach involves Single Stop's national team identifying and contracting with a local financial provider to provide one-on-one financial counseling, and in some cases, workshops on specific topics related to financial literacy and/or wellbeing. Some sites indicated that one-to-one counseling worked best on their campuses, while others felt that workshop-based services were preferable. On campuses where this financial counseling component was more established, there was a range in the perceived quality of services offered. Some students reported learning a great deal through financial counseling and at those colleges there were month-long waitlists to meet with financial counselors. Students expressed a desire for more availability of these services—a full time financial counselor would be kept busy. But at other colleges, students reported that the financial counseling offered was not very useful, and at these sites the coordinators recognized the problem but were unclear as to their ability to change providers.

In sum, of the four services just described that are provided to students through Single Stop's Community College Initiative, benefits screening and tax preparation were most consistently in place and available. Legal services and financial counseling were sometimes not yet implemented or on hold. Students' assessments of the value of the services provided by Single Stop were strong and generally consistent, particularly in terms of tax preparation and benefits screening, while perceptions of the value of the legal and financial services were more varied. Since use of these services vary so much depending on students' needs, the background, training and personal style of the provider, and the format of the interaction (one to one or in a workshop setting, for example), it makes sense that there was great heterogeneity in students' assessments of these two services.

Case Management

Single Stop has established structures and processes through which the sites are meant to provide the benefits screening, tax preparation, legal counseling, and financial counseling services discussed above. But the program also employs case management practices because it recognizes that students learn from interacting with an expert who can help them navigate pressing issues. This approach accommodates the wide ranges of students' needs at community colleges. Some students may visit Single Stop to save money on tax preparation while others come in the midst of a mental health crisis, domestic violence, food insecurity, or homelessness. Other students need financial or life coaching when, for example, deciding how to finance a car loan or complete a lease application for housing. Many students we interviewed developed strong relationships with Single Stop site coordinators, explaining that they had come to Single Stop in crisis, and continued to access the range of additional support and resources offered by the program once past that initial emergency.

Site coordinators frequently refer to themselves as "case managers." By design, many have backgrounds and degrees in social work, counseling psychology or mental health, as well as student services and other related fields. In discussing their work, they consistently emphasize that they help students in many ways that go well beyond conducting benefits screening and follow-up. As one coordinator said, "A lot of times students are looking for services that are not in the Single Stop paradigm, but we still help them to try to figure it out. We do a lot more than that [what is expected of us] just because we're here…and we know what the services are." This is in fact an intended part of the Single Stop model because of its seeming importance to student success, and may need greater attention when it comes to rewarding staff work. Students emphasize the case management support as especially important because of the limitations of what colleges typically provide. As one student put it:

> *"Single Stop is a resource for anything 'beyond campus.' I've asked about scholarship information, about mental health counselors, about all sorts of resources within the community—because the site coordinators are so involved, they really branch out, and they have always been able to give me pieces of information, leading me towards more information."*

The Single Stop framework anticipates these referrals, and the way in which they are offered to students is important. Critically, the manner in which Single Stop staff interacts with students is consistently described as respectful. Students explained that they felt that Single Stop site coordinators and their assistants often went above and beyond to help students by making referrals, advocating, and following up. As a student stated, "they are trying to give us an opportunity. You know, we do not really have anything to stand on, but Single Stop truly wants to help."

Outreach

Some students come to Single Stop after seeing signs posted on campuses or hearing about the service in their classrooms, and many come because of information passed by word of mouth. Site coordinators are given information about a range of ways to outreach to students (as described below). Their success appears to be related to at least three factors: faculty governance norms, campus culture, and site coordinator experience. Getting buy-in from faculty in order to conduct outreach can be essential: several coordinators described the importance of reaching out to faculty members to request permission to make short presentations about Single Stop services during classes. Coordinators sometimes spoke of promoting class presentations widely, through fliers distributed broadly to faculty, for example. They often cited specific departments or key individuals who became strong proponents of Single Stop services (for example, the leaders of other programs serving first generation students and students of color) and these connections were said to be vital. Coordinators appeared to pay attention to achieving buy-in from faculty members and expressed at least two specific concerns that they perceived from professors: 1) Faculty can be conflicted about the extent to which they (and their campuses) should focus on the non-academic portions of students' lives and 2) in an era of constricting resources, faculty could be tense about, and distrustful of, any program that they perceived as taking from the institution's already scarce resources.

Classroom presentations, the coordinators felt, were especially important to successful outreach and sparked new awareness and use of Single Stop benefits screening services. Several students also indicated that they had

learned about Single Stop through a classroom presentation. During these presentations and other communications with students, coordinators (at some colleges more than others) reported a need to carefully market the program's services to reduce any potential stigma associated with applying for safety-net programs. We noted this issue was treated differently within geographic regions, as well as across regions. Coordinators said that students' awareness of their own level of need did not necessarily translate into their willingness to explore enrolling in public benefits programs. Several coordinators spoke of finding ways to "normalize" the experience, explaining to students that these benefits are available to everyone who qualifies and that many students do make use of them. One site coordinator, for example, described changing the wording in program materials to remove direct references to food stamps. Some "students are very turned off at those words," said the coordinator, who reported coming to the realization that it was important to "change the marketing here," and instead began to use phrases like "grocery help." The coordinator felt that the change helped boost student willingness to explore the program, but also that faculty can be prone to the same types of stigma and thus that the change may have also increased faculty buy-in. Single Stop's training materials encourage site coordinators to think through these issues.

Other Services

Students, faculty, staff and administration also identified several additional supports that they felt would complement and enhance the existing model (of course many of these services are currently unavailable due to the policy environment, lack of federal/state/local funding, or because of a lack of specific services available in a given community). These include:

1) <u>FAFSA assistance</u>**.** Some colleges have arranged to have FAFSA assistance available to students, whether through the financial aid office, or through student services or student outreach. But coordination between tax preparation services and FAFSA assistance is not common. A few financial aid officers said that FAFSA assistance should be coordinated with tax preparation. At the same time, others college financial aid officers said that Single Stop was not a good fit in their offices, viewing that work as distinct, and strongly suggesting that a merger would be unfavorably received.

2) <u>Transportation assistance</u>**.** Community colleges are generally commuter campuses and the sites we visited were no exception. Students discussed the difficulties of finding affordable, reliable transportation and parking. Multiple site coordinators named transportation as a service that students desperately need. Several site coordinators had attempted to find assistance from local transit authorities or workforce development offices, with limited success.

3) <u>Food assistance.</u> As noted earlier, lack of food is a serious concern across the colleges we visited. One college administrator interviewed explained the relationship between hunger and academic achievement: "When a student is hungry, he does not feel safe, and it is hard to help him synthesize class material. We have to meet students' basic needs in order for them to fully concentrate on assimilating the information in class in a way that they can apply it, learn, and take it forward." At a few schools, Single Stop site coordinators have brought food pantries to campus or coordinated

access to community pantries, but this work is quite unevenly distributed across sites and availability is not clearly correlated with student need.

4) <u>Mental health assistance.</u> The need for mental health services was reported repeatedly since most community colleges lack the resources to provide support. Site coordinators described the challenge of referring students to services that are not available on campus and cost a significant amount of money.

5) <u>Housing</u>**.** While Single Stop screens students for housing benefits, these programs are not entitlements, and as such, they are subject to funding limits and carry long waiting lists. Eligibility for housing assistance means little when actual support is years away—one student who reported living surreptitiously on the campus asked Single Stop for housing help but said, "they just couldn't really do anything at that time." Site coordinators across the country reported disappointment with the level of service they were able to provide around housing support—some felt they had to remove the term "housing assistance" from program literature since they felt they were unable to provide it in any meaningful way.

6) <u>Books</u>**.** Financial aid often arrives late, meaning that students are unable to purchase books before the start of the semester—some programs exist to help students purchase books before their aid checks are available, but information about the availability of these programs is not uniformly available across colleges.

7) <u>Child Care</u>. Affordable, high-quality, conveniently located child care was mentioned on many college as a critical but unmet need. Students described child care as central to their attendance: one student said she decided to come back to school only because her mother offered to care for her baby if she enrolled. Students resorted to creative solutions to find child care so they could attend classes: administrators noted with concern the formation of informal childcare "co-ops" occurring on campus, where parents would agree to watch others' children in the library so that other parents could attend class. Multiple coordinators noted that qualifying for childcare subsidies was too difficult because of work requirements and funding shortages, and that child care remained a need for many student parents. One professor said that a father had taken to lining his four children up in the hallway outside the classroom door so that he could observe them while attending school.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE, PLANNING AND TRAINING

The Single Stop leadership team seeks to support college partners in their efforts to do the critical and difficult work just described. That support enables sites to be identified, established, staffed, trained, managed and assessed—in other words to enable sites to do their work. There are five key components in the current suite of services: training, program support, consultative services, evaluation/assessment and technology. This section discusses these elements with the exception of technology, which warrants its own section below. Single Stop has adapted and honed these services with the ultimate goal of improving outcomes for participating students and their campuses, so it is critical to understand the way that Single Stop envisions its role, how that role has evolved, and how these services are currently received, perceived, and understood by sites. With this in mind, we interviewed key leaders at Single Stop, reviewed program records and materials, and analyzed interview data

from campus administrators and site staff to learn about the support, training and management they received from the national office. All of these sources of information allowed us to describe the model of support as conceived by Single Stop, as well as the perceptions about that support as reported by site staff and college administration.

Besides being an essential part of the implementation assessment, understanding the role of the national organization in a devolved model is key to preparing for a rigorous impact evaluation. Evaluation research and social science more generally have paid a great deal of attention in recent years not only to measuring outcomes (impact), but to understanding *how and why outcomes occur*. Mechanisms are separate from program activities— they are the fine-grained particular causes of given outcomes. In the case of community college retention, mechanisms might include, for example, an increase in average nightly hours of sleep that improves learning ability. Unpacking mechanisms can be challenging, particularly for comprehensive, multi-layered programs like Single Stop. It is, however, critically important for a few reasons. For example, a clear understanding of mechanisms provides a means through which to judge efficiency. This allows programs to focus attention and resources on particularly effective components while revising or eliminating others. Also, when internal validity of a study is limited because of the impossibility of conducting a randomized trial (often the case in social research), working to understand, at the finest grain, what specifically causes (or is hypothesized to cause) an outcome of interest is particularly important. In an experimental study researchers can claim that a program causes an effect without a full picture of exactly *why* it does, but when (as is often the case) the claim on causality is more limited, it behooves researchers to have a stronger case regarding mechanisms through which change occurs.

That said there are some important contextual factors that make assessing the implementation of Single Stop's management and training model complex tasks. The sites we visited varied widely in important ways: they ranged from being newly-opened to having years of experience, they had different staffing models and histories, various funding structures and they functioned with varying levels of support from college leadership. Their campuses varied in terms of demographic characteristics of students, the size of enrollment, the scope and nature of student need, the existing student services environment and level of services offered in the community more broadly, and other important differences. All of these factors may well affect the ways in which coordinators and administrators experience and value the training, management, and support provided by Single Stop. Given these differences, while our findings do produce clear themes, they may to some extent be driven by interactions between the above variables and the services provided by Single Stop (however, we are limited in our ability to be too-specific about this while maintaining site confidentiality). Moreover, Single Stop has modified the services they provide to sites as the program has grown and as plans to fully integrate and institutionalize the model on campuses have developed. Sites with more years of service have, according to interviews with Single Stop staff and review of training materials, experienced a very different type of training and management environment than newer sites with fewer years of experience. Assessing the services provided to sites is, at this point, very much a matter of studying a moving object.

Site Coordinators: Hiring, Training, Support, and Management

Across the nation, site coordinators at each Single Stop community college campus work on a daily basis to bring services to students. A great deal of time and attention has therefore been paid to how they are hired, trained, supported, and managed.

Hiring

According to senior members of the Single Stop leadership team as well as program materials related to hiring, site coordinators are hired specifically for their casework experience (experience and education in social work and/or counseling is required). The site coordinator job description template says successful candidates will have strong communication skills, proficiency with computers, and an "entrepreneurial spirit." Bilingual candidates (English/Spanish) are preferred. While the hiring rubric seeks staff with this set of skills, characteristics and experiences, site coordinators are not required to have experience working on college campuses, and training therefore helps them to understand the institutional structures and systems within which they must work.

The Single Stop site coordinators we met appeared, on the whole, to be a group well prepared to succeed based on the education and professional experiences they brought to their jobs. They are overwhelmingly female, and most are African American or Hispanic. Many have rich backgrounds in social service fields, including academic credentials and professional experience in mental health and counseling psychology, community organizing and social work, and but also in student services, admissions counseling, and other related areas. Most have resumes that covered both types of work. These skills allowed them to begin their work with an established understanding of the nature of the barriers to postsecondary success faced by the population of potential Single Stop clients, as well as the specific programs and services for which students might be eligible, the processes through which they could become enrolled, and the barriers to enrollment that students might be facing. Coordinators with experience in social service fields made particular efforts to tailor outreach to best fit their student population and campus climate. These coordinators acknowledged the multi-layered ecosystems at their campuses, and the fact that students' perceptions of their needs, their willingness to seek help to meet those needs, and their willingness to consider public benefits are related to their individual contexts (their relationships with peers and family, for example) as well as the climate they experience on campus. Faculty were said to play an important part in these ecosystems as well, both through their connections with students directly in the classroom, but also through their contributions to the institution's larger culture.

Coordinators also seemed to possess a great deal of "entrepreneurial spirit." Their descriptions of their work illustrated their ability and willingness to take initiative: to seek out needed information, relationships and training, as well as their strong commitment to advocating for their students. On the whole, it appeared that this important group of Single Stop staff were carefully selected and fit very well in their roles.

Training

Training site staff is clearly seen as a critically important function of Single Stop's national team, and training has evolved to better serve sites as the Single Stop model is brought to scale. In the program's early years, training was comprised mainly of information and expectations passed from the national office to the site staff, and was focused on relatively fine-grained matters. Program officers spent time at sites to assist on a one-to-one basis,

helping coordinators with social work backgrounds prepare to translate their work to a postsecondary education setting. Training materials from the program's early years focused more on the specific activities coordinators needed to undertake during outreach, intake, screening and/or referral, follow up, advocacy and data collections. They also focused on the expected deliverables (number of screenings, number of participants who obtain benefits). The emphasis on expectations and deliverables was tied directly to the funding model on which many initial sites were based: sites were funded by grant-makers who had specific outcome expectations and, therefore, Single Stop's role was to ensure that sites reached these goals.

Since campuses had not previously undertaken this kind of work, it was not long before Single Stop became the go-to place for any non-academic concerns that students had, which meant that sites saw many students with needs beyond the initial foci of Single Stop (financial, tax, legal, benefits screening). Training materials stressed the importance of developing relationships on campus and beyond, for outreach purposes but also to help with referrals. As training has developed through the years, the process has become increasingly interactive and workshop-based, and intended to give site staff a chance to work through various possible scenarios that they may encounter in their roles. Workshops might cover, for example, developing campus presentations for various audiences, details of screening various sub-groups, or discussions about conducting outreach on a campus where the stigma surrounding government benefits is particularly high. Most recent iterations of the training encourage site coordinators to dialog with their campus supervisor and their program officers regarding their own short- and longer-term vision for their work with Single Stop. The changes in training reflect the program's changes in scale: as Single Stop has increased its focus on ensuring institutionalization of its programming on campuses nationwide, site coordinators are encouraged, even from their first days, to think broadly about how they can ensure successful program integration. It is important to note that only the most recently trained sites have experienced the most current version of staff training.

Site coordinators' descriptions of the training and support provided to them, as well as their estimations of the value of those services, varied widely, which makes sense given that the training curriculum has been formalized and refined over time. Some coordinators saw the training and program support as sufficient, while others reported feeling left adrift by the national staff, and still others seemed disappointed or even resentful at what they perceived as a lack of sufficient support. Coordinators said that Single Stop mainly trained them with printed materials and presentations, and it seemed as though that training was primarily focused on the BEN technology (described below). They talked about site manuals, regular conference calls with Single Stop staff, and the occasional training organized by Single Stop. Some felt that they could easily reach out when they had questions—one said of their regional office, "they are just a phone call away." Others, though, were frustrated by what their perceived as a lack of competent support. Asked what kinds of support were offered when the Single Stop site was originally opening on her campus, a coordinator from a more recently developed site paused before noting that she did not recall receiving much help other than a site manual. Another coordinator said she felt questions often went unanswered for too long, even when they were posed in advance of a meeting or call. Responses to requests for materials or purchases were reportedly drawn out over long periods of time. Another coordinator expressed confusion about the role and purpose of the regional offices altogether.

Support

When coordinators were asked what kinds of training, assistance and support they had found most valuable, they generally referred to forms of social capital—connections they said that they had forged. Multiple coordinators expressed that they had learned on the job mainly through links they built on their campuses, with other local community organizations, and from reaching out directly to other site coordinators. They felt that a strong network of service providers based in the college's surrounding community was the best way to ensure that student needs could be met. Coordinators repeatedly said they sought out trainings they felt they needed, attended meetings to build connections, and took on projects they felt needed tackling. "That was my own assignment that I looked into […] I went out to the housing organizations and met with directors just to see and hear what was going on. It was not something that Single Stop told me to do or set up for me," said one coordinator. "Training stuff—I independently seek stuff out. I want to look into it," said another person. A different coordinator spoke about reaching out to a nearby Single Stop college site to get confirmation about the way a specific policy was implemented in that county. The result of that conversation was a productive new approach to helping some students obtain difficult-to-access benefits.

Not only did coordinators rate connectedness as a prime source of support, it was also a key focus of their effort. In interviews, site coordinators described the importance of being connected within their institution, but also linked to local nonprofits, community based organizations and county or state agencies. These connections take time to build, and are often the focus of the first year of their job. They use these connections to help students when a need arises for which formalized supports are not offered on campus through Single Stop, but also to advocate for policy changes that can benefit the whole group of low-income students within their institution. For example, food insecurity was a common concern described across campuses—while food provision is not a funded/contracted service provided by Single Stop, sites are supported in doing referrals to services that provide food. Among students eligible for food stamps, the benefits can take weeks to obtain or may still not be enough and for ineligible students, a lack of food is a serious problem. Some site coordinators have invested considerable amounts of time and energy to partner with a local food pantry. While the ideal model may be for the food pantry to set up an on-site distribution point, some site coordinators have only been able to gain access to food from a food pantry located elsewhere in the community. That means that they have figured out how to transport and distribute the food on their own, a time-consuming and complicated task. Other sites have no food pantry services on campus, instead directing students to community sites. In addition to food pantries, some sites have partnered with the school cafeteria to obtain a limited number of meal vouchers. This seems to be a small, but critical support, especially since food stamps cannot be used to purchase hot meals. It is clear that the support network cultivated by Single Stop coordinators is critical to the successes that the sites are achieving.

Through their descriptions of the training and support that mattered most to them, as well as of their work in general, coordinators illustrated that they were indeed the entrepreneurial, innovative, highly motivated individuals that Single Stop aims to hire. In the program's early years, it is likely that coordinators developed community-based connections without specific guidance from the national office, but in later years new coordinators have been explicitly encouraged and supported in building these relationships and networks through community mapping efforts. Though Single Stop has been consistently supportive of these connections and this outward focus, site coordinators have not always been explicitly trained on this in a formal way.

Many factors affect volume and traffic at college sites including the time of day, the time of semester, and the day of the week. Community colleges generally operate based on periods of high volume coupled with times where there are lower levels of activity on campus. We visited some Single Stop offices which sat silent and empty during our site visits (including those that have been long established and are high-performing sites), perhaps because of a period of low volume on campus or because site coordinators had not scheduled student appointments in order to prioritize time to visit with the evaluation team. Other colleges had busy offices with students waiting in line to be screened, and evaluators were able to observe this flow—even when coordinators attempted to set aside time for interviews, they were interrupted (and graciously and easily moved to meet with students). In some cases the site coordinators share an office with other workers at the college, providing relatively little quiet and possibly compromising privacy of students, but at most colleges the Single Stop offices are small, standalone spaces. On some campuses they are located near the financial aid office or the cafeteria, while at other places they are more distantly located on a less utilized floor or in a somewhat far off building. Wherever they are located, site coordinators find themselves juggling. Field notes from one observation described a coordinator who, within a span of about ten minutes, assisted a total of six students with everything from confirming an appointment to following up on a benefit application, to arranging for legal services for a benefit denied, to helping a student determine the most appropriate contact information to use, to greeting a prospective student seeking assistance. That assistance includes general life coaching, discussing difficult personal relationships, navigating the college bureaucracy (helping students obtain their transcripts, for example), doing informal academic advising, and helping students to understand their financial aid packages. Part detective, part psychologist, part cheerleader and part taskmaster, coordinators wear many hats, and switch them quickly.

Interviews revealed, however, that despite evidence that case management is central to the model according to both formal Single Stop literature and the national office staff, site coordinators at multiple sites, both old and new, described this kind of work as falling *outside* of what one coordinator called "the Single Stop paradigm." They stressed the importance of always being available to help students and never saying no, and depicted this approach as in opposition to the messages received from the Single Stop national office. Since they expect their jobs to encompass this full array of work, nearly every office said they were frustrated with current staffing levels (one to two full-time workers per office), since they felt they did not have enough personnel available to ensure that all services are consistently delivered at a high quality level. Their managers at the colleges consistently confirmed the report that site coordinators are under-resourced and under-staffed by the national office.

There are several reasons why site and national office staff may have different expectations of what the Single Stop approach is meant to include and how it is best enacted. Both groups share a strong commitment to increasing students' success in college, but their backgrounds lead to different in approaches how they think success can be achieved. With some exceptions, site coordinators—who are most often trained in social work—approach each student as an individual and think about how to create connections and resources for those students in effective ways. Faced with the immediacy of students' needs, it is natural for them to want to respond personally and in whatever way they can. While there are a few site coordinators who spoke of clear boundaries between what they can do as Single Stop employees and what they need to defer to other college

Single Stop USA's Community College Initiative

personnel to do, most seem to accept or even embrace the idea that they themselves should serve as many needs as possible for each student.

The national staff members at Single Stop come from a fairly different perspective, with most having developed their skills in poverty prevention programs, working in public policy arenas and/or management/business settings. Their focus is on delivering resources to as many students as possible and doing this in a cost-effective manner. The policy constraints and program rules that circumscribe the ability of Single Stop site coordinators to deliver a more extensive array of services, and the tradeoffs and tensions involved in trying to provide benefits access to large numbers of students while also delivering case management services are at the forefront of their concerns.

Management

The most critical source of tension between these differing points of view over the expectations for site coordinators' work and how it can best be supported is evidenced when the discussion turns to how program outcomes are measured. Currently, sites are assessed based on the following: number of students screened for benefits; number of students for whom benefits receipt has been *confirmed* (e.g. the site coordinator has verified with students that benefits were received); number of students receiving tax preparation; number of students receiving financial counseling, and number of students receiving legal services. Each of those activities has an estimated value, developed by the Robin Hood Foundation, and each activity must be tracked and reported to the national office. While other things the site coordinators do, such as counsel students, refer them for other services, or walk them to the financial aid office, are recorded in BEN, they do not "count" in the same way for site outcomes when compared to the activities that have been assigned monetary values.

This situation has generated frustration among site coordinators (and often their direct managers) at every college we visited. Where funding contracts at the site are tied to these specific outcomes, site coordinators chafe at them, calling them narrow, inadequate, and even inappropriate. The case management work, often described as the most challenging, rewarding, and time-consuming part of the site coordinator's job and one that feels essential and irreplaceable, is not assigned a monetary value or stipulated as a contractual goal even though the national office in interviews openly acknowledges its importance to the model.

Interviews with the Single Stop leadership team suggest that this problem has been clearly communicated and is a well-known issue that they seek to address. One possible solution described by Elisabeth Mason is for the organization to undertake or commission additional analyses to evaluate the benefits associated with case management work, and include that work as an outcome. Mason said, "The truth is that we are likely helping more students than we are counting. We inherited this approach… and it is hard to change the metrics…[but] it is something we have always wanted to address and would spend the time creating better evaluation metrics if only we had the funding to do the necessary assessment and groundwork."

At the same time, the focal activity that Single Stop seeks to bring to scale is benefits screening—and thus the current incentives appear focused on the right place. Mason described a desire to manage site coordinators' workload and resources by scaffolding them with a self-service benefits screening system that took over that responsibility, leaving them to focus on deploying their talents in case management. "Right now, every student

sees a credentialed social worker with 20 years of experience," said Mason, "and they sit down and do casework. But when you look at the importance of the benefits access, those dollars are going to make the biggest difference, that's where the real bang for the buck is—and we know this from 50 years of anti-poverty reduction efforts." Thus, the current goal is to flip the process occurring at colleges, so that more students are screened for benefits, Mason explained that there should be a system in place that allows for the greatest number of students to access benefits. A lighter touch model (possibly self-service) could be used as the first step, and Single Stop recently announced plans to develop such a model. A slightly heavier-touch using cross-trained staff would then be used to help students requiring some basic assistance in getting connected. Finally the high-touch approach would remain for students in crisis or with complex situations that requires the help of a trained social worker/counselor. This will be, Mason admitted, a very hard shift for many colleges to undertake:

> *"It is a balance, and it is very hard because it is a contradictory way of thinking—most people are one way (social work-minded) or the other (business-minded)—and so this is hard. We want comprehensive services for the students who really need them, and we also want the institution focused on scale, so we have to apply both pressures at our sites. In those first few years we start, we have to help colleges rethink and reimagine how they deliver student services."*

Thus, approaches to institutional change and scale are leading to new thinking on how to take the model to scale within an institution.

A related theme that emerged from the interviews regarded the relationship between site coordinators and college administrators. Several administrators who oversaw Single Stop sites expressed a great deal of trust and belief in their site coordinators. As one administrator said, "I can't speak highly enough of [our coordinator]. She has been a true asset, a true advocate of the program. She has really gotten her hands dirty." But several administrators overseeing Single Stop sites were explicit about wanting to have more control over the work that the site coordinators do and how they are supported and managed. This mainly seemed to be an issue of local control as compared to national control. One college dean told this story:

> *"There was a Single Stop [regional] program officer who jumped all over my coordinator about her outcomes, and I had to say, 'Back off. You deal with me, not my coordinator. This person works for me. If something is not working, tell me--criticize me.' I have always felt it was my job to protect my coordinator, since she is a college employee. We do not report to Single Stop. The site coordinator reports to me, to this institution."*

Administrators at colleges in multiple regions echoed these feelings. A dean at a different college spoke of regularly soliciting his coordinator's feedback on the services provided by Single Stop and providing that information to the national office. "I told her to tell me what the issues are, and I will call them and say that I am not happy with this," he said. "We made our commitment to Single Stop, and we are not always getting the results that we need." A lack of communication among management responsibilities coupled with tensions about funding may be at the heart of the issue. A supervisor at a newer site clarified this, stating, "I do not really have any direct oversight in how everything is done at this site. I am performing *their* theory with *my* money." Her peer at yet another school felt that the management authority also ought to reside with the sites. She said,

"My site coordinator has been with the program long enough, and she is very intuitive about what works and what is a waste of time and what looks good but does not contribute any value. Sometimes I think Single Stop would be challenged by us saying we are just not going to do it their way anymore."

As is common in many devolved and growing programs, success is defined differently by actors in different structural positions and with disparate senses of control. The relationship between the national office and its sites is continuously evolving and subject to revision. It was clear from our interviews that these honest assessments of the current situation were provide by sites with the sincere hope that the programmatic model and management practices would be improved, since overall Single Stop's efforts are needed and appreciated.

Consulting Services

At all recently launched sites, Single Stop has shifted from acting as an intermediary between a grantor and grantee to acting more as a consultant or partner to sites. This process has been formalized to include a set of services dubbed "consulting services" that includes launch management and support around institutionalization and integration of the sites. Launch management involves a formalized and codified process by which the national team conducts due diligence and feasibility research including the identification and selection of campuses based on student need and other factors, and the evaluation of potential third-party service providers. Single Stop leads the implementation process, working jointly with the campus on site operations, including hiring, allocating office space, setting expectations and schedules, and developing an outreach plan. Further, the executive leadership and strategy team promotes coordination and cooperation between the local community college office and other student service departments on campus. The national office actively encourages conversations between representatives from high-level college leadership, various student service offices and site staff in order to build and/or strengthen referral networks within the college. Single Stop also supports integration and institutionalization work on all campuses: the goal of this work is to ensure that the Single Stop model can be brought to scale nationally by increasing the numbers of students who are served, and providing a graduated service model that allows lower-need students to receive more efficient help, while students with more intense needs would receive specialized casework. The process of integration begins immediately during the launch period when high-level meetings occur between campus administration and Single Stop. Campuses are encouraged to think creatively about ways in which Single Stop services could be wrapped into other existing services on campus, and ultimately, to plan for the Single Stop program to become completely institutionalized (programmatically, financially, and structurally).

The ways in which the consulting services provided by Single Stop are viewed vary widely. Administrators at a more well-established characterized those services as helpful, with one reporting that "We've had a lot of great interactions with the National Office…They seem willing to pick up the phone and talk whenever we need to bounce ideas off of them…I think it's been a really good relationship." That administrator was particularly pleased that the relationship with Single Stop continued long after the initial site launch. However, administrators at several other sites expressed concern and confusion about how the program was funded, and in multiple cases specifically stated that the costs of operating Single Stop on their campus were much more substantial than they had expected. Said one senior college leader, "The funding model is not quite what we thought it was going to be, or what we were told. It is not that we were misled, but more that it seems that we

were not given all of the information." The miscommunication, he admitted, might have occurred because of disconnects at the college level during the initial recruitment process—he was not sure.

At another college, an administrator who was also unsure of how the program's costs were covered suggested that the costs would be worthwhile if the longer-term benefits in terms of student retention were realized. But, to date, he had not observed those benefits and that concerned him:

> *"The money is coming out of our pockets. We have to pay the salaries of the people that we hire, and fulfill the contractual obligations to the tax preparers and that has to come from our general fund—and we were not anticipating that. We are paying for this program [Single Stop] and at this point we are getting, literally, nothing out of it—other than providing a service for our students. Yes, our students are benefitting from it on the front end [in terms of getting more money] and so maybe two years down the line we will begin to reap the rewards. We may see some dividends as a result of this, based on increased retention. But it is up to us to really make sure that the program is worthwhile for [the college] in the long-term."*

Sharing with administrators how the financial benefits of retention might help the colleges cover the costs of Single Stop is part of the work done by the national leadership team, and some college staff expressed knowledge of those potential benefits—but these were clearly viewed as a hypothetical, at this point.

Like many young programs, Single Stop continues to work on building trust in the program among its sites and to ensure that faith in the program does not result in a single-mindedness about solutions but rather an attitudinal shift that makes the college feel capable and nimble in meeting students' needs. There is substantial variability across colleges in the level of comfort local administrators have with Single Stop's national and regional personnel, and the initiative's funding and funders. They also have disparate feelings about the consistency and transparency of interactions with the program. For example, at one college the administrators spoke with familiarity and fondness about some of the national office's staff members, noting that they could count on one of them to provide good feedback and fruitful ideas. At that college, the funding for Single Stop appears to feel secure and college leaders describe being included in the national office's decision-making processes. At another college, even though the national leaders have visited campus several times, administrators have not experienced those interactions positively, instead feeling that they are treated as less important than funders. They are not confident that Single Stop places as much of a priority on institutional buy-in as it should. Most colleges are, however, somewhere in-between—speaking of Single Stop's senior leadership and regional managers with both praise and critique, noting that their hearts are in the right place, even when their actions are not always consistent.

Evaluation and Assessment

Single Stop also provides some limited evaluation and assessment services to sites and is working to expand these services. Currently, the national office provides assistance by collecting, cleaning, analyzing and reporting performance/outcome data to funders, particularly for sites who use a philanthropic funding model. Single Stop also uses these data to pursue new funding opportunities on behalf of sites and colleges. The national office

reports cumulative or date-specific performance summaries to site administration for their own use in reporting to their boards or stakeholders. The data is also used to identify potential problems in service delivery and work with site coordinators to address them. Evaluative services also allow colleges to connect student records to Single Stop data, which will increasingly be useful as the impact of the program on retention and graduation becomes a stronger focus. Finally, the national office commissions evaluations to provide evidence on the national program's efficacy and effectiveness.

One way that the national office encourages sites to review their own data is by requiring quarterly reports. Each quarterly report currently requires the collection of information from five separate reports from BEN. While those reports can be pulled and someone skilled in using BEN can complete the template for the quarterly report in fifteen to twenty minutes, site coordinators indicated that this was a significant challenge and time-consuming activity for them. Furthermore, sites are told when their reports do not match with reports pulled by the national office, leaving some to question why they had to go through the trouble in the first place if the national office is going to do it anyway. To be clear, Single Stop does not reproduce all reports for all sites, but rather double checks site reports that seem inconsistent with historical data, checking for errors to help ensure high levels of data quality. Coordinators expressed a desire to make data-driven decisions, but sought clear guidance from the national office; having the data fields available in BEN or even the data collected is not enough. Furthermore, these reports are in the form of Excel spreadsheets, which are often challenging to read and interpret. Single Stop's evaluation officer reports that they are working on addressing this concern by creating more user-friendly graphics to aid in interpretation of data.

TECHNOLOGY AND SINGLE STOP SERVICES

Single Stop prides itself on using technology to enhance student services. The current platform, BEN, is a five-year-old benefits-screening tool designed to help site staff quickly navigate the complex process of determining benefits eligibility and serves as a warehouse for client data. This section describes sites' assessment of the current tool, while recognizing that a new tool is now under development.

BEN for Benefits Screening

Currently, the intended model is for a student to sit down with a Single Stop staff person and answer approximately 15 questions about their background, and then BEN will generate a preliminary list of local, state, and national benefits that the student and their family are potentially eligible. This brief first-level screen errs on the side of false-positives; the process is designed to consider students potentially eligible for benefits until they provide information that indicates ineligibility. After the student determines which potential benefits to pursue, a second-level, in-depth screening can be conducted in BEN. This second-level screening more precisely determines a student's eligibility for the particular benefit(s) that they may be eligible for as indicated by the first screening. The Single Stop staff then assists in the process of securing those benefits by providing assistance in filling out forms and in some cases can actually electronically file benefits applications from the Single Stop office.

In practice, when and how BEN is utilized varies substantially across regions and across colleges within regions. The first type of variation is with regard to when students are entered as "clients" into the BEN software. Single

Stop trains site coordinators to use BEN to collect contact and demographic data about each student at "intake" and again each time there is contact with the student, including in emergency situations and relatively minor interactions. However, this concept of "intake" is not operationalized consistently across sites. At some colleges, as part of campus outreach, students are asked to fill out a one page paper form that asks basic questions about the student's background, need, and contract information for later follow-up. Colleges use these forms in a variety of ways; some hand them out during classroom presentations about Single Stop, others using them during in-person student orientations, and other having students fill out electronic versions of the form online and email the completed form to the Single Stop office. These strategies are part of the colleges' efforts to connect as many students as possible with information on Single Stop, and to allow the site staff to gather preliminary information on students that may benefit from the services offered.

At some campuses, the information from the one-page form provides the start of a BEN profile and the information necessary to conduct a first-level screening. This first-level BEN screening can be conducted by someone with relatively little formal training or deep understanding of public benefits. In at least one case, student volunteers conduct the first-level screening using BEN and then follow-up with students who are potentially eligible for benefits to schedule a meeting with the site coordinator. In this case, students who are not found to be likely eligible for benefits and are not immediately contacted for additional follow-up have BEN profiles. At other campuses, however, a student's information is not entered into BEN until the student meets one-on-one with the Single Stop staff or is deemed very likely eligible for benefits based on site coordinator experience. On these campuses, a more select group of students – those likely to be eligible for public benefits – have BEN profiles.

In spite of the varied use of BEN the sites have been able to achieve high levels of success in connecting students to benefits and services (see Table 1), but this differentiation is important to understand in light of the goals of the impact evaluation. The fraction of students evaluated for benefits is currently based on the number going through the first level of screening, if that screening was entered into BEN. Since interviews with site coordinators strongly suggest that when some students go through the first level of screening they are *not* entering into BEN, this is likely underestimate of how many students sites interact with. On the one hand, the impacts of the underestimate may be relatively inconsequential for program evaluation (although not when assessing site coordinators' work loads) if the impacts on the student occur *only if benefits are received* but could be consequential if impacts also arise through interaction with the site coordinator. If students who were counseled by the site coordinator during an initial screening are not recorded in BEN, an evaluation is likely to place them in the comparison group rather than the "treatment" group and any positive impacts will count against the estimated treatment impacts.

On the other hand, at campuses where students who only fill out a one-page paper screener at recruitment events or orientation sessions are entered into BEN as clients, we expect the impact evaluation to underestimate the impact of Single Stop because these "clients" include students who may have had only very minimal contact with the Single Stop program, thus weakening the potential impact of the intervention.

BEN and Site Performance

Related to the earlier discussion of program management, one reason that sites refrain from putting some students into the BEN system is related to the way site coordinators understand the metrics for their performance. Sites' effectiveness is judged, in part, by the proportion of clients screened for benefits that report the receipt of benefits, regardless of the eligibility of the students. Thus, the easiest way to increase performance numbers is to limit the number of clients entered into BEN that are ineligible for benefits assistance, and interviews indicate that more than one site has adopted on this strategy. When a site does this, the coordinator also rarely records other referrals or services made for the student. There appears to be confusion and a lack of guidance about the differences between screening versus serving students and how these are to be entered into BEN, and for what purpose. The national office staff report that this is an issue they are actively working to correct.

Once a client profile has been created in BEN, staff members are required to fill out certain fields regarding personal and demographic background and benefits outcomes, including confirmed receipt of benefits. All of the site coordinators were keenly aware that this confirmation of benefits receipt in BEN was required by Single Stop and had a system in place to track this required information. These required fields appear to be of relatively high data quality; we found no evidence that would raise concerns about the accuracy of these data. Site coordinators seem to be following Single Stop's guidelines that only *confirmed* benefits receipt are entered into BEN, thus serving as a conservative estimate of benefits receipt. Because of these conservative estimates of benefits receipt, the impact of public benefits on academic outcomes will likely be understated in the impact evaluation.

In addition to tracking confirmed benefits receipt, BEN also captures information on client referrals to legal and financial services and an indicator of tax assistance and the amount of tax credits obtained. BEN is designed to include an initial step that indicates a referral has been made to legal or financial services and a secondary step that then indicates that the service has been received. However, the depth or outcome of financial and legal services is not systematically recorded in BEN although some site coordinators reported adding an open text note about the outcome. Thus, students with an indication of "legal services received" may mean that the student had an initial appointment with legal services and was told that their problem does not fall under their purview of services provided; met with a lawyer and had a case taken on that was unsuccessful; or met with a lawyer and had a case taken on that was successful. While it is beneficial for students to learn that they do not have a viable legal case without spending money on a private lawyer, conceptually, the impacts of those different scenarios would have very different impacts on students' academic outcomes. Yet, this information is not included in BEN and does not appear to be available at the individual level for evaluation purposes.

BEN for Referrals

BEN also has the capacity for additional functionality that has the potential to inform how sites operate and thus initiate ideas for improvement. For example, BEN has a data field where site coordinators can indicate how the

client learned about the program; it is not required and few sites use it regularly. But if they did, they might examine that information and adjust their outreach and recruitment strategies accordingly. This additional functionality lies in optional data fields, in an attempt by Single Stop to reduce the data entry burden required by site staff, and is consistently underutilized. When sites utilize the optional data fields in BEN, they do this inconsistently, making it difficult for Single Stop's national office or researchers to aggregate and systematically study the data. One area in which there is discrepancy across sites regards how referrals to partner agencies or services, such as those made to domestic abuse shelters or food pantries are indicated in BEN. Single Stop's program officers indicate that there is an initial step that indicates a referral has been made and a secondary step that then indicates that the service has been received. However, site coordinators using BEN most often spoke of a single referral box in BEN and used it either to indicate a referral was made or that a referral was confirmed. Some coordinators, especially more established sites, did not use the optional referral data fields at all or just started doing so more recently. Instead of using the optional data fields in BEN to help track client information, some coordinators put all non-mandatory referral and case management information in the notes section of BEN, which provides enhanced flexibility for site staff, but is difficult for Single Stop or evaluators to track. Interviews indicate that national staff members are aware of this varied and arguably underutilization of BEN, disappointedly noting that an Excel spreadsheet would suffice for many of the ways in which sites currently use BEN (a situation that they would like to see changed). Of course, even in its underutilized state, BEN offers safety and security features as well as linking and connection options beyond that of typical excel file, but site staff do not appear to readily recognize those features. Single Stop's efforts to have a new tech platform ready in the next 12 – 18 months will address many of the concerns that the early sites have expressed as the initiative has matured.

Evolution of BEN

Since Single Stop's leadership team is working to develop a new technological platform, we next reflect on the desires that site coordinators expressed for the next iteration of the software. First, site coordinators believe that they are at least as knowledgeable as BEN is when it comes to predicting potential benefits eligibility. It is difficult to assess the validity of this claim. However, site coordinators often cite errors with BEN's screening results when assessing the value of the BEN screening tool; concerns regarding immigration and documentation were particularly noteworthy suggesting that site coordinators may not be utilizing the more precise second-level screener. Single Stop's leaders are aware of these misreports or discrepancies (at the first level of screening), noting that BEN is a simplified and imperfect tool meant to determine students' potential benefits eligibility and do this at scale. It is clear, however, that this nuance in potentiality is often lost sometimes to the detriment of students' hopes and expectations. Future plans to put the first-level benefits screener in the hands of students and reserve site coordinator's expertise for more complex or challenging cases should help to alleviate some of these concerns.

A related factor in the underutilization of BEN is the limited training received by Single Stop college staff. Site staff reportedly received just one day of training on the content and technological workings of BEN. They were given a homework assignment of case studies to review one week later and are given refresher information six

months after the initial training. While webinars and a support hotline are available for additional follow-up, they are underutilized; plans are in place to be more proactive in reaching out to sites about BEN and require additional trainings.

Site staff and some of their more recently hired Single Stop program managers seem largely unaware of the full functionality of BEN. This is especially true at the more established sites suggesting that as Single Stop has developed, so has its training. One site coordinator said that she photocopies important documents that students bring in and keeps them in a large filing cabinet along the wall. The site coordinator explained that it is useful to have copies of these documents for future casework with the students, but expressed a desire to be able to do this electronically within BEN instead of on paper. Of course, BEN does have the capability to attach such documents. Basic knowledge of Microsoft Office may seem like sufficient background knowledge for this task given the paperclip icon in the toolbar, but the lack of utilizing this functionality in BEN likely has more to do with the way in which the system is perceived. Currently, BEN does not play an integral part in the work of most site coordinators; instead, it is viewed as a data warehouse and tool for the national office to track outcomes. Site coordinators and staff rarely use BEN in real time as a day-to-day tool that is critical to their job function. Several sites, across regions, rely almost exclusively on paper client in-take forms and then use paid or volunteer staff to enter that data into BEN; this is slow and often tedious work that generates resentment of the technological program. Other sites use a mix of paper and electronic BEN intake processes. For example, one site coordinator keeps track of client information she needs to enter into BEN using her own paper system, but updates BEN each evening before she leaves the office. She explained that her day is too hectic to take the time to log into BEN and update each client's file as she meets with him or her. An evaluator's observation notes from her office describe a steady stream of students and college staff stopping by her office to ask a question or schedule an appointment and a phone regularly ringing even though she had cleared her schedule to meet with the evaluation team during that time period. Other coordinators proposed ways to improve BEN as a case management tool, such as adding the functionality to email students reminders and updates from within BEN. More than one site coordinator suggested that the national office look towards Microsoft products or those used by state social services agencies for ways to improve BEN, apparently unaware that BEN is, in part, a Microsoft product.

Overall, it seems that BEN has the potential to change the way in which site coordinators do the work of benefits access. The technological advancements may be able to enable staff to do their work more efficiently or with greater precision. However, BEN is rarely used in an innovative capacity, and when it is, it is often used to compliment the skills of those not formally trained in social work and benefits access. For example, minimally trained volunteers are able to conduct the first-level BEN screening and flag students for further follow-up with Single Stop. Since site coordinators are often already experts in social work and benefits, or quickly become expert, they find it less useful. This idea of differentiating expertise where a student starts by using a self-screener or meeting with someone who does not have deep expertise in social work or benefits access is the direction that Single Stop plans to go in coming years. That way, social workers and experts in benefits access only see the students that truly need a higher level of support.

BEN and Data Access

Another issue, however, is that most Single Stop site coordinators are frustrated by their ability to access their college's information system and therefore details about students' financial aid, outstanding bills and holds, course enrollment and grades, and so on. Those with ready access to this information report that is very useful in case management as they are able to more fully, quickly, and accurately investigate a student's situation and provide appropriate guidance. If BEN were integrated into a college's information system it would be more useful, they say, because staff would not have to juggle multiple data systems and the work could be more easily and accurately linked to students' academic outcomes. Some colleges report hesitation in granting access to information systems or linking data systems due to restrictions in the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, but other colleges have found a way to enable this level of access for site coordinators. Some staff actively participate in their college's advising groups or are cross-trained as academic advisors. As one site coordinator explained, the "real Single Stop is where academics and finances meet," stressing the importance of being able to fully support students in this way since "simply getting them benefits access does no good if they are failing out of school and do not get help."

Even when lacking full access to a college's information system, at least one site has creatively partnered with the school's information technology department to flag students' records indicating that they might eligible for Single Stop services. In order to do this, the site coordinator used the information that the college already collects to create an algorithm for identifying potential Single Stop clients. All faculty and staff at the college as well as the student are made aware of this eligibility via the student's online portal. The site coordinator says that it is a promising new recruitment tool that increases awareness of Single Stop on campus and has the potential to influence how other faculty and staff members interact with the student, having noted the Single Stop flag on their file.

CONCLUSIONS

Today some Single Stop sites are a year or two old, while others are closer to five years old. Since 2009, Single Stop's Community College Initiative has expanded from three New York based sites to include 21 campuses across the nation and several others in development. Single Stop, through the work of its college partners, has served a total of 123,685 families and individuals, connecting them to $226,724,576 in benefits, tax refunds and other services. Despite this considerable success, Single Stop does not intend to rest on its laurels. Elisabeth Mason noted that few if any of the colleges are bringing benefits access, tax preparation, or financial coaching to the majority of their students:

> *"They are not reaching everyone they can, and we can see that in the data. We can help them see what they do not yet see, and help them do so much more. Our technology and training is advancing by the day. Even some of the most forward-thinking colleges are generationally behind in terms of what their student services system are set up to do—they cannot yet meet the needs of today's students. We learned this quickly the hard way, and we have a strategic plan to help."*

Single Stop USA's Community College Initiative

Growing and Learning

Single Stop began working in the community college arena with the intention of demonstrating that helping students to access benefits and services would translate to increased retention rates. Before Single Stop, most campuses did not have much experience connecting students to social services, so when this resource appeared, offices were inundated with non-academic student needs of all kinds. Campuses were eager for a place to direct students facing these pressing issues, and Single Stop became the hub. Because the first-established sites were funded through philanthropy, they had to balance the need to reach funders' performance metrics aimed at serving the neediest students with the far broader, but equally important need to develop a deep-rooted campus and community-based network to provide referrals and advocacy for students facing a wide range of critical barriers.

Under the original funding model, an unintended disconnect became apparent between providing "countable" services (e.g., enrollments in SNAP or Medicaid) and other parts of the case management approach that were not measured by funders (e.g., being a friendly, trustworthy support in a student's life). Sites were not given "credit" for this work in terms of funding, though the national organization certainly understood and supported this work. With a new funding model in place, Single Stop plans to increasingly align training, technology and supportive services with this broader need. For example, coordinators' feedback about the BEN technology has spurred development of an upcoming version of the software, which will track a broader set of outcomes. Single Stop is responding to desires for easier reporting and is currently in the process of exploring new data reporting platforms that would provide sites with a more intuitive, user friendly set of reports utilizing data visualizations and pre-developed analyses to help identify important trends in the data. The newly formalized launch process includes laying groundwork with community organizations when possible and training coordinators on community mapping. Single Stop's goals to take the model to scale within institutions have become more formalized: sites are encouraged from the outset to consider ways in which the program can become embedded in natural ways on campus (from being part of the campus orientation/matriculation materials to automatic "flagging" on student records for potentially eligible students). Sites are pressed to work towards institutionalizing the program structurally, programmatically, and financially. In these ways, Single Stop sees its future as being able to serve greater numbers of students efficiently to maximize results.

As campuses bring Single Stop to full scale, the plan is to maintain efficiency and serve much larger numbers of students by "triaging" students by their level of need. Some students will be able to self-screen for benefits eligibility using new software developed by Single Stop. These students, who have less complex needs and who can self-serve, could receive support in a very low cost manner. Students needing a limited amount of additional help in getting connected to benefits and services could then be served by a set of cross-trained college staff. While these staff will not be experts (like the site coordinators are), they will be trained to help address basic questions around benefits and services. Students with the most complex cases and needs will be triaged to the emergency room—to receive direct support from the highly trained expert site coordinators.

Implications for Evaluation

Given sites' perceptions of Single Stop, as well as the organization's ambitious plans to further scale the model, there are a few important issues for the organization to consider for the planned impact evaluation.

The model's focus on benefits confirmations is clearly warranted given the strength of existing research showing that social welfare benefits alleviate poverty and the potential positive effect of benefits receipt on college completion. However, as interviews with both site coordinators, administrators and Single Stop staff illustrate, the organization is working to overcome an unintentional disconnect that had sites focusing on some benefits that were more easily tracked versus other potentially important benefits and services that are less easily measured. It will be critical for the impact evaluation to, to the extent possible, measure what matters. Site coordinators are a ready source of expertise on this—they alone are truly familiar with the day-to-day services that students receive and should be deeply involved in any discussion of broadening measures of these services.

As this report illustrates, the use of BEN has varied by sites with some sites using it regularly and others holding data on paper until a volunteer or staff can do entries. All stakeholders seem to agree that this complex piece of software has both strengths and weaknesses. Sites using this software differently will necessarily affect the precision of impact estimates: issues around defining a Single Stop "client" will be important to understand as well as the ways in which Single Stop's reporting requirements influence estimated treatment impacts.

Along with the shift from philanthropic funding to self-funded models, Single Stop will need to continue to prove their worth to their sites through the consultative services offered, evaluation and assessment provided, and program support in general. As described earlier, there was some suggestion from administrators that campuses (particularly self-funded ones) were now making an investment larger than they had originally expected, and that while the investment would be worthwhile if it translated into measurable differences in retention, campuses might feel forced to identify less costly ways to meet the needs of students if they could not ultimately justify spending on Single Stop. One of the ways in which Single Stop can demonstrate its worth is by conducting an impact evaluation with a full cost analysis in order to demonstrate the program's effects, but this effort will only be successful if sites are prepared to invest and participate in that work. In this way, any efforts Single Stop can undertake to promote good faith and trust between the national organization and its sites are valuable in preparing for the impact evaluation (and beyond). Some suggestions for this include continuing to encourage and facilitate coordinator connections and networking through real events (like the conference held for coordinators in New York in June of 2014) or virtual events (like listservs, Google groups, or other platforms). The national organization can use the experiences of site coordinators to better understand the implications of various policy changes and can use high-level connections to lobby for policy change—the key with this is to ensure that sites are aware of this work and understand how they have contributed to it.

Finally, Single Stop might consider focusing and refining the specific chain of events (mechanisms) that it views as most likely to improve student retention, while also acknowledging that there are legitimate competing hypotheses among practitioners in this regard, and the mechanisms may vary by site. As the organization continues to grow, it will be important to balance the deployment of critical services for students with the needs of colleges and staff that provide their academic homes. While five decades of poverty research have pointed to the importance of benefits assistance, there has been a paucity of research on the effects of case management and social support. Documenting and unpacking the impacts of this multi-faceted model in a college setting will be a major contribution to those working to improve educational and economic security for all Americans.

Single Stop USA's Community College Initiative