Empowering Teams, TRANSFORMING Outcomes
A guide to building a holistic in-house student support program
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>Foreword: Replicating and Sustaining Success ›</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04</td>
<td>Acknowledgments ›</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05</td>
<td>Introduction: High Stakes for Higher Education and Students ›</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08</td>
<td>The Essential Elements of Building Sustainable Student Support ›</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 09   | **1** Assess Institutional Needs and Readiness ›  
  *Case Study: California State University, Bakersfield ›* |
| 12   | **2** Choose an Evidence-Based Methodology ›  
  *Case Study: Loyola University New Orleans ›* |
| 16   | **3** Nurture Internal Culture to Sustain Impact ›  
  *Case Study: Austin Community College ›* |
| 19   | **4** Secure Sustainable Funding Sources › |
| 21   | Conclusion: Building Capacity That Lasts › |
| 23   | Ready-to-Use Tools › |
Over the past two decades, institutions have embraced the need to enhance their student support services. This imperative is born from both a moral obligation and a fiscal necessity. Millions of students stop out of college every year, many having invested considerable money and effort into their education only to never receive the enormous benefits that come with a college degree. About 40 percent of learners do not graduate within six years.

Of course, there’s a compelling financial argument for maximizing student success, as well. A decade ago, researchers found that four-year institutions were losing, at minimum, $16.5 billion each year due to attrition. In the years since, higher education’s completion crisis has only deepened. Today, most college leaders know making investments in strengthening student support and improving retention makes ethical and economic sense. But, at a time when many institutions are under mounting financial and political pressure, finding the capacity to actually make these necessary investments — from funding to human capital — is a different story altogether.

Georgia State University, where I work as the executive director of the National Institute for Student Success, has a long and celebrated history of doing this kind of work. Since 2003, the university has increased its six-year graduation rate by a remarkable 23 percentage points and eliminated achievement gaps based on race, ethnicity and income. Our use of predictive analytics to provide targeted, timely interventions has received the lion’s share of attention from those looking to replicate our approach. While analytics have certainly played a core role, Georgia State’s steadfast commitment to building a durable and sustainable infrastructure for delivering responsive student support has proven just as crucial, if not more so.

We learned that technology and individual interventions can only get you so far. The difference-maker was not any one tool, department or person, but an intentional campus-wide shift toward a culture that is entirely oriented around, focused on and driven by improving student outcomes. It is within this shift that institutions can find the elusive capacity they need to create and sustain human-centered — and holistic — student supports that have a wide and lasting impact.

Drawing from insights developed through InsideTrack’s work supporting millions of learners, this paper provides a roadmap for institutional training, development and change management — all with an eye toward dramatically improving learner outcomes. With the practical and evidence-based strategies contained in these pages, institutions can get to work building the sustainable, in-house capacity they need to ensure all students not only persist but thrive.

TIMOTHY RENICK, PH.D.
Founding Executive Director, Georgia State University’s National Institute for Student Success
Acknowledgments

This report is the product of both secondary research and analysis as well as direct interviews and conversations with institutional leaders, practitioners, public policy experts and other higher education leaders. To reflect the wide range of issues and perspectives on student success, student affairs and institutional governance, we intentionally sought out individuals with a wide range of perspectives and divergent experiences to better understand the complex nature of the issues discussed in this paper.

We are particularly grateful to the following individuals who contributed their time, expertise and perspectives to this publication: Kelvin Bentley, Ph.D., program manager at the University of Texas System; Melanie Booth, Ed.D., executive director of the Higher Learning Commission Credential Lab; Wade Bradfute, Ph.D., executive dean of student services at Austin Community College; Terry Brown, Ph.D., vice president of academic innovation and transformation at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities; Corina Caraccioli, Ph.D., assistant dean of Online and City College at Loyola University New Orleans; Alexa Wesley Chamberlain, director of research and strategy, NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education; Jhenai Chandler, Ph.D., senior director of college completion policy at The Institute for College Access & Success; Ashley Finley, Ph.D., vice president of research and senior advisor to the president, the American Association of Colleges and Universities; Tanya Garcia, Ph.D., vice president, The Institute for College Access & Success; Hilda Gartzke, coordinator of student affairs training at Austin Community College; Kathy James, advising supervisor at Austin Community College; Mike Krause, senior advisor, John M. Belk Endowment; John Lane, Ph.D., vice president for academic affairs and equity initiatives, SHEEO; Bernard Mair, Ph.D., senior vice president for academic affairs and chief academic officer at the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities; Amelia Parnell, Ph.D., vice president for research and policy at NASPA; Eleanor Eckerson Peters, director of research and policy, Institute for Higher Education Policy; Elizabeth “Liz” Rainey, Ed.D, assistant provost of student success at Loyola University New Orleans; Ruth Reinhart, Ed.D., associate vice chancellor, student support at Austin Community College; Danielle “Dani” Solano, Ph.D., professor, department of Chemistry & Biochemistry at California State University, Bakersfield; Yolanda Watson Spiva, Ph.D., president at Complete College America; Thomas Stewart, Ph.D., executive director of the Cause Research Institute (CRI) at National University; Joel Vargas, Ed.D., vice president of the education practice at Jobs for the Future (JFF); and Amanda Winters, program director at National Governors Association.
INTRODUCTION

High Stakes for Higher Education and Students

After years of steep declines, colleges and universities received a glimmer of hope this fall when undergraduate enrollment saw an increase of about 176,000 students. It’s tempting to view the modest gain as a sign that higher education might, at last, be turning a corner following the difficulties of the COVID-19 pandemic. The reality, however, is that the news represented a rare bright spot in an otherwise murky outlook for our nation’s system of postsecondary learning.

Enrollment remains well below pre-pandemic levels, with many learners finding it more difficult than ever to make their way to and through college. More than 40 percent of college students now say they have considered stopping out within the past six months, according to a recent survey from Gallup and the Lumina Foundation. The rates were even higher for Black and Hispanic learners, at 43 percent and 52 percent respectively. Students in the survey attributed their thinking to a range of reasons, from emotional stress and mental health issues to college costs and course difficulty. Some said they had lost interest in earning a degree, while others said they no longer believed a degree would help them achieve their goals.

“There is real urgency being felt by academic affairs and student affairs to focus on student well-being and mental health,” says John Lane, Ph.D., vice president for academic affairs and equity initiatives at SHEEO, a membership association representing state higher education executives. “States and institutional leaders now have a deeper appreciation for the complex array of personal, financial and socioemotional challenges that students face. The question is how do we respond to those challenges before they stop students in their tracks.”
In the 2021-2022 academic year, 2.3 million students stopped out — joining the more than 40 million people in the United States who have left college without earning a credential.

“To support student success, it’s critically important for institutions to create a stronger sense of student belonging,” says Eleanor Eckerson Peters, director of research and policy at the Institute for Higher Education Policy. “If students feel unsure of their place in college or receive mixed messages about if they belong there at all, those sentiments can compound barriers to enrolling and staying on track to earn a degree. Institutions can and should implement evidence-based strategies for fostering students’ sense of belonging alongside other comprehensive supports to promote equitable student success.”

The challenges of the past few years follow a long period of improvements in student success. Yolanda Watson Spiva, Ph.D., a former college administrator and U.S. Department of Education official who heads up the national nonprofit Complete College America, says states and institutions deserve enormous credit for committing to the hard work of closing gaps in college access and completion. But after a decade of progress toward improving student persistence and college completion, the trendlines are now pointing in the opposite direction.

“College leaders are coming to grips with the reality that whatever gains we saw in the past are not permanent,” says Watson Spiva. “Unfortunately, we’ve seen that progress can be erased because of powerful forces beyond anyone’s control, from COVID-19 to changes in the labor market and shifting views around the value of the degree itself.”

JOHN LANE, PH.D.
Vice President for Academic Affairs and Equity Initiatives, SHEEO

KEY CHALLENGES IN BUILDING INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

Ironically, higher education has never been better equipped with the knowledge needed to ensure students succeed. The evolution of high-quality student success coaching has led to significant increases in persistence at institutions that invest in an evidence-based methodology. Taking advantage of innovations in technology, analytics and pedagogy, coaching and other student-centered interventions are becoming more personalized, more proactive and more timely — all in response to the disparate needs of a diverse student population.

Ashley Finley, Ph.D., vice president of research and senior advisor to the president at the American Association of Colleges and Universities, says that institutions have learned they need to assemble what leaders at North Carolina’s Elon University describe as a “constellation of mentors” if they are to meet the vast and complex needs of their students.

“Addressing the challenges students face requires a networked approach that treats the entire student experience, not just silos,” says Finley, who co-authored the publication Assessing Underserved Students’ Engagement in High-impact Practices. “It’s about marshaling support and resources from every corner of an institution.”

Implementing student success practices at this scale — and with fidelity to evidence-based practices
that succeeded in other places and with other students — often requires no less than an institution-wide transformation. But, hindered by a complex web of financial, operational and political challenges, many institutions do not have the resources to carry out this necessarily ambitious undertaking. They lack the capacity to put the wealth of knowledge now available to them to use.

Over the past decade, colleges have seen a decline of about 2.6 million students. During much of that same time frame, they also saw declines in state and federal funding. Now, colleges across the country are struggling with budget deficits that require cuts to programs, faculty and student services. Even prior to the accelerant that was the COVID-19 pandemic, hundreds of institutions showed warning signs of financial stress. Forced to carry an ever-growing workload as they navigate an increasingly complex educational landscape, more than one-third of college and university workers report frequently feeling burned out, which places them among the most burned-out employees of any industry in the country.

“This work can be difficult and demanding,” says Amelia Parnell, Ph.D., vice president for research and policy at NASPA, Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. “Student success teams are working to find efficiencies and optimize using technology and data, which can be challenging without additional staff or financial resources.”

Even the best partnerships are not guaranteed to last. Building internal capacity for long-term sustainability is critical.

JHENAI CHANDLER, PH.D.
Senior Director of College Completion Policy,
The Institute for College Access & Success

The gradual maturation of the student success sector has given rise to a complementary marketplace of for-profit and nonprofit organizations that can provide a much-needed boost to institutions’ capacity. At the same time, the effects of such partnerships are very often temporary. Outsourcing student success has its limits, as the impact tends to live and die with the partnership.

The pathway to student success transformation is instead built on finding innovative ways to invest in existing staff and structures, ultimately creating sustainable internal capacity.

“This hinges on building institutional capacity in-house,” says Jhenai Chandler, Ph.D., senior director of college completion policy at The Institute for College Access & Success. “Institutions that have money available today to fund programs and initiatives may not have those funds tomorrow. Even the best partnerships are not guaranteed to last. Building internal capacity for long-term sustainability is critical.”
An IACET-accredited provider, InsideTrack has worked with more than 130 partners on coaching development and training programs that empower in-house teams and build lasting capacity to better meet student needs. The organization’s training approach is informed — and continuously refined — by the insights it has gained from coaching millions of students using its evidence-based coaching methodology. Guided by a nonprofit mission to drive transformative change and promote equitable social mobility, InsideTrack’s training and development initiatives are crafted to generate a ripple effect that empowers institutions to reimagine how they can support students, their families and their broader communities.

To help college leaders create sustainable student success practices at scale, this guide identifies four essential elements necessary for bolstering their in-house capacity. While not exhaustive, these elements do offer a broad overview of some of the key areas — ranging from securing initial funding to ensuring lasting impact — that are vital for institutions aiming to bolster their student support infrastructure. Accompanied by illustrative case studies and ready-to-use tools, these resources draw upon the successes of a diverse selection of colleges and the expertise of InsideTrack.
Prior to embarking on any endeavor to enhance student support, colleges and universities must first conduct an in-depth assessment of the needs of their students. Institutions cannot expect to better serve their learners without first gaining a deeper understanding of who those students are and what challenges they’re facing.

Many of today’s students juggle multiple, competing responsibilities alongside their academic obligations. These learners are what administrators at National University — a nonprofit minority serving institution that specializes in serving non-traditional, working and military learners — have come to call “and-ers.” They are students and parents. Students and workers. Or even students and working parents. To say learners wear many different hats would be an understatement.

“Often we want to lump students into broad categories and make generic assumptions about their needs,” says Thomas Stewart, Ph.D., executive vice president and executive director of National University’s Cause Research Institute, which was launched in part to offer financial and other support to researchers studying the underlying issues related to student success. “But students’ needs are more nuanced, and colleges are starting to understand that our support has to be more customized, particularly for nontraditional learners.”

When Austin Community College District (ACC) set out to learn more about its learners amid a capacity-building initiative, for instance, staff were surprised to learn how little they actually knew. Through surveys designed to assess student needs, leaders at the Central Texas community college system found that many students were struggling to access basic necessities like food and transportation, as well as health insurance coverage.

“We did not fully realize how complex the needs of our students were,” says Wade Bradfute, Ph.D., an executive dean of student services at ACC. “We do now. A lot of that just comes from slowing things down and stepping back to have a more holistic and detail-oriented view of our students and how we can help them.”

Understanding student needs is just one side of the coin; assessing institutional readiness for addressing these
needs is equally important. This includes an in-depth evaluation of the needs of staff. Unlocking in-house capacity for sustainable student support will pay dividends in the long term, but institutions must be prepared to commit considerable time, effort and resources to training and development. A comprehensive assessment that measures the needs of students, the capabilities of staff and an institution’s preparedness allows institutions to set a data-driven North Star guided by clear goals and specific desired outcomes. This could range from high-level objectives, such as improving overall retention or completion rates, to more nuanced goals designed to address the discrete needs of a given student population.

In recent years, for example, several colleges have invested in capacity-building initiatives aimed at re-engaging and re-enrolling learners who have stopped out. Other institutions have built additional capacity to better prepare students for their careers after graduation. Though varied in their scope and intent, these programs are all born from the same crucial first step: a thorough institutional assessment dually focused on student needs and internal capacity.

California State University Bakersfield (CSUB) serves a student population that is far more diverse than the CSU system at large. Nearly 40 percent of its learners have transferred from a California Community College (CCC), 65 percent receive Pell grants and 63 percent identify as Hispanic.

As a designated Hispanic-serving institution (HSI), the university is committed to ensuring it lives up to the title, with CSUB leaders actively working to center student support services around an ethos called “servingness.” The concept — first coined and defined by Gina Ann Garcia, Ph.D., a University of California Berkeley School of Education
professor — offers institutions a framework for moving from simply enrolling Hispanic and Latine students to actually serving them.

For CSUB, this process has meant taking a hard look at its strengths and shortcomings as an HSI. The university conducted a data-driven needs assessment to better understand the institutional barriers Hispanic and Latine students were facing in terms of access, transfer, retention and completion. Although the assessment revealed that the institution had made promising strides in recent years, it also showed that lower completion and transfer rates persisted among Hispanic students at a disproportionate rate. More troubling, CSUB found that the four-year graduation rate of Hispanic men lagged significantly behind that of other students, including the overall Hispanic student population. For the cohort enrolling in 2017, just 18 percent of Hispanic men had completed their degrees four years later.

The assessment formed the basis for a Title V grant the university received from the U.S. Department of Education, which is now being used to fund a four-year coaching development and training partnership with InsideTrack. The partnership will focus on certifying CSUB’s support staff in InsideTrack’s coaching methodology, providing change management support, implementing a “train the trainer” model, and embracing leadership development geared toward embedding coaching across multiple teams. By weaving coaching principles across the institution, support staff can meet their Hispanic and Latine students — and the entire student body — where they are.

The partnership is just one component of a much larger initiative fueled by the funding, which the institution hopes will help close equity gaps in student outcomes. The three-part strategy aims to widen access to educational and career pathways for more Hispanic students in the region; enable a multidimensional, culturally responsive approach to serving Hispanic and Latine students’ academic, emotional and basic needs; and spur a culture shift that reimagines any existing structures, policies and practices that fail to meet its new standard of servingness.

“Starting with an in-depth needs assessment was key to understanding how we could best help our students,” says Dani Solano, Ph.D., a key leader in the coaching effort at CSUB. “It not only revealed which learners most need our attention but also what existing interventions and systems no longer make sense. What worked 10 years ago, or even just right before the COVID-19 pandemic, doesn’t necessarily work today. Assessments show where you need to adapt.”

Starting with an in-depth needs assessment was key to understanding how we could best help our students.

DANI SOLANO, PH.D.
Professor, Department of Chemistry & Biochemistry, CSUB
There are many moving pieces that must align in order to prompt the kind of institution-wide transformation that can sustain holistic in-house student support. As Mike Krause, senior advisor at the John M. Belk Endowment, puts it: “When it comes to turning, institutions are, with very rare exceptions, aircraft carriers rather than speedboats.”

It’s crucial, then, that institutions align around an evidence-based training framework that will not only meet the learning needs of their students but also the development needs of their staff. An ideal training program is far more robust than a two-day workshop; instead, training should be immersive and continuous, providing ongoing motivation — and even inspiration — for staff to embrace the sometimes uncomfortable changes necessary for enhancing learner support. The framework should be informed by a strong coaching methodology that is student-centered, holistic and scalable. It should be proactive, personalized and collaborative, with a focus on not just telling students what to do, but assessing their strengths and aspirations and empowering them to meet their goals.

“There are high-impact practices we know can work if leaders are able to integrate them across their systems,” says Joel Vargas, Ed.D., vice president of Jobs for the Future’s education practice and an expert on systems change in higher education. “But there are capacity constraints here too. Remember leaders are also learners. You have to learn the practices from somewhere.”

InsideTrack’s coaching and development framework, for example, equips student support professionals with key skills that help shift their interactions with students — going from transactional to transformational. Through comprehensive training, observation, feedback and reinforcement, staff are able to apply a research-backed success coaching methodology to existing student support programs. Based on an assessment of an institution’s goals and needs, this framework can be tailored to address the particular training requirements of advisors and other student support staff at any given institution.

Of course, the benefits of even the most robust training approach may not be immediately obvious to staff, many of whom suffer from “initiative fatigue” and are leery of yet another program that could lead to wasted time and effort. If the process lacks broad buy-in from both front-line student support staff and senior leadership, a training framework will have very little impact on individual learners, let alone on building and sustaining capacity. When staff members see that leadership is bought in and participating in the training themselves, they will more readily recognize its importance.

The best frameworks help staff see the training for what it is: an opportunity for career development. Outcome-oriented training programs accredited to meet the highest standards of continuing education programs give staff
assurance of the initiative’s legitimacy. Meanwhile, framing certification as an opportunity for career advancement offers staff the extra incentive they might need to give it a chance.

But training is only one half of the equation. Too often, institutions invest time and money in promising initiatives that seem built to last, only for them to fall flat or stagnate beyond a handful of enthusiastic staff members. Employing a consistent change management strategy alongside the implementation of any new initiatives is key to their success. This often overlooked component is what ensures a training initiative can take root and blossom into the internal capacity an institution needs to sustain change.

Change management frameworks designed by Kotter International, founded by Harvard Business School emeritus professor of leadership Joseph Kotter, and the widely used Prosci® model offer strategic methodologies that help cultivate intentional growth. Both frameworks are designed to empower teams and individuals to take ownership of new initiatives and, ultimately, transform organizations from the inside.

Effective practices for managing change in student support programs include:

- Fully informing staff of the changes and the rationale behind them
- Making time and space for staff to ask questions, get on board and become excited about the change
- Ensuring staff have access to the skills training they need to effectively implement those changes
- Sustaining highly visible executive sponsorship throughout the entire process

“The hallmarks of the most successful capacity-building ventures are strong executive-level sponsorship and commitment to organizational change,” says Megan Breiseth, who leads the Learning and Development team at InsideTrack. “Leaders talk to staff involved in the change to help them understand what they are being asked to do and on what timeline. They activate direct managers to come together in support of that and really spread the message.”
There is no one-size-fits-all technique for building capacity. Colleges and universities serve a diverse range of populations, deliver education through multiple modalities and work within wildly different resource constraints. Increasingly, this can hold true even within a single institution, as is the case with Loyola University New Orleans.

In 2017, this small Jesuit institution partnered with InsideTrack to launch a three-year coaching development and training program that would empower Loyola staff to provide personalized coaching across their campus. As a first step in the process, InsideTrack coached Loyola’s full class of first-year students, demonstrating the methodology in practice to Loyola staff. The impact was immediate. Just one year into the partnership, first-year retention improved by five percentage points to 85 percent, the highest such rate in the university’s history. First-generation students who engaged with the coaching saw a 12 percentage point increase in retention.

Advising staff then underwent extensive training and certification, learning coaching skills that transformed how they supported students. Loyola’s student support leaders liken this proactive persistence approach to working with a personal trainer to holistically improve a person’s health, rather than waiting for a medical issue to develop.

The benefits of that transformation soon caught the attention of other leaders at the university, and interest grew in extending the program’s reach. By selecting a versatile and efficient training framework, Loyola was able to apply the methodology to serve seemingly disparate student populations. The university initially worked with InsideTrack to train three full-time success coaches and 10 part-time advisors.

First-year retention improved by five percentage points to 85 percent, the highest such rate in the university’s history.
success coaches. Today, there are six certified success coach trainers and 23 success coaches, as well another five who are undergoing training, across two large departments.

“It’s remarkably adaptable,” says Liz Rainey, Ed.D., assistant provost for student success at Loyola. “We always said that we would never turn students away from coaching when they needed assistance, but we didn’t know it would grow to this extent.”

For instance, students enrolled in fully online programs at Loyola have since been granted access to student success coaching as well. The needs, backgrounds and experiences of these learners vary greatly from those of the first-year students who initially received the coaching.

The university is also working to provide coaching to recently admitted students, helping learners navigate the complexities of attending higher education before they step foot on campus, virtually or otherwise. The online success team now offers coaching to all persisting online students who seek it; that’s about 600 learners. Beyond informational meetings between coaches and students, the coaching methodology is integrated throughout all types of student communication, including outreach around orientation and onboarding, registration and academic probation.

“Because we saw how well success coaching was working with our traditional-aged, main-campus students, we knew it could have an impact on our adult learners as well,” says Corina Caraccioli, Ph.D., assistant dean of Online and City College at Loyola University New Orleans. “Now we are seeing how coaching that has been embedded in our retention strategies can be used in recruitment. For adult learners, some of whom have been out of school for 10 or 20 years, coaching holds a lot of promise for assessing and improving student readiness.”

"Because we saw how well success coaching was working with our traditional-aged, main-campus students, we knew it could have an impact on our adult learners as well."

CORINA CARACCIOLI, PH.D.
Assistant Dean of Online and City College at Loyola University New Orleans
Nurture Internal Culture to **SUSTAIN IMPACT**

Pairing the right training framework with the appropriate change management strategy lays the foundation on which in-house capacity is built. A foundation is only a starting point, however. In too many cases, the effects of a student success initiative — no matter how impactful in the short term — eventually fizzle out once grant funding dries up or an external partnership winds down.

“That’s the real pitfall for many initiatives aimed at improving student success,” says Dani Solano, Ph.D., a professor at California State University, Bakersfield, who has played a role in revamping the university’s student support systems. “Many of them are great, but as soon as the grant funding is up, they disappear because it’s not sustainable. You’ll try something new and get great evidence that it really helped, but then there isn’t funding for it beyond the grant.”

Creating lasting capacity for transforming student outcomes requires that the innovations institutions develop with partner organizations are sustainable and capable of persisting long after the partnership ends.

As powerful as student success coaching methods can be, their impact is limited to the extent to which institutions remain committed to truly embedding the learnings from evidence-based training into their everyday interactions with students. Behaviors and techniques should, therefore, be consistently and continuously reinforced through **practice, observation and in-depth feedback**. Dedicated staff members should be trained to observe coaching interactions and take a developmental, strengths-based approach when providing feedback. A culture won’t change without practice, application and a supportive feedback loop.

As college leaders, faculty and staff who receive training become more proactive and holistic in their work, the impact can be felt far beyond one-on-one meetings with students. The philosophies behind effective student success coaching are folded into the fabric of the institution, permeating everyday interactions, big and small.

This culture shift can be further solidified through a “train the trainer” model, in which dedicated staff go through intensive training and certification that allows them to mentor future generations of coaches. This unlocks true continuous growth at an institution.
By training staff to become coach trainers themselves, institutions set off a chain reaction that allows the benefits of the initiative to endure, potentially in perpetuity.

Colleges can further enhance continuous learning for trained staff by nurturing communities of practice, both on their own campus and across a broader network of like-minded institutions. This can help coaches and trainers exchange resources, best practices and insights — and find support and encouragement from a community of equally passionate and knowledgeable educators.

Austin Community College District (ACC) is the sixth-largest community college in the country. Each year, ACC serves tens of thousands of students across central Texas, many of whom struggle with financial, food and housing insecurity. In 2017, the district partnered with InsideTrack in an effort to boost its retention and completion and, ultimately, improve the economic and social mobility of its learners. The partnership was funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Coaches first worked one-on-one with 125 ACC students, providing success coaching while also performing an in-depth assessment to better understand the ACC student experience, learn about the college’s student support strengths and identify opportunities for improvement. Simultaneously, a small group of student affairs staff members received training on how to embed coaching techniques

The result was profound: The district’s graduation rates have increased from seven percent to 23 percent and its persistence rate from 45 percent to nearly 75 percent.

From Transactional to Transformational: How ACC’s Student Support Team Led a Culture Change

- Austin, Texas
- 35,609 students
- 5,000 faculty and staff
- 40.1% of undergraduate students identify as Hispanic
- 77% of students are part-time

Empowering Teams, Transforming Outcomes

The Essential Elements › / Conclusion › / Tools ›
into their advising. Other advisors began receiving advanced training so that they could train new hires as coaches, ultimately extending the impact of the program even in the face of turnover and expansion. In total, InsideTrack provided training to 93 staff members and certified nearly 70 coaches.

Administrators took seriously the idea that advising should be transformational, not merely transactional. They hired registration liaisons to help students build their schedules, for instance, freeing up time for advisors to put their coaching skills to good use. The result was profound. The district’s graduation rates have increased from seven percent to 23 percent and its persistence rate from 45 percent to nearly 75 percent. The college’s transfer rates now rival that of more prominent regional institutions.

The changes ACC made during the initial two-year pilot project have endured. Administrators and staff say the lessons imparted throughout their coaching development and training program led to a cultural reset, first among student support services and then the entirety of the system. Techniques utilized in one-on-one advising sessions with students have found their way into staff meetings and daily communication. Staff, faculty and administrators spread across 11 distinct campuses now have a consistent, shared vocabulary around student success.

“It’s part of our culture now that we coach,” says Hilda Gartzke, coordinator of student affairs training at Austin Community College. “We try to model it with everything we do.”

Years after the partnership with InsideTrack ended, groups of coaches are still being consistently trained on a regular basis. Over the past five years, ACC has certified 110 new coaches, with an additional 36 coaching candidates currently engaged in the certification process. These staff members also participate in InsideTrack’s community of practice, a cost-free service that promotes continuing education and the sharing of best practices among certified coaches and trainers across hundreds of institutions. More than 35,000 ACC students now benefit from the impact of coaching each year.

“It’s been incredible what we have been able to sustain and how the coaching training has been shared across all colleges and divisions in the district,” says Ruth Reinhart, Ed.D., associate vice chancellor of student support services at ACC. “It started out just in student affairs, but now everyone who is advising students in any fashion is doing the coaching. We really do take this work to heart.”

In January 2024, InsideTrack and Austin Community College announced that they had re-teamed to launch yet another phase of their collaboration, this time focused on re-enrolling stopped-out students. In this two-phase partnership, InsideTrack will coach up to 6,800 former students who wish to return to college to complete their degree, and the partnership will equip ACC coaches with the skills and credentials needed to help future stopped-out students return.
Secure **SUSTAINABLE** Funding Sources

While creating a holistic and self-sustaining system of student support will yield immense benefits over time, there’s no denying that institutions will need to prepare for some upfront costs. At a time when many colleges are strapped for resources, this is easier said than done. Fortunately, there are avenues institutions can explore to ease the initial financial burden of investing in building their internal capacity.

A growing number of institutions are working to fund student support innovations and coaching development and training work through federal grants from the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Labor’s grant programs. Student support leaders have also funded programs through state grants and philanthropic investments, along with vying for investments from within their institutions’ existing operating and strategic initiatives budgets. Demonstrating from the outset how an initiative can result in a strong return on investment is key to securing both internal and external funding. InsideTrack’s research-backed student success coaching, for instance, is one of many proven methodologies included in the Education Department’s “What Works Clearinghouse” of evidence-based practices.

“Initiatives that succeed in keeping students enrolled tend to pass a very basic ROI test,” says Bernard Mair, Ph.D., senior vice president for academic affairs and chief academic officer at the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities. “If you keep students enrolled, that’s an automatic return on whatever investment an institution made to ensure that happened. That’s very valuable to institutions. Investments in student success tend to pay off in comparison to the tuition institutions are losing by so many students stopping out.”

Mike Krause, of the John M. Belk Endowment, goes a step further. He suggests embedding evaluation into program design as a way to cultivate interest with prospective funders.

“Funders and grantmakers, both in the public sector and philanthropy, stand up and take notice when a college president is willing to let the data and evidence do the talking — and commit to that up front,” Krause says. “They want to know that the incremental gains achieved on your campus will actually be sustainable in the long run, not a flash in the pan. Connecting the dots between outcomes, data and program design can help institutions secure the financial runway needed not just for the first year, but the years that follow.”

---

**Connecting the dots between outcomes, data and program design can help institutions secure the financial runway needed not just for the first year, but the years that follow.**

**MIKE KRAUSE**  
Senior Advisor, John M. Belk Endowment
data and program design can help institutions secure the financial runway needed not just for the first year, but the years that follow.”

By exploring a mix of funding sources, making a compelling case for the financial benefits of student support initiatives, and adopting innovative approaches to program design and proposal, institutions can secure the financial support necessary to launch and sustain these critical programs.

**READY-TO-USE TOOL:**

**Funding options for sustainable student support initiatives**

InsideTrack has partnered with a wide range of colleges and universities to build in-house student support capacity, and those institutions have relied on an equally wide range of funding sources to support that work. This tool provides a list of questions and considerations that will help colleges understand — and navigate — the myriad options available to them. Those funding sources include:

- College operating budget
- Employer partnerships
- Local, state and federal grants
- Local, regional and national philanthropic partnerships
CONCLUSION

Building Capacity That Lasts

The challenges facing institutions and their students are not likely to become any less complex in the years to come. Colleges will continue to be confronted by financial, enrollment and political headwinds that strain their already stretched-thin resources. In an era of increased uncertainty for higher education and its students, institutions are feeling intense pressure to respond to the expectations of varied, and sometimes contradictory, stakeholders.

“We are expecting universities and colleges to be everything to students now,” says Amanda Winters, a program director at the National Governors Association’s Center for Best Practices who previously served as assistant director of academic affairs at the Illinois Board of Higher Education. “Today’s colleges are expected to offer everything from career planning and navigation to food, childcare and transportation. They’ve become this community linchpin, but state policymakers don’t always think of them that way or provide them with adequate resources. It creates a challenge for institutions.”

There is tremendous opportunity embedded in this more aspirational vision of what a college can be — one that calls on institutions and their student success teams to serve as vital community anchors. The path to realizing that vision depends entirely on better supporting the dedicated, knowledgeable and yet overstretched individuals who interact with students every day. In this sense, the answer to institutions’ lack of capacity is deceptively simple: prioritize investing in human capital.
For most institutions, a change in culture is a precondition for a change in outcomes. To pursue organizational change, institutions must simultaneously create the capacity to make it happen.

MELANIE BOOTH, ED.D.
Executive Director, Higher Learning Commission Credential Lab

By equipping their teams with evidence-based coaching frameworks, institutions can grow their capacity for student support in a more sustainable way at a time when resources are exceedingly tight. When coupled with strategic change management, these investments can catalyze a culture shift that extends the impact of this holistic approach to student support beyond the reach of any single coach or advisor.

“Incremental changes can be easy to achieve, but fleeting in impact. The more difficult thing is engaging as part of a transformational process that changes systems, instead of just introducing one-time solutions,” says Melanie Booth, Ed.D., executive director of the Higher Learning Commission Credential Lab. “For most institutions, a change in culture is a precondition for a change in outcomes. To pursue organizational change, institutions must simultaneously create the capacity to make it happen.”

InsideTrack is a nonprofit on a mission to give institutions the tools and resources they need to pursue in-house transformation. Carefully curated from insights gained over decades of experience working with colleges and learners, this guide is designed to provide higher education leaders with strategies for empowering their teams to reimagine student success. It serves as a foundational blueprint for those aiming to develop holistic and sustainable in-house student support systems. Together, these elements can spark a transformative shift in an institution’s culture that unlocks the capacity needed to help all students thrive.
Ready-to-Use **TOOLS**

- Planning Guide for Institutional Transformation
- Change Management Best Practices Checklist
- Funding Options for Student Support Initiatives
Planning Guide for Institutional Transformation

When InsideTrack partners with an institution to help identify a path to transforming student support through staff training and development, we begin with program design. We help leaders design effective programs by assessing goals, current internal gaps and readiness for change — then we help them identify the programs and scaffolds that will lead to the desired outcomes.

To aid planning, here are guiding questions to consider when you’re partnering to launch a training and development program at your institution.

**SET CLEAR GOALS**

As a first step, all key program stakeholders should be clear on the purpose for embarking on a training and development initiative, as well as how the initiative fits into departmental and institution-wide strategic goals.

- How will this initiative fit into your overall student success vision and the strategic plan for your organization?
- By building in-house capacity and elevating student support, what desired outcomes will be possible? (Consider the specific needs and benefits to both staff and students.)
- How will you define and communicate roles and responsibilities for all parties involved in the initiative?

**KEEP STUDENTS AT THE HEART OF PROGRAM DESIGN**

InsideTrack recommends using a formal learner experience map as a tool to help institutional leaders understand and empathize with the complex relationship between the actions students are taking and what they are thinking and feeling during those key milestones. In addition to the questions below, consider accessing existing student survey results, organizing a focus group, and/or auditing existing processes and policies to provide more insight into the student experience.

- What are the key institutional activity milestones (e.g., register for classes, complete admissions checklist, finalize registration, meet consistently with an advisor)?
- What is the student experience at each of these milestones (e.g., taking first productive steps, worrying about whether they will fit in, experiencing independence)?
- Are students achieving these milestones, and/or where might students face barriers in achieving these milestones?

**UNDERSTAND STAFF EXPECTATIONS AND GOALS**

Building in-house capacity is all about careful planning to adequately empower and advance your staff. Before you partner with a training provider, be sure you know where your staff’s current strengths and challenges are and how training could lean into those strengths and fill gaps.

- How are staff members currently supporting students? What strengths and areas of opportunity exist?
- What are the existing capacity pain points and challenges experienced by staff? How will this initiative address those challenges?
- What gap in information can be filled with training to meet your desired impact?
UNDERSTAND STAFF EXPECTATIONS AND GOALS (CONTINUED)

- What skills do staff need to build to ensure the success of this initiative?
- Ultimately, what behavior changes are you looking for in your staff?

CHOOSE THE RIGHT TRAINING PROGRAM

When choosing a training program, be sure to put the staff and student needs identified above at the center of your decision criteria. Find a training provider that will help your staff build the knowledge, skills and beliefs that lead to transformational change.

- How will you brief potential service providers on your vision, needs and desired outcomes?
- What metrics will you use to evaluate training-provider proposals (e.g., mission and value alignment, training approach, proposed budget)?
- How will you ensure training meets high-quality, evidence-based standards?

THINK AHEAD ABOUT SUSTAINING IMPACT

An in-house training and development program is only effective if trained staff, administration and leadership are able to practice, receive feedback and ultimately embed the learnings into their everyday practices.

- What adjustments can you make to ensure your staff has the time and space to fully participate in the training?
- How will trained staff have opportunities to practice and apply what they learned?
- How will you sustain progress, including the challenge of turnover of trained staff?
- How will you create feedback loops for students and staff to filter back what is working and what is not?

MEASURE SUCCESS

Be sure to develop a comprehensive plan for measuring success during the program design stage, so you’re equipped with the designated staff time and resources when it comes time for measurement.

- How will you measure success for staff and students?
- Do you have specific KPIs in place — and designated staff and workflows to ensure these KPIs are measured?
- How do you plan to communicate results with your staff? And your students?
Change Management Best Practices Checklist

New training and development initiatives will require a significant amount of change for your teams — in mindset, behavior, knowledge and skill development. The best laid plans incorporate a change management model from the very beginning to ensure individual staff members, managers and leadership all know what’s expected of them throughout the program implementation process and what the benefit of the change will be to each affected team member.

InsideTrack has developed these best practices based on years of implementing Prosci’s change management methodology and through identifying what steps and practices are most relevant for training and development initiatives. Complete the actionable checklist below as you embark on a student support transformation initiative to build staff capacity and elevate student outcomes. The checklist is divided into three distinct phases.

PHASE ONE: PREPARATION AND READINESS

Establish clear messaging about the change

☐ Answer the following questions at the organization and/or department level:

☐ Why are we implementing this training and development program?

☐ How will we define success throughout and after the training process?

☐ What is changing and why?

☐ What is not changing?

☐ What exactly do we expect staff to do differently in their work?

☐ What are the consequences of not changing?

☐ Create a communication plan about the new initiative using the answers generated from the questions above.

☐ Determine the impact of the change to each group and what they need. Some groups or roles may simply need to be informed, while other groups will be expected to change the way they work and apply a new approach.

☐ Ensure all leaders who oversee impacted individuals are informed and supportive of the change. Note: It’s important to make time for leaders to ask questions and develop buy-in.

☐ Ask leaders to communicate about the change with their teams using the defined communications plan.

Engage managers

☐ For any teams or individuals who will be asked to work differently, engage their managers.

☐ Make sure manager perspectives are considered before announcing the change.

☐ Elicit feedback from managers to forecast potential obstacles and points of resistance.

☐ Ask managers to discuss the change with their direct reports. Be sure managers are equipped to discuss how the change will impact each of their reports directly and what will be expected of them.

Engage leadership

☐ Evaluate who in the organization will be impacted by this program and relevant changes.
PHASE TWO: IMPLEMENTATION

Participate in the change
- Have a plan for how you’ll prepare staff to get the most out of training and how their managers and teams will reinforce those learnings on the job.
- Ensure leaders actively and visibly participate in the change — according to Prosci, this visible buy-in from the top will increase your likelihood for project success.
- Consider organizational leaders who would be appropriate to address teams directly. Plan for those individuals to host kick-off training events.
- Create a plan for managers to participate in learning activities alongside the teams experiencing the change. Teams look to their managers to understand the importance of a given initiative and for guidance on how new learning impacts their work.

Keep up with communication
- Continue to deliver communication about the change. Aim for every key message about the change to be covered five to seven times, using multiple communication channels, according to Prosci.
- Identify where you can have two-way communication to understand how the information is landing and to drive clarity and alignment.
- If large groups are impacted, consider quick surveys to see how awareness-building is going.

Set up feedback loops to understand progress
- Set performance metrics that leaders and managers can use to understand and measure impact at the organization, department and team levels.
- Assess what managers need in order to support their teams through the change. This includes facilitating regular conversation with managers and leadership to evaluate how teams are keeping up with the changes.
- Consider how you will seek feedback from learners to understand how they are being impacted by the new approach.

PHASE THREE: REINFORCEMENT

Identify successes and publicize them
- Encourage managers to build momentum by reflecting on team wins throughout the program implementation process.
- Create public opportunities across the organization for managers and teams to share wins as staff members apply changes.

Identify challenges or obstacles and address them
- Ensure leadership and managers understand that, even with the best-laid plans, challenges will occur once teams begin applying new skills, strategies and approaches.
- Create regular, clear and safe opportunities for employees to share their challenges.
- Provide dedicated support and resources to address employee challenges on an ongoing basis.

Clarify ongoing ownership
- Answer the following questions at the organization and/or department level:
  - What existing structures or organizational practices can keep the work alive?
  - What culture shifts have we made, and how can we reinforce those?
- Determine who will play what role in sustaining the new way of working.
Funding Options for Sustainable Student Support Initiatives

PREPARE TO ASK FOR FUNDING

As you prepare to fund a program to build your in-house student support capacity, evaluate the full scope and budget of your desired changes. A checklist of potential steps to secure your project’s funding needs could include:

- Assess and define your desired areas of improvement.
- Research all available resources for implementing your initiative, including in-house resources and external service providers.
- If you choose to bring in external support, choose a service provider that aligns with your vision and mission.
- Request a comprehensive proposal from your service provider (if applicable).
- Solidify your short- and long-term project budget.

So once you have defined your project and budget, how do you determine which funding sources are available to you? Below is a comprehensive list of possible funding sources, with questions to consider as you navigate a funding pathway that works for your institution.

IDEAS FOR FUNDING SOURCES

- College operating budget
- President/provost special projects fund
- System office
- College foundation
- Employer partnerships
- Local grants
- State grants
- Federal stimulus funds
- Federal grants
- Local/regional philanthropic partnerships
- National philanthropic partnerships

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER FOR EACH FUNDING SOURCE

College operating budget
- Is there money left in the current fiscal year? Or, when will you know that there’s money left in the current fiscal year budget that can be allocated?
- When does the budgeting process begin/end for the next fiscal year?
- Can a program be designed to get us to start now and grow later?

President/provost special projects fund
- If this is a strategic priority, what executive funds exist?
- If this is a strategic priority, can budget be pulled from a lower priority and put towards an in-house training and development program?

System office (if you are part of a system office)
- Do you have funding available to support one campus? Multiple campuses?
- Do you have an innovation fund?
System office (continued)
- Do you have a fund that supports historically underserved populations?

College foundation
- What’s the purpose of the college’s foundation and would they be interested in supporting this project?
- Where does the college foundation raise money from? Could you seek funding there?

Employer partnerships
- Are there local/regional employers who need you to graduate more students who are ready to enter the workforce (both hard and soft skills)? Would they pay for some or all of the coaching program?
- Do your large local employers have a foundation to support the local community?

Local grants
- Are there local economic-development grants?
- Are there local funding programs to improve equity/social mobility?

State grants
- Does the state have a degree/certificate attainment goal that the program can be linked with?
- Are there state-level economic-development grants?
- Are there state-level funding programs to improve equity/social mobility?

Federal stimulus funds
- Is there HEERF or other federal program funding available?

Federal grants
- Does your institution serve a low-income student population? (Title III)
- Is it a minority serving institution? (Title V)
- Is it a predominantly Black institution? (PBI)
- Is your program focused on using evidence-based approaches to equitably improve postsecondary student outcomes? (Postsecondary Student Success Program)
- Is the program for high-poverty middle/high school students getting ready for college? (GEARUP)
- Does your program support workforce development? (Perkins)

Local/regional philanthropic partnerships
- Are you focused on adult learners? Minority learners? Low-income learners? Single parents? Foster youth?
- Does your program have an economic development angle?
- What organizations in your region could fund community-enhancing programs?

National philanthropic partnerships
- Are you focused on adult learners? Minority learners? Low-income learners? Single parents? Foster youth?
- Does your program have a large-scale economic development angle?
- Are you willing to work with other institutions and organizations on a larger initiative?
About InsideTrack

InsideTrack is a mission-driven nonprofit that fuels positive change by advancing all learners to achieve their educational and career goals through the transformative power of coaching. We help individuals get the education they need to enhance well-being, create opportunity and secure meaningful employment — ultimately facilitating economic and social mobility. Since 2001, we have directly served more than 3.2 million students and 350 institutions to improve enrollment, retention, completion and career advancement.

To expand our impact in the postsecondary ecosystem, we also directly serve institutions and organizations by training and certifying their staff, administration and leaders in our evidence-based and research-confirmed coaching methodology. This equips teams with proven tools to sustain the impact of coaching in-house and help their learners thrive for years to come. InsideTrack coaching is a catalyst for transformational impact, both empowering students and the organizations who serve them.