Graduating from college is a challenge, particularly for low-income students and students who are older, have children, or have jobs. Such students often face personal, institutional, and structural barriers to success. Two of the most important factors that predict whether students will graduate from community college are the number of credits they attempt per semester and their academic performance in courses. However, most community college students enroll in fewer than 15 credits per semester, making it nearly impossible for them to graduate in two years. Many also struggle academically, failing to make satisfactory academic progress. As a result, their progress halts altogether and they lose financial aid. What can be done about these types of challenges?
Students who enroll full time, generally 12 credits per semester, are more likely to graduate than students who enroll part time, and those who attempt 15 credits fare even better. Encouraging students to enroll in more credits may lead to improved academic outcomes.

Federal regulations require colleges to establish standards to monitor students’ progress. Students who fail to meet a college’s satisfactory academic progress standards may be in jeopardy of losing their financial aid.

The project will also tackle other challenges that stand in the way of students’ graduation. These challenges will be defined in partnership with the colleges in the study through a behavioral diagnosis process.
HOW MIGHT INSIGHTS FROM BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE HELP IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION?

Rather than assuming people are purely rational, behavioral science offers a more realistic appreciation of human behavior. Behavioral science research has demonstrated that people’s attention, self-control, and cognitive resources are limited and often overwhelmed, making it unlikely that they will use all available information to make decisions.

Since “full-time” enrollment is defined by the federal government as 12 credits for financial aid purposes, students may be dissuaded from taking 15 credits.

Students may drop to part-time status because they believe they will beat the odds and still graduate.

Students may choose to work longer hours at their jobs for immediate income instead of making future income associated with their degrees a priority.

Insights from behavioral science help explain why some barriers to graduation are difficult to overcome. The Finish Line project will investigate what barriers may limit community college students’ ability to graduate. Existing research suggests that the concepts depicted here may apply. The Finish Line project’s diagnosis process will investigate these concepts and many others.
THE CENTER FOR APPLIED BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE (CABS) APPROACH

CABS uses a proven method to investigate problems and design solutions, which it will apply to refine its understanding of the barriers community college students face and to design innovative approaches to address them. MDRC is combining decades of research in postsecondary education with insights from behavioral science to generate promising solutions to the stubborn problem of low graduation rates.

- Define: Identify problems and define those problems in a neutral and measurable way.
- Clarify: Investigate the context to ensure there is a clear understanding of the barriers to success.
- Diagnose: Use insights from behavioral science to explain why the problems are occurring.
- Design: Create solutions that relate to the barriers uncovered in the diagnosis. Create prototypes of the ideas.
- Develop: Make the design ideas a reality. Determine how the design will be implemented.
- Test: Rigorously evaluate through randomized controlled trials to determine effectiveness.
- Finish Line: Graduation by Design
PARTNER COLLEGES

We are partnering with three colleges in the Minnesota system to begin the diagnosis process.

Rochester Community and Technical College
Inver Hills Community College
Normandale Community College

MDRC’s Center for Applied Behavioral Science (CABS) is an initiative that combines MDRC’s expertise in social and education programs with insights from behavioral science. CABS develops innovative, lower-cost interventions, tests their impact through experimentation, and provides technical assistance to programs incorporating behavioral insights.

For more information about the Finish Line project, email Caitlin Anzelone, project director, at Caitlin.Anzelone@mdrc.org.

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