EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PATHWAY TO COLLEGE ACHIEVEMENT

A Mixed-Methods Evaluation of the Male Student Success Initiative for Men of Color

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FUNDERS

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OVERVIEW

A ccess to college has increased substantially over the last 50 years, but student success—defined as the combination of academic achievement and degree or certificate completion—has largely remained stagnant. The gap between access and success is particularly noteworthy for male Black and Hispanic students, whose college completion rates lag those of White students and female students of any race or ethnicity.

To address these patterns, the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) created the Male Student Success Initiative (MSSI) in 2014. The program was designed to support male students of color throughout their academic journeys. In partnership with CCBC, MDRC, through its Men of Color College Achievement (MoCCA) project, evaluated a redesigned MSSI program that provided a culturally relevant student success course as well as comprehensive support services such as mentoring and academic development workshops.

An earlier report presented findings on how MSSI was implemented in 2019, the first year of the MoCCA study. This report presents findings from a mixed-methods evaluation that covered the entire program period from 2019 to spring 2022. The evaluation consisted of: (1) a randomized controlled trial to estimate the effects of MSSI on student academic progress, using a sample of 514 students, (2) implementation research that focused on how the program was put into effect, (3) qualitative research to obtain a deeper understanding of the student perspective and context, and (4) cost analyses. This report provides the first causal estimates of the effects of a college program targeting male students of color on academic outcomes.

KEY FINDINGS

• The study found that MSSI program components were implemented inconsistently. Despite the implementation challenges, however, MSSI program features created a substantially different experience for students in the program group compared with students in the control group.

• MSSI had positive effects on enrollment in a student orientation course and on passing the orientation course in the first semester—two measures of academic success. The program also had positive effects on increasing students’ ability to perform better in the courses they took after the MSSI program year. However, the program did not affect persistence or credits earned.

• Program impacts were concentrated among first-generation students.

• The average cost of the two-semester program was $885 per student.

It is important to note that this evaluation of MSSI occurred during two national crises that deeply affected the program, its staff, and its students. The first—the COVID-19 pandemic—forced CCBC to change the modality of learning as most classes moved to a virtual format. Second, the killing of unarmed Black people in 2020, including Ahmaud Arbery in February, Breonna Taylor in March, and George Floyd in May, and the resulting public demonstrations, had special salience for MSSI students and staff and also led to some campuswide changes at CCBC. That MSSI had positive effects in this extraordinarily challenging context suggests that the program might generate larger impacts with stronger implementation, though the study design does not permit a conclusive answer.
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The Authors
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Access to college has increased substantially over the last 50 years, but student success—defined as the combination of academic achievement and degree or certificate completion—has largely remained stagnant. The gap between access and success is particularly noteworthy for Black and Hispanic students, whose college completion rates lag those of White students. Male students of color also have lower rates of enrollment and completion than females.¹

The research literature is rich with theories about the challenges faced by male students of color who strive to achieve college success and completion. Three broad factors seem to have the most support for explaining the inequality in outcomes for these students: (1) insufficient college preparation,² (2) nonacademic barriers to persistence, including insufficient financial support,
psychological factors, and discriminatory practices, and (3) inadequate social, emotional, and campus support.

Increased attention has been devoted to these challenges both inside and outside of academia. To address those gaps, many community colleges and four-year institutions have developed programming specifically aimed at supporting male students of color or have joined institutional networks to share best practices for improving outcomes for this group. The underlying philosophy of most such programs is that providing these students with additional social, personal, and academic support can improve retention and completion rates. Most programs seek to achieve this not only by working with students as individuals but by forming a supportive community designed to encourage students to build both internal resources and external connections that can help them persist, succeed, and ultimately graduate.

While there is extensive qualitative literature on the implementation and value of these programs, there are few quantitative studies of the effect of this type of programming on academic outcomes. To that end, this report presents findings from a mixed-methods evaluation by MDRC of the Male Student Success Initiative (MSSI) at the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC). It provides the first causal estimates of the effects on academic outcomes of a college program targeting male students of color.

BACKGROUND OF THE MSSI PROGRAM

The MSSI program, which has operated at CCBC in Baltimore, Maryland, since 2014, is being evaluated by MDRC through its Men of Color College Achievement (MoCCA) project, in partnership with CCBC. MSSI was expanded in 2019 as part of the MoCCA study from a one-semester program to a two-semester program and extended to all students self-identifying as males of color, including Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and members of other ethnic groups. The program was envisioned to lead ultimately to graduation or transfer to a four-year institution by supporting noncognitive outcomes such as:

- Improved academic self-efficacy and the belief that one can achieve a specific academic goal.


An increase in help-seeking behaviors, such as asking for help from others, to improve students’ performance and understanding when they are struggling.

More positive adult relationships through which students accept the supports offered by advisors, counselors, and coaches.

A sense of belonging in the college community and a reduced sense of isolation through identification with the MSSI program.

Increased community and brotherhood through scheduled gatherings and other key events that help students foster relationships with each other and with MSSI staff members.

To accomplish this, MSSI was designed to have five program components: academic skills enrichment through a culturally contextualized section of Academic Development 101 (ACDV 101)—a required one-credit course; student support services, including referrals to tutors and other supports; assigned Success Mentors; leadership and professional development activities; and community and brotherhood activities. (See Figure ES.1 for more information about the program components.)

MDRC’s mixed-methods evaluation consisted of: (1) a randomized controlled trial to estimate the effects of MSSI on student academic progress, in which eligible students were randomly assigned to either a program group and offered MSSI services as well as all other support services available on campus, or to a control group that only had access to the support services available to all students at CCBC, (2) implementation research that focused on how the program was put into effect, fidelity to the design, service contrast, and service use by students, (3) qualitative
research to obtain a deeper understanding of the student perspective and context, and (4) cost analyses.  

An earlier report presented findings on how the MSSI program was implemented during the first year of the MoCCA study in 2019, using an early sample of students enrolled in the program. That report found that there was a limited set of resources to support the program and program leadership had little available time to oversee the program. The report also found that CCBC struggled to implement MSSI consistently. This report covers the entire program period from 2019 to spring 2022 and includes the full sample of 514 students.

FINDINGS

- **MSSI did not operate as intended. However, despite implementation challenges, the MSSI program features represented a substantially different experience for students in the program group compared with students in the control group who were not enrolled in the program.**

Students did not participate in MSSI services at expected levels before the pandemic, and difficulties in engaging students in program activities were particularly noticeable after the start of the pandemic. The program features were purposefully evolved over time and not all program components were implemented as originally planned. Yet, an analysis of qualitative data, including interviews with staff members, focus groups with program group students and control group students, classroom observations, and observations of other MSSI activities, shows that the intervention’s features represented a substantially different experience for students in the program group compared with students in the control group.

- **From the beginning of the study period, the MSSI program experienced staffing changes at all levels, including day-to-day management, program leadership, and Success Mentors, among those who interacted with the students.**

These changes affected all MSSI program components and may have influenced program implementation and implementation fidelity. In 2019, day-to-day program responsibilities and oversight of the Success Mentors were led by a faculty liaison—a full-time faculty member with six hours (the equivalent of two classes) allocated specifically for MSSI. Throughout 2019, the day-to-day management position experienced significant turnover. Two individuals left the role within the year, leaving the position vacant in each instance for a period of time. To stabilize
MSSI’s management and to address challenges arising from the limited capacity of the previous managers, a full-time staff member was hired in summer 2020. Furthermore, in late 2020-early 2021, MSSI program leadership transitioned from a dean to a vice president, which raised the program’s profile among college leadership.

- The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated difficulties in program operation and student engagement.

In March 2020, CCBC announced a travel ban for staff and students, cancelled all in-person classes, cancelled and postponed all major events on campus, and began preparation for remote instruction and teleworking. Classes largely remained remote through the end of the spring 2020 semester, and nearly all staff were directed to work from home or “be at home” if unable to telework.

MSSI students experienced various challenges adapting to the pandemic-induced virtual learning environment. Those who participated in focus groups after the start of the pandemic frequently noted their difficulties and displeasure with virtual learning. These students cited numerous instances of struggling to stay focused on learning course content amid the distractions of being at home such as other family members who were also attending online classes or working within close quarters. Some students missed having the face-to-face, dynamic interactions with other students and teachers that they were usually afforded in class. Others cited a lack of consistent communication with their professors, whom they would normally try to approach either before or right after class to receive immediate help, compared with waiting for them to respond to emails during the pandemic.

- The pandemic also disrupted the experimental evaluation of the MSSI model, creating two subsamples with different experiences and contributing to a smaller evaluation sample.

The evaluation period ran from 2019 through spring 2022, which resulted in some students in the study sample receiving services during the pre-pandemic period (2019) and others receiving services during the pandemic (2020 through spring 2022). Specifically, the study sample is divided between those who experienced the program in-person (204 students or about 40 percent of the sample) and those who experienced the program virtually during the pandemic (310 students or about 60 percent of the sample). See Figure ES.2 for the implementation timeline. As a result, while results for the full sample are reported, some analyses divide the sample into pre-pandemic and pandemic groupings.

- The MSSI program had positive effects on enrollment in the student orientation course and passing the orientation course in the first semester—two measures of academic success. The program also had positive effects on increasing students’ ability to perform better in the courses they took after the MSSI program year.

The MSSI program increased enrollment in ACDV by 10.3 percentage points (above the control group mean of 56.1 percent) during the first semester of the intervention and increased passing the course in the first semester by 15.2 percentage points (above the control group mean of 28.1
percent). The program did not affect enrollment, credits attempted, or credits earned in the first two semesters. (See Table ES.1.)

After the MSSI program year, the program increased students’ ability to perform better within courses they took.\(^7\) Program group members were 7.3 percentage points more likely (12.5 percent compared with 5.2 percent) to earn an A, B, or C in all courses relative to control group members in the fourth semester. When grades from the ACDV course—part of the intervention—are excluded from the grade calculations, program group members were 6.3 percentage points more likely than control group members to earn an A, B, or C in all other courses (12.3 percent compared with 6 percent) in the fourth semester. It is unclear why impacts were present in the fourth semester and not the third semester. There is no evidence that the MSSI program affected persistence or completion in any semester. (See Table ES.2.)

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7. Note that the sample is limited to the first three cohorts, as these students experienced a full post-program year at the time of reporting.
**Program impacts were concentrated among first-generation students.**

The intervention induced higher ACDV enrollment among first-generation students in the first semester (68.2 percent of program group members enrolled in ACDV in the first semester compared with 39.8 percent of control group members, a 28.4 percentage point increase). Non-first-generation students in the program group and the control group, on the other hand, had similar rates of enrollment in ACDV students (65.5 percent of non-first-generation program group members enrolled in ACDV in the first semester compared with 62.4 percent of control group members). The difference in first-semester ACDV enrollment between first-generation students and non-first-generation students is 23.5 percentage points (not shown in table), which is statistically significant.
### TABLE ES.2 Academic Outcomes After the MSSCI Program Year, Cohorts 1 to 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Program Group</th>
<th>Control Group</th>
<th>Impact</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd semester</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>32.9</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>0.234</td>
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<tr>
<td>4th semester</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>0.220</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credits attempted&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd semester</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.721</td>
<td>0.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>4th semester</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.639</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credits earned</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd semester</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.318</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th semester</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.531</td>
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<tr>
<td>Received A, B, or C in all courses (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd semester</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>0.639</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th semester</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>**0.048</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excluding ACDV</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received A, B, or C in all courses (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd semester</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>0.639</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th semester</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>*0.092</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample size (total = 256)</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>134</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sources:** MDRC calculations using transcript data from the Community College of Baltimore County.

**Notes:** Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent. Estimates may reflect rounding.

<sup>a</sup>Includes class withdrawals, dropped classes, and incompletes.

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- The average cost of the program was $885 per student. However, cost effectiveness cannot be determined at this point.

The estimated cost of Success Mentors varied from $29,101 in spring 2019 to $5,414 in fall 2021. This variation reflects the change in the number of Success Mentors across terms (from seven in spring 2019 to one to three in fall 2021). The amount of time Success Mentors spent on MSSCI activities also varied by term. In contrast, administrator costs were relatively stable over time. The cost per student ranged from a high of $1,474 per student in spring 2019 to a low of $273 per student in fall 2021 because of the variation noted above as well as the change in the number of program group students in their first or second terms. The overall average cost was $885 per student. This average cost per student was $1,046 in the pre-pandemic period and $815 in the pandemic period. Because there were no early impacts on persistence and completion, cost ef-
fectiveness calculations could not be performed. As a result, it is not possible to ascertain whether MSSI was more cost effective than the status quo.

CONCLUSION

This report provides the first causal estimates of the effect of a program for men of color on academic outcomes. The findings suggest that a program that combines academic advising and coaching, academic and study skills training, leadership training and career development, mentoring, and special events and workshops can improve some academic success measures, such as earning course grades of A, B, or C. The findings also suggest that such programming can have a bigger impact on outcomes for first-generation male students of color compared with their non-first-generation counterparts.

It is important to remember that the evaluation of MSSI was impacted by two significant changes in context. The first—the global COVID-19 pandemic—affect both students and administrators, and resulted in a change in learning modality as CCBC moved all classes online in the spring of 2020 to mitigate COVID-19 transmission rates. The second consisted of a rash of killings of unarmed Black people in 2020, including Ahmaud Arbery in February, Breonna Taylor in March, and George Floyd in May, as well as 17 more fatal police shootings of unarmed Black men across the country that year. These killings coincided with the pandemic and likely affected both students and MSSI staff differentially, as research suggests that the death of George Floyd resulted in widespread anger and sadness, which was most pronounced among Black Americans.

This challenging context, combined with the implementation challenges, suggest that the program has promise to generate larger impacts with stronger implementation, though the study design does not permit a conclusive answer.

8. The number of police shootings of unarmed Black men are author’s calculations using the fatal shootings database compiled by The Washington Post (“Fatal Force: 1,047 People Have Been Shot and Killed by Police in the Past Year,” Accessed July 5, 2022, website: https://www.washingtonpost/data-police-shootings). Other research places the figure of unarmed Black men shot by police at 22 per year (Robert VerBruggen, Fatal Police Shootings and Race: A Review of the Evidence and Suggestions for Future Research (New York: Manhattan Institute, 2022)).

ABOUT MDRC

MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization, is committed to finding solutions to some of the most difficult problems facing the nation. We aim to reduce poverty and bolster economic mobility; improve early child development, public education, and pathways from high school to college completion and careers; and reduce inequities in the criminal justice system. Our partners include public agencies and school systems, nonprofit and community-based organizations, private philanthropies, and others who are creating opportunity for individuals, families, and communities.

Founded in 1974, MDRC builds and applies evidence about changes in policy and practice that can improve the well-being of people who are economically disadvantaged. In service of this goal, we work alongside our programmatic partners and the people they serve to identify and design more effective and equitable approaches. We work with them to strengthen the impact of those approaches. And we work with them to evaluate policies or practices using the highest research standards. Our staff members have an unusual combination of research and organizational experience, with expertise in the latest qualitative and quantitative research methods, data science, behavioral science, culturally responsive practices, and collaborative design and program improvement processes. To disseminate what we learn, we actively engage with policymakers, practitioners, public and private funders, and others to apply the best evidence available to the decisions they are making.

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