



To: Sam Parmekar, Committee Administrator,
Minnesota Senate Higher Education Committee

From: MHEC Research Staff

Date: February 4, 2025 (updated version)

RE: State Support for College Access and Success Initiatives

The following information is a response to a research request from Sam Parmekar concerning how states structure and support college access and success initiatives. The response focuses on three questions:

- 1) How do states structure their college access and success work, including the number of full-time equivalent staff (FTEs), where they place FTEs throughout the state, and the focus of their work?
- 2) How much money for college access and success initiatives is appropriated to state agencies through the legislature?
- 3) What has research found with regards to effective school counseling for college-going?

Overview of Research Methodology

To address the inquiry into state-level organization and appropriations for college access and success initiatives, MHEC research staff developed and administered a survey targeting members of the National Association of State Student Grant and Aid Programs (NASSGAP)¹ in the 12 Midwestern states (see the Appendix for the survey instrument). The survey received responses from 11 states, yielding a 92% response rate.

Table 1 on page 2 lists the state agencies that participated in the survey. In addition to the survey, the question regarding the effectiveness of school counseling for college-going was explored through a synthesis of peer-reviewed research.

TABLE 1: State Agencies Represented in Survey Sample

State	State Agency
IL	Illinois Student Assistance Commission
IN	Indiana Commission for Higher Education
IA	Iowa College Aid
KS	Kansas Board of Regents
MI	Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential
MN	Minnesota Office of Higher Education
MO	Missouri Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development
OH	Ohio Department of Higher Education
WI	Higher Educational Aids Board

¹ NASSGAP is an organization comprised of state higher education agencies responsible for administering student financial aid programs. SD is the only Midwest state to not have a NASSGAP representative but was provided access to the survey.

Types of College Access and Success Work

Survey respondents were asked to indicate whether their agency engages in any of the following types of college access and success work: outreach, coordination, and recruitment; test preparation (ACT/SAT); college and career counseling; financial aid information and support; and FAFSA completion assistance. Of the 11 state agencies that responded to the survey, 10 reported overseeing at least one of these initiatives.

Table 2 shows that outreach, financial aid support, and FAFSA completion assistance are the most common areas of focus, though fewer agencies support college and career counseling and test preparation. Key findings include:

- Outreach, coordination, and recruitment: Eight agencies reported engaging in activities such as collaborating with school districts to promote college access or coordinating with various stakeholders on college access services.
- Test preparation (ACT/SAT): No agencies reported offering support for test preparation.
- College and Career Counseling: Three agencies reported providing college and career counseling services.
- Financial aid information and support: Eight agencies support efforts to help students understand and access financial resources for higher education.
- FAFSA completion assistance: Seven agencies reported providing direct support to students for FAFSA completion. Three of those states—Illinois, Indiana, and Nebraska—have implemented a Universal FAFSA policy, requiring all high school seniors to complete the FAFSA prior to graduation. Michigan is also in the process of developing or planning the implementation of such a policy.

TABLE 2: Types of College Access and Success Work at State Agencies

	IL	IN	IA	KS	MI	MN	MO	NE	ND	OH	WI	Total
FAFSA Completion Assistance	X	X		X	X	X	X	X				7
Financial Aid Information and Support	X	X	X	X	X	X	X				X	8
College & Career Counseling	X	X				X						3
Test Preparation (SAT/ACT)												0
Outreach, Coordination, and Recruitment	X	X	X		X	X	X		X	X		8

Specific Agency Activities for College Access and Success

Beyond the general types of college access and success work within their agency, survey respondents identified specific activities or operations, such as hosting a webinar or implementing a text messaging campaign.

Table 3 displays the various activities that agencies are implementing to support their college access and success work and initiatives.

- The most common activities are providing training for high school counselors on FAFSA and college applications (7 agencies), creating college and financial aid information guides (7 agencies), organizing FAFSA completion events (7 agencies), and hosting webinars on college admission and financial aid processes (6 agencies).
- The administration of a publicly available dashboard tracking FAFSA completion was another common activity (5 agencies).
- Fewer agencies are involved in text messaging campaigns (2 agencies), offer grants or financial incentives for FAFSA completion programs (3 agencies), or provide support to summer bridge programs (2 agencies).

TABLE 3: Agency Activities to Support College Access and Success Initiatives

	IL	IN	IA	KS	MI	MN	MO	NE	ND	OH	WI	Total
Text messaging campaigns targeting students and families	X		X									2
Training on college and FAFSA applications for high school counselors	X	X	X	X	X	X	X					7
Attendance at college fairs	X		X	X	X	X	X					6
Organizing FAFSA completion events (e.g. workshops or FAFSA nights at high schools)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X					7
Hosting webinars or information sessions on college admissions and financial aid processes	X		X	X	X	X					X	6
Providing summer bridge activities to prepare students for college			X			X						2
Creating college and financial aid information guides	X	X	X	X	X	X	X					7
Offering grants to school districts or high schools to financially support their college access and success programs		X	X			X						3
Offering stipends or financial incentives to schools for achieving FAFSA completion goals					X							1
Maintaining publicly available FAFSA completion dashboards	X	X	X		X	X						5

State Appropriated Funding and External Funding Sources

Table 4 displays the funding support for agencies' activities on college access and success initiatives. Key findings include:

- Seven agencies received state appropriations in the current fiscal year, which ranged from about \$600,000 to \$27,000,000.
- Agencies used state funding for various activities. Kansas directed its funding to public 4-year and 2-year institutions for outreach, marketing, and retention services, while Michigan allocated \$10 million of its \$21 million appropriation to grant funding for school districts to implement a Universal FAFSA policy and provide FAFSA completion services. Illinois used its funding for marketing, outreach, training, and research, whereas Iowa, Minnesota, and Missouri focused their appropriations primarily on marketing, outreach, and FAFSA completion initiatives.
- Nebraska, North Dakota, and Wisconsin reported not receiving state funding for college access and success initiatives.
- Most states supplement efforts with external funding sources. Federal programs, including TRIO, GEAR UP, and AmeriCorps, are the most common external funding sources. Iowa and Illinois also leverage private foundation grants and revenue from agency programs (e.g., fees, service charges, loan collection) to support their initiatives.

TABLE 4: Funding for College Access and Success Work in the Midwest

State	Receive State Funding?	State Funding Amount	How does the funding support college access and success programs?	Additional External Funding Sources
IL	Yes	\$7,840,000	Marketing, Outreach, Training, and Research	Federal funding (e.g., TRIO, GEAR UP, AmeriCorps, ED Grant)
IN	Unsure			Nonprofit or community organization funding
IA	Yes	\$591,833	Marketing, Outreach, Training, and Financial Aid support	Federal funding (e.g., TRIO, GEAR UP, AmeriCorps, ED Grant); Private foundation grant; Revenue from agency programs (e.g. fees, service charges, loan collection)
KS	Yes	\$27,037,700	Provided to public universities for marketing, outreach, and retention services	Revenue from agency programs (e.g. fees, service charges, loan collection)
MI	Yes	\$20,980,000	Marketing, Outreach, and Grant Stipends for FAFSA completion	Federal funding (e.g., TRIO, GEAR UP, AmeriCorps, ED Grant); Nonprofit or community organization funding
MN	Yes	\$2,600,000	Marketing, Outreach, and grant to a non-profit	Federal funding (e.g., TRIO, GEAR UP, AmeriCorps, ED Grant); Nonprofit or community organization funding
MO	Yes	\$640,000	Marketing and Outreach	
NE	No			
ND	No			Nonprofit or community organization funding
OH	Yes	\$1,000,000	Marketing and Outreach for FAFSA completion	Federal funding (e.g., TRIO, GEAR UP, AmeriCorps, ED Grant); Nonprofit or community organization funding
WI	No			

Staff Support for College Access and Success Work

Table 5 displays state-reported staffing and collaboration with external organizations that provide college access and success services. Key findings include:

- Six state agencies have employees dedicated to college access and success initiatives, though the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) employees ranged from 5 to 90.
- Agencies with dedicated FTEs for college access and success initiatives varied in activity focus.
 - Illinois had the largest number, with 90 FTEs, including 6 focused on professional development for counselors and 84 on broader college access tasks like FAFSA completion and financial aid support.
 - Iowa allocated 20 FTEs across grants, scholarships, and access initiatives.
 - Indiana employed 11 FTEs for FAFSA completion, financial aid support, and outreach.
 - Michigan had 10 FTEs, including 1 FAFSA specialist and 9 outreach representatives.
 - Minnesota had 20 FTEs for GEAR UP and college outreach activities.
 - Missouri employed 5 FTEs for comprehensive outreach activities.
- The location of FTEs dedicated to college access and success initiatives varied by state.
 - Illinois distributed its 90 FTEs across regions aligned with community college districts.
 - Indiana placed 8 FTEs in high schools across the state and retained 3 in a centralized state agency office.
 - Iowa's 20 FTEs were all centralized within the state agency, relying on electronic communication for outreach.
 - Missouri positioned some FTEs in a central office and others across regional areas.
 - Michigan's 10 FTEs operated remotely.
 - Minnesota has FTEs in a central office and affiliated staff in high schools for GEAR UP.
- Nine states reported collaborating with external organizations to provide college access and success services.
 - Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, and Ohio provided state funding to these external partners.
 - Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri collaborated without offering direct financial support. States such as Indiana, Minnesota, and Wisconsin reported collaboration but were unsure if state funding was provided.

Table 5: Staff Support for College Access and Success Work

State	Have FTEs for college access and success initiatives? (# of FTEs)	FTEs focus	FTEs location	Collaborate with external organization/s?	External organization/s receive state funding?
IL	Yes - 90	6 focused on professional development and training for college access practitioners and counselors, 84 focused on all aspects of college access including providing financial aid information and support, FAFSA completion, admissions application completion, etc.	Located across the state of Illinois in regions coinciding with community college districts.	Yes	No

IN	Yes - 11	1 on college success grant coaches, 2 working on FAFSA completion and college access, 4 financial aid support staff that assist with FAFSA completion and college access via phones/emails.	Centralized state agency office and 8 regions across the state (working in high schools).	Yes	Unsure
IA	Yes - 20	4.75 grants and scholarships; 3.75 postsecondary authorization; 5.75 GEAR UP; 5.75 broad access/success;	Centralized state agency	Yes	No
KS	No			Yes	Yes
MI	Yes - 10	1 FAFSA Specialist and 9 Outreach Representatives	Remotely within State Agency	Yes	Yes
MN	Yes - 20	GEAR UP; Direct Admissions Staff; Comms/Outreach	Centralized state agency	Yes	Yes
MO	Yes - 5	All focused on comprehensive outreach, including FAFSA completion and planning and paying for college.	Some in central office, some regions of the state.	Yes	No
NE	No			No	No
ND	No			No	Unsure
OH	No			Yes	Yes
WI	No			Yes	Unsure

Research on College Access Interventions in High School

Past research has identified six primary interventions to increase college-going rates in high school: (1) information-only interventions, (2) text message nudge campaigns, (3) high school counseling, (4) college advising, coaching, and mentoring, (5) virtual college advising, and (6) school-based college-going programs. Below is a summary of key findings.

- **Information-Only Interventions:** These "light-touch" approaches yield mixed results. General efforts like mailing college-related materials or displaying posters about financial aid programs show no impact on FAFSA completion or college enrollment rates (Cummings, 2024; Gurantz et al., 2021; Hyman, 2020). However, personalized information tailored to an individual's college options or financial aid eligibility has increased college enrollment for high-achieving, low-income students (Dynarski et al., 2021; Hoxby & Turner, 2013).
- **Text Message Interventions:** Small-scale campaigns targeting specific populations, such as school districts, have proven effective in increasing FAFSA filing rates, reducing summer melt, and boosting college enrollment (Avery et al., 2021; Castleman et al., 2012, 2014; Page et al., 2020). However, national implementations through platforms like the Common Application and the College Board show no significant impact (Bird et al., 2021). The success of text campaigns may depend on targeting and implementation scale.
- **High School Counseling:** Despite challenges such as high caseloads and competing priorities, school counseling is positively associated with FAFSA submission (Fitzpatrick, 2020), college application rates (Bryan et al., 2011; Robinson & Roksa, 2016), and enrollment rates (Belasco, 2013; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014). Expanding counselor capacity could amplify these benefits.
- **College Advising, Coaching, and Mentoring:** Some school districts and communities have introduced non-profit organizations and partnerships between high schools and colleges to provide specialized college advisors, coaches, and mentors, focusing on guiding students through the college application and enrollment processes. These dedicated college-going advisors has been found to improve college decision-making among disadvantaged high school students, including those from lower-income backgrounds, racially and ethnically underrepresented groups, and first-generation students (Avery, 2013; Bettinger & Evans, 2019; Castleman et al., 2015).

- **Virtual Advising:** In the absence of in-person advising, virtual or remote advising through video-based face-to-face sessions, emails, phone calls, or text messaging has been shown to provide positive college enrollment outcomes (Gurantz et al., 2020; Sullivan et al., 2021). However, the impacts of this type of intervention have been limited to students identified as highly motivated and high-achieving. Additionally, when comparing the effects of remote advising to in-person advising, the outcomes of remote advising are smaller.
- **School-Based College-Going Programs:** Comprehensive school-based approaches such as integrating the college-going process within the school curriculum or staffed resource centers have increased rates of FAFSA filing and enrollment (Cunha et al., 2018; Oreopoulos & Ford, 2019). However, these programs require further study to assess scalability across diverse school contexts.

Conclusion

This response addresses the three key questions posed regarding how states structure their college access and success initiatives, the funding appropriated for these efforts, and the effectiveness of interventions like school counseling. The survey findings indicate a wide range of approaches and levels of support for college access and success initiatives across the 11 Midwestern states. While most states prioritize FAFSA completion and financial aid support, variations exist in the allocation of resources, staffing, and the extent of collaboration with external organizations.

Research on high school interventions to improve college-going rates highlights six primary approaches: information-only interventions, text message campaigns, high school counseling, college advising and mentoring, virtual advising, and school-based college-going programs. Findings indicate mixed outcomes for "light-touch" strategies like information-only interventions and broad text message campaigns, with effectiveness increasing when personalized information or targeted outreach is provided. School counseling has been shown to positively influence FAFSA completion, college applications, and enrollment, although large caseloads often limit counselors' ability to provide comprehensive support. Programs involving dedicated college advisors or coaches, particularly for disadvantaged students, have demonstrated positive effects on college decision-making and enrollment. Virtual advising has shown promise, though its impact is generally smaller compared to in-person advising. Lastly, integrated, school-based college-going initiatives have increased financial aid applications and enrollment, though more research is needed to fully understand their scalability. These findings suggest that personalized and targeted support strategies are key to improving college access outcomes.

If there are additional questions, please feel free to contact MHEC Research staff for assistance.

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Appendix: Survey Instrument

Section 1: General

Information State Name:

Agency Name:

Primary Contact Information:

- Name:
- Position:
- Email:

Section 2: Structure of College Access and Success Initiatives

1. Does your state agency oversee college access and success initiatives, including FAFSA completion?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

2. Does your state have a universal FAFSA policy, where all high school seniors are expected to complete the FAFSA as part of college access initiatives?

- Yes
- No
- In Development/Planned
- Unsure

3. How is your agency's college access and success work structured?

-Check all that apply:

- FAFSA Completion Assistance
- Financial Aid Information and Support
- College & Career Counseling
- Test Preparation (SAT/ACT)
- Outreach and Recruitment
- Other (please specify): _____

4. Does your agency do any of the following activities to support college access and success initiatives:

-Check all that apply:

- Text messaging campaigns targeting students and families
- Training on college and FAFSA applications for high school counselors
- Attendance at college fairs
- Organizing FAFSA completion events (e.g. workshops or "FAFSA nights" at high schools)
- Hosting webinars or information sessions on college admissions and financial aid processes
- Providing summer bridge activities to prepare students for college
- Creating college and financial aid information guides
- Offering grants to school districts or high schools to financially support their college access and success programs
- Offering stipends or financial incentives to schools for achieving FAFSA completion goals
- Maintaining publicly available FAFSA completion dashboards
- Other (please specify): _____

5. Does your agency have dedicated Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs) for college access and success initiatives, including FAFSA completion?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

6. If yes, please provide the following details for FTEs involved in college access and FAFSA completion work:

- Total Number of FTEs:
- FTE Roles and Responsibilities
 - (Example: 5 FTEs focused on FAFSA completion, 3 FTEs on college and career counseling, etc.)
- FTE Placement
 - (Briefly describe where these FTEs are located - e.g. centralized at the state agency, regional offices, embedding within a high school or college, etc.)

Section 3: Funding for College Access and Success Work

1. For the current fiscal year (July 1, 2024 - June 30, 2025), does your agency receive funding appropriated by the state legislature specifically for college access and success initiatives?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Unsure
2. If yes, please specify the amount allocated for the current fiscal year:
3. How does the funding support college access and success programs? (Open-ended question for a summary)
4. Other than state appropriations, has your agency received funding from other sources to support college access and success initiatives for this current fiscal year (July 1, 2024 - June 30, 2025)?
-Check all that apply
 - Federal funding (e.g., TRIO, GEAR UP, AmeriCorps, ED Grant)
 - Private foundation grant
 - Corporate sponsorship or partnerships
 - Nonprofit or community organization funding
 - Revenue from agency programs (e.g. fees, service charges, loan collection)
 - Other (please specify):
5. If applicable, please describe how these additional funds are used to support college access and success initiatives: (Open-ended for specific uses, programs supported, or funding amounts)

Section 4: External Organizations and Partnerships

1. Are there organizations within your state, outside of your agency, that provide college access and success programs or services?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Unsure
2. If yes, please list some of the main organizations that provide these programs or services:
3. What types of services do these organizations primarily offer?
-Check all that apply:
 - FAFSA Completion Assistance
 - Financial Aid Information and Support
 - College & Career Counseling
 - Test Preparation (SAT/ACT)
 - Outreach and Recruitment
 - Other (please specify): _____
4. Does your agency collaborate or coordinate with these organizations to deliver college access and success programs?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Unsure
5. If yes, please describe the nature of these partnerships:
6. Did any of these organizations receive funding from state appropriations this fiscal year to support college access and success initiatives?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Unsure
7. If yes, please list some of these organizations and briefly describe the type of support they provide with state-appropriated funds: