



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA  
STATE COUNCIL OF HIGHER EDUCATION FOR VIRGINIA


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**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** The Honorable Barry Knight, Chair, House Appropriations Committee  
The Honorable Janet Howell, Co-Chair, Senate Finance and Appropriations Committee  
The Honorable George Barker, Co-Chair, Senate Finance and Appropriations Committee

**FROM:** Peter Blake 

**DATE:** July 19, 2023

**SUBJECT:** Report on plan to address recruitment and retention of Pell-eligible students

In response to the requirement articulated in the 2022 Act of Assembly, Chapter 2, Item 142 M.2, staff of the State Council of Higher Education (SCHEV) provides the attached final report developed by HCM Strategists (HCM). This report summarizes the steps, findings and recommendations completed through the project. SCHEV thanks HCM for its work throughout the process and agrees with the findings and recommendations provided in the report. SCHEV offers the following additional information and commentary.

SCHEV secured HCM's services in November 2022 and began working with the consultant in December 2022; institutional meetings and student focus groups commenced in January 2023. An addendum to this report, anticipated later this summer, will be provided once sub-contractors complete work on measures to be used in the annual and final reviews.

The Commonwealth appropriated \$25 million in 2023-24 to fund proposals from the public four-year institutions to address either enrollment or retention initiatives. SCHEV and HCM have identified initiatives for each of the 15 senior institutions totaling approximately \$24.4 million over a period of four years. The remaining funds are set aside to address funding shortages or proposal enhancements that may take place over the course of the four years of implementation.

SCHEV notes that, due to increased attention on enrollment trends and projections generally and on gaps in participation rates specifically, many of the institutions have been engaged in various levels of review of enrollment and retention of low-income students. With

each public four-year institution securing approval for a four-year initiative, this program assures an on-going comprehensive review of processes and procedures supporting overall success for low-income students.

During this process, several access institutions (low-income serving) expressed concerns about selective institutions competing for the same students and creating additional enrollment challenges. To minimize the impact, HCM identified low-income-serving high schools that have college-going rates that are lower than expected given demonstrated academic preparation levels. Increased institutional attention on these high schools could reach college-ready students who would not normally seek higher education.

Although enrollment and retention of low-income students are treated by this exercise as individual measures, SCHEV has observed that initiatives designed primarily around increasing enrollments – such as financial aid offers, in-person visits and summer bridge programs – also have a positive impact on retention; and programs designed specifically for retention – financial aid, student support services and increased tutoring – have a direct impact in moving students toward graduation. Institutions were made aware of the measures in which they individually are below the state average and that these measures would be featured prominently in the annual and final reviews. Institutions were then able to submit proposals that best met their goals.

Part of the study included student focus group. These groups revealed that pre-admission communication from the institution can set an important tone for prospective students. Focus group participants expressed a need for a welcoming and positive message but did not want to be targets of a marketing pitch that made them feel that they were a “commodity.” This observation extended to financial aid award notifications. While SCHEV has worked with institutions to standardize terminology and calculations, the more nuanced work remains to achieve the right tone and messaging that connects and informs low-income, often first-generation, students.

Again, SCHEV thanks HCM for its central role and contribution to this project. We trust that the report findings and the results over the next four years will improve upon the Commonwealth’s already strong nationwide standing. Improvement is critical and yet possible in the participation and overall success of low-income students. This project confirms the Commonwealth’s commitment to that end.

Attachment

cc: April Kees, Staff Director, Senate Finance and Appropriations Committee  
Anne E. Oman, Staff Director, House Appropriations Committee



# Improving Efforts to Recruit and Retain Pell-eligible Students in Virginia

## Final Report

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### PREPARED FOR

Governor Glenn Youngkin  
The General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia  
State Council for Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV)

### DATE

JULY 1, 2023

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# Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
Project Deliverables .....	2
Student Focus Groups .....	4
PROSPER Matrix.....	4
Data Analysis .....	6
Data Dashboard.....	7
Pell-recipient Enrollment at Public Virginia Institutions with Below-average Pell Enrollment.....	7
SCHEV RFP and Institution Proposals .....	10
Scoring, Award Amounts, and Future Evaluations .....	17
Recommendations.....	18
The Role of the Commonwealth.....	18
Recommendations for Institutions.....	19
About HCM Strategists .....	25
Project Team .....	25
References .....	27
Appendix – Institutional Survey .....	32

## Introduction

By many objective measures, Virginia has one of the nation's strongest public higher education systems. With the second highest postsecondary graduation rate in the U.S., Virginia generates \$21 in state revenue for every \$1 of state investment in higher education, boasts a \$36 million annual contribution to its economic output from its higher education system, and is considered a top-performing higher education system by 82% of Virginians ([Virginia Business Higher Education Council](#)). Yet, despite these notable achievements, economic equity and opportunity remain the Achilles heel of Virginia's higher education system; research shows that many of the state's postsecondary institutions do not sufficiently serve low-income students and Pell Grant recipients, "leading to 'de facto economic segregation' in higher education" ([SCHEV, 2021](#)).

To address this challenge and enhance efforts to recruit and retain students eligible for the Pell Grant, the Virginia General Assembly established a competitive grant program during the 2022 session, with a budget of \$250,000 for FY2023 and \$25 million allocated for FY2024. Institutions that wish to receive funding must demonstrate their commitment to restructuring outreach, recruitment, admission and retention procedures. The funds can be used to support initiatives that attract, enroll and retain low-income students.

The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) was tasked with collaborating with institutions that have lower-than-average enrollment of Pell-eligible students to create customized plans for recruiting and retaining low-income students. Additionally, SCHEV was instructed to partner with a nationally recognized consultant who specializes in this area. Following a request for proposal (RFP) process, [HCM Strategists](#) (HCM) and its partners were chosen by SCHEV to implement the initial year's activities related to the initiative.

## Project Deliverables

### INSTITUTION INTERVIEWS AND SURVEY

HCM carried out comprehensive one-on-one interviews with the seven Virginia institutions exhibiting lower-than-average Pell student enrollment to evaluate their recruitment and retention strategies for low-income students. The institutions interviewed were: Christopher Newport University (CNU), James Madison University (JMU), University of Mary Washington (UMW), University of Virginia (UVA), Virginia Military Institute (VMI), Virginia Tech (VT), and William & Mary (W&M). The objective was to listen to the institutions, help them to understand their current practices and potentially illuminate strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement to serve Pell students as they prepared to submit proposals for the SCHEV grant opportunity. Subsequently, HCM designed and distributed a survey to all 15 public four-year institutions in Virginia, collecting data on current initiatives for low-income students, challenges faced, institutional needs and desired future outcomes to enhance support for this demographic.

### **Key Findings from Interviews with the Seven Institutions with Below-average Pell Student Enrollment**

**Need-Blind Admissions:** All the institutions indicated a need-blind admissions process, with an inability to identify Pell-eligible students during the application review period. The information is not available until a student is admitted. After admission, financial aid offices assess financial need. Admissions staff review student demographic information and find it useful to be knowledgeable about Virginia's demographically under-represented areas to gauge students' financial status. Some institutions also take first-generation status into consideration.

**Data Use for Communications and Decision-Making:** Several of the institutions interviewed did not appear to use data to inform communications and decision-making regarding Pell-eligible student success and retention specifically. But this is an area that some are beginning to prioritize and are using their student data systems to aid in that work, e.g. EAB Care Network through Navigate and PeopleSoft's student database. JMU maintains robust data on Pell-eligible retention and graduation data compared to non-Pell and has a public facing [website](#).

**Outreach Strategies:** The institutions have similar outreach strategies for low-income students (except for VMI, which is currently making changes to its outreach, marketing and recruitment approach). Many of them mentioned

their participation in college fairs and events such as the Virginia college tours. Their recruitment strategies involve traveling and holding events at under-resourced/under-served high schools. Some institutions utilize lists to target under-served communities and welcome more information from the state about high achieving, low-income students. Other notable outreach/marketing tactics include:

- Strong participation in Virginia College Application Week;
- Collaboration with college advisors in the public school system;
- Strategic communications on FAFSA and financial aid packages;
- Joined the Common App;
- Application Fee Waivers; and
- Virginia College Advising Corps (UVA-sponsored for all of VA).

During discussions with the seven institutions, it became clear that for some, the need to focus on enrolling and assisting Pell-eligible students had been a years' long and ongoing effort. At others, however, relatively little concentrated effort had been undertaken. Three of the seven (and one additional Virginia institution) have joined a national conversation aimed at working to expand access and opportunity for highly talented lower-income students, the [American Talent Initiative](#).

*Focus on First-Generation Students:* Several institutions pointed to established on-campus centers for first-generation students. Common themes and services offered in these first-generation centers and first-year services include:

- Specialized advising/mentoring;
- Extensive orientation programs or summer bridge programs;
- Academic support/tutoring services;
- Financial counseling/services; and
- Wellness support.

*First-Year Student Supports:* Institutions indicated they had first-year services geared toward all students that benefited first-generation and Pell-eligible students. Specific successful retention strategies referenced by institutions include:

- Living learning communities when asked about cohesive first-year classes;
- Retention and graduation group counseling;
- Mid-term advising alerts;
- Periodic monitoring;
- Summer bridge programs were noted as effective by institutions that had them, with most wanting to expand but unable to with existing resources based on cost; and
- Emergency funding.

Following interviews with the seven institutions, HCM prepared a survey for distribution to all 15 public four-year institutions (Appendix). The survey included both closed- and open-ended questions about institutional strategies and practices surrounding recruitment/enrollment and retention/completion. The survey received 100 percent participation from the institutions, and responses were used to gain a better understanding of institutional practices as well as to populate the PROSPER Matrix (more fully described below).

According to survey results, despite the selectivity and need-blind admissions processes, institutions noted they are trying to target outreach to students from low-income families. About half of the institutions are employing unique strategies to recruit these students. Institutions described creative strategies they would like to institute with additional resources and staffing capacity. Institutions indicated they are employing retention and completion strategies for all undergraduate students. All institutions described common strategies employed to retain students and several noted unique interventions and supports. While institutions measure their students' progress, they did not indicate in the survey that they generally measure the impact of specific interventions.

## STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS

[Edge Research](#) (Edge), in collaboration with HCM, conducted three 90-minute virtual focus groups with a diverse set of prospective low-income students to uncover the factors influencing their decisions about enrolling and completing a degree at one of the Commonwealth's public universities. During the focus groups, participants discussed opportunities and barriers to higher education and the emotions and rationale behind their decisions against enrolling or continuing in Virginia's higher education system.

In developing the recruitment screener, HCM and Edge worked closely to ensure focus group participants met essential criteria, reflecting the diversity within the broadly defined category of low-income individuals. Participants had graduated from high school but had not graduated from a four-year public university, including adults with no college experience, some four-year college experience and community college students. One group was conducted among Black adults, while the other two groups included a mix of races and ethnicities. Edge conducted all focus groups virtually, limiting them to no more than eight participants per session to facilitate open sharing of perspectives.

HCM and Edge collaborated with SCHEV on the content of the focus group discussions to establish key objectives and prioritize topics. SCHEV had the opportunity to review and provide comments on the focus group guide before its finalization. SCHEV was encouraged to watch the groups in real-time, with live-streaming and online recordings available for those who were unable to watch live.

Upon completing data collection, Edge shared key findings, detailed results with supporting quotations, and implications and recommendations to inform future strategy and outreach. Edge presented results to multiple stakeholder audiences, ensuring all parties were aligned in utilizing the data to better serve Virginia's Pell-eligible and low-income students.

### **Key Findings**

*Facing a Series of Obstacles:* Respondents described the path to college as a series of obstacles of varying sizes. They noted the following challenges (in no particular order): Information gathering, the application process, finances/cost, financial aid process, family responsibilities, choosing classes/major, managing deadlines, campus culture, socializing and mental health. Uncertainty remained a common thread throughout the discussions. These individuals carry more doubt than confidence when it comes to making decisions about their futures, especially as it relates to education and potentially earning a degree. Several of these respondents view college education from the perspective of someone on the "outside looking in," and every obstacle on this path to a four-year degree reinforces that dynamic.

*Prioritizing value:* Respondents often ask, "Is it worth it?" when thinking about additional education. This question speaks to concerns about cost, return on investment (of time and/or money) and other challenges they may face or have faced when on campus. Campus culture is not an immediate concern or criterion when these respondents *initially* assess their "next step"; however, those with some experience at a four-year institution deem it a major consideration for their likelihood of success in future educational endeavors.

*Desire for clear information and support:* Respondents noted that communications from a four-year university should find a balance between celebrating achievements and providing easy to understand information about financial aid and next steps. While financial help remains a primary need, mentoring and guidance through the process are critical. The respondents noted that mentoring encompasses several areas of assistance, so institutions should clearly describe help available and how students can access it.

## PROSPER MATRIX

As part of Deliverable 2, HCM developed the [Proven Strategies and Practices to Enhance Recruitment](#) matrix (PROSPER Matrix). This resource provides a comprehensive overview of state- and institution-led activities in Virginia and across the U.S. that demonstrate a positive impact on recruiting and retaining low-income students.

The Matrix is a key component of a collection of user-friendly and visually oriented resources that HCM compiled for each participating institution's self-assessment process. The resource draws on data from existing research and best practices across the U.S. to provide reliable and sustainable methods for reaching economically disadvantaged Virginians.

To gather information on Virginia-specific practices, HCM used the information collected from the interviews with each of the seven participating institutions, the electronic survey administered to all 15 public universities and solicited direct feedback on an earlier draft of the Matrix. For national best practices, HCM conducted a comprehensive 50-state scan and analyzed exemplary results from states and institutions with a focus on peer and comparison institutions.

The information collected was synthesized into a single reference document to aid in the drafting of proposals for recruitment and retention activities funded by the second-year appropriation for the Pell initiative. The PROSPER Matrix was intended to serve as an anchor for these proposed activities.

HCM hosted a virtual webinar to demonstrate the PROSPER Matrix and address any questions. The webinar was recorded and subsequently shared with institutional contacts.

### **Key Findings**

In the PROSPER Matrix, we compiled data and research, and evaluated the impact level of practices using a triadic scale: New/Uncertain Effects, Moderate/Promising and Strong. The “New/Uncertain Effects” category refers to practices or policies that are recent, and their effects are not yet able to be evaluated. However, these practices have gained attention and we believe are worth monitoring. The “Moderate/Promising” category encompasses practices that have been implemented for at least one cohort, but have limited research, consisting of one or two studies at most. While the results may be mixed, they are predominantly positive. “Strong” policies are those that have been in place for several years, have multiple research studies conducted on them across various cohorts, and consistently yield positive results. The following initiatives are ones we identified in Virginia and nationally that fall across all of these categories.

### **Virginia Institutions**

Based on our investigation, we identified nine common categories of existing initiative types at Virginia’s public institutions of higher education.

1. **Advising and Mentorship.** In terms of Advising and Mentorship, over 30 strategies were described, with a focus on providing advising and mentoring to all students, but with a special focus on those who are low-income or first-generation. Some institutions use software systems to track academic and advising progress and offer strategic outreach and support services to at-risk students. Additional programs and services include summer bridge, student success coaches, peer tutoring and referral programs.
2. **Communications.** Nine Virginia institutions have specific communications strategies. The most common strategy focuses on recruitment, with institutions updating their communication platforms to be more user-friendly for today's students. Research indicates students are more responsive to frequent, targeted messages across multiple platforms, and institutions are finding success modifying their practices to these preferences. Some institutions also provide Spanish-language recruitment materials and have Spanish-speaking staff in admissions and financial aid. Text campaigns are used to keep students engaged, and some institutions host tours and events to showcase their mission and support mechanisms.
3. **Events.** All institutions hold events for recruitment purposes. Most participate in the Virginia College Application Week and Virginia College Tour, as well as open houses and preview days at high schools. Some institutions target college fairs and host events with direct pipeline groups for under-represented students. Overall, these retention and success strategies focus on providing support, resources and opportunities to ensure student success in higher education.
4. **Fee Waivers.** All institutions provided application fee waivers, with many having joined the Common App to increase institutional access for all students and provide easier access to fee waiver information for self-identified low-income students.



5. **Financial Aid.** Financial aid was also used as a strategy for recruiting, enrolling and retaining students, with efforts to leverage federal, state and institutional dollars to provide large aid packages. Financial aid goes beyond the formal programs and results are being seen by several institutions that also had specific aid programs serving limited numbers of low-income students providing emergency and basic needs resources like food pantries, textbook and technology offsets.
6. **Interventions in High School.** These interventions were reported by two institutions as a robust effort to increase participation in post-secondary education among low-income students. Faculty in residence programs in Richmond public schools and the Virginia College Advising Corps were used to aid under-represented students in the financial aid process and provide near-peer advising in high schools throughout the Commonwealth.
7. **On-campus resources.** Virtually all institutions reported offering on-campus resources to promote retention and success, with several institutions using predictive analytics and communication tools for academic advising and tutoring, maintaining longitudinal student success dashboards and providing financial literacy and well-being resources.
8. **Transition support.** These supports were reported by four institutions, with summer bridge programs and first-year experience being mentioned in this category as well as in the Advising and Mentorship category.
9. **American Talent Initiative.** Lastly, several institutions, including GMU, JMU, UVA and WM, were members of the American Talent Initiative, which required them to establish and share clear goals for expanding opportunity and access for low- and moderate-income students.

### **National Practices and Policies**

Regarding national key themes, HCM identified 27 initiatives that support low-income students across various stages of their educational journey, with eight targeting recruitment, one supporting the admissions process, one helping with enrollment, nine providing support for retention and completion, and seven offering comprehensive support from recruitment to graduation. Of these initiatives, eight are at institutions identified as peers to Virginia institutions and two are statewide programs within Virginia's peer states. Most programs are open to all low-income students, with some specifically targeting high-achieving, first-generation or rural students.

The Matrix catalogs various types of supports, including six financial aid programs, two communications or outreach strategies, three advising and/or mentorship programs, seven interventions at the high school level, one program offering additional on-campus resources, one initiative managing an enhanced data tracking system, and seven initiatives falling across multiple categories. The aim was to make the Matrix as useful and relevant as possible for Virginia's public four-year institutions, with almost all initiatives at public institutions in the 4-year sector.

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

HCM, guided by Dr. Nate Johnson, assisted the 15 institutions in evaluating their existing policies and strategies for recruiting and retaining low-income students by collecting relevant data. Data on numbers of low-income K-12 students and college-age residents were compared to institutions' records of the numbers of students applying, admitted and enrolled from each high school and ZIP code in the state. After analyzing the data, HCM shared the analysis and raw data with the institutions, providing key information such as priority high school and ZIP code lists, as well as community college transfer data, to aid the institutions in developing their proposals. HCM hosted a virtual webinar to showcase the data tool developed and address any questions. The webinar was recorded and subsequently shared with institutional contacts.

### **Key Findings**

There is a risk in statewide projects like this that individual institutions end up competing and spending more resources on the same set of students rather than focus on growing the overall number of low-income students attending. At the same time, there are many high schools in the state with significant numbers of low-income students but with lower than 10% rates of public institution enrollment (sometimes much lower) for their graduates. There are almost certainly at least 10% of students at any high school who could do well in college with the right support. For others, the low proportion of low-income to all enrolled students from a particular school

does not match that high school's high percentage of low-income students. These are two different but related problems that public institutions could address by creating school-specific action plans led by one or more universities. Institutions that want to enroll more adult students could do something similar by looking at underperforming transfer pathways (community colleges) or ZIP codes.

#### DATA DASHBOARD

This element of the project is still underway. We anticipate presenting this work in an upcoming addendum.

## Pell-recipient Enrollment at Public Virginia Institutions with Below-average Pell Enrollment

We can assess the level of access low-income students have to higher educational opportunities by examining the number of students who receive Pell Grants. These grants, provided by the federal government, are given to students who demonstrate significant financial need. The Pell Grant is the largest need-based grant offered at the federal level and is allocated based on a flexible scale that accounts for the financial resources of students and their families.

According to the SCHEV [Pell Grant Report](#), the average proportion of students who received the Pell Grant at all of Virginia's public four-year colleges and universities in the 2020-21 academic year was 26.4% (See Figure 1). The Pell recipients at the seven public colleges and universities with below-average Pell enrollment constitute roughly one-quarter (27.6%) of all Pell recipients at the Commonwealth's public four-year higher education institutions. Nearly three-quarters (72.6%) of undergraduate Pell recipients at Virginia's public four-year institutions attend one of the other eight public universities: George Mason University, Longwood University, Norfolk State University, Old Dominion University, Radford University, University of Virginia-Wise, Virginia Commonwealth University and Virginia State University. Or, stated differently, roughly half of the Commonwealth's public four-year institutions enroll about three-quarters of all in-state Pell Grant recipients; the other half of the state's public four-year colleges and universities enroll only one-quarter of Pell Grant recipients, in spite of enrolling almost half of Virginia's undergraduate population.

The Pell enrollment rates vary among the seven institutions in this project, ranging from 13.4% at William & Mary to 21.6% at the University of Mary Washington. The average Pell Grant award at these institutions is \$4,642, which is similar to the state average of \$4,524 for all of Virginia's public four-year institutions.

To reach the state-average Pell student enrollment, the seven institutions with below-average Pell enrollment would need to enroll an additional 1,083 Pell recipients at James Madison University, on the highest end, to just 33 at Virginia Military Institute, on the lowest end.

**FIGURE 1: IN-STATE UNDERGRADUATE PELL RECIPIENTS AT THE SEVEN INSTITUTIONS WITH BELOW-AVERAGE PELL-RECIPIENT ENROLLMENT, 2020-21**

Institutions with Below-average Pell Enrollment	% Undergrads Receiving Pell	# of Unique Undergrads Receiving Pell	Average Pell Award	Total Undergrad Enrollment	Additional Pell Recipients to Reach Average Enrollment
Average of all Virginia public four-year institutions	26.4%	45,366	\$4,524	142,388	N/A
Christopher Newport University	14.8%	663	\$4,563	4,465	+515

James Madison Univ.	14.8%	2,965	\$4,461	15,335	+1,083
University of Mary Washington	21.6%	791	\$4,369	3,642	+170
University of Virginia	13.9%	2,400	\$4,800	12,003	+768
Virginia Military Institute	15.1%	249	\$4,773	1,070	+33
Virginia Tech	15.4%	4,589	\$4,757	21,435	+1,069
William & Mary	13.4%	876	\$4,770	4,183	+228

Source: SCHEV Higher Ed Data Reports, AY 2020-21

For Pell-eligible students the full cost of attendance — including tuition and non-tuition costs, such as room and board — can be overwhelming. For Virginia's low Pell-enrollment institutions the remaining need after Pell awards are awarded ranged from \$19,294 at Virginia Tech to \$32,644 at William & Mary (Figure 2). After accounting for the Pell grant, the average remaining unmet need for low-income students at Virginia's public four-year institutions (not including Richard Bland College and the Virginia Community College System) is \$21,063.

**FIGURE 2: PURCHASING POWER OF THE PELL GRANT, 2019-20**

Institutions with Below-average Pell Enrollment	Average Pell Grant Award	Average Tuition and Fees	Average Total Cost (Tuition, Fees, Room, and Board)	Remaining Need After Pell Awarded (Excludes any other Gift Aid) Red = Above Avg.
Average of all Virginia public four-year institutions	\$4,524	\$9,464	\$25,587	\$21,063
Christopher Newport University	\$4,563	\$9,100	\$26,684	\$22,121
James Madison University	\$4,461	\$7,460	\$24,188	\$19,727
University of Mary Washington	\$4,369	\$8,678	\$24,852	\$20,483
University of Virginia	\$4,800	\$14,658	\$29,786	\$24,986

Virginia Military Institute	\$4,773	\$9,782	\$30,032	\$25,259
Virginia Tech	\$4,757	\$11,931	\$24,051	\$19,294
William & Mary	\$4,770	\$17,570	\$37,414	\$32,644

Source: SCHEV Financial Aid at Public Institutions of Higher Education Report

The total amount allocated for undergraduate aid, which may not necessarily match the actual total awards given, includes various programs in addition to the Virginia Student Financial Assistance Program (VSFAP). The state provided \$253 million in appropriations for undergraduate aid in FY 2022. Figure 3 contains the specific institutional amounts for the seven institutions with below-average Pell student enrollment.

**FIGURE 3: STATE SUPPORT FOR UNDERGRADUATE AID THROUGH THE VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH AND/OR VGAP AWARD, 2021-22**

Institutions with Below-average Pell Enrollment	State Aid Appropriations	Average Award Per Recipient
Christopher Newport University	\$6,168,658	\$4,981
James Madison University	\$11,807,636	\$5,276
University of Mary Washington	\$4,131,795	\$5,120
University of Virginia	\$7,110,704	\$14,970
Virginia Military Institute	\$1,144,918	\$9,541
Virginia Tech	\$19,067,505	\$4,573
William & Mary	\$3,997,913	\$13,930

Source: [https://research.schev.edu/fair/VASFAP\\_ALL\\_Report.asp](https://research.schev.edu/fair/VASFAP_ALL_Report.asp)

Both institutions and the state play crucial roles in achieving college affordability goals. Higher education institutions have a responsibility to make education accessible and affordable for all students, and the Commonwealth can play a crucial role in achieving college affordability goals by implementing policies and providing financial support to students and institutions. This relationship was examined by SCHEV in its [2020 Review of Financial Aid Formulas and Awarding Practices](#) and [2021 Report on Financial Aid at Public Institutions of Higher Education in Virginia](#).

Enrolling more Pell-eligible students is beneficial for Virginia and its higher education institutions because doing so can help equalize access to education for all individuals, regardless of their socioeconomic background. It promotes equity by breaking down financial barriers and increasing educational opportunities for economically disadvantaged students.

## SCHEV RFP and Institution Proposals

In March 2023, SCHEV issued a request for proposals (RFP) from Virginia's public postsecondary institutions, the purpose of which was to solicit proposals from institutions that aimed to promote and fund initiatives that would increase the enrollment and/or completion rates of Pell-eligible students in the Commonwealth. The RFP specified that the proposed programs could be considered as a pilot program for up to four years that would follow a cohort of new students. In prioritizing the proposals, SCHEV placed a premium on those that utilized strategies with proven results, focused on in-state students, emphasized increasing applications of low-income individuals, aimed to increase completion rates and demonstrated sustainability. By prioritizing these proposals, SCHEV hoped to identify and support initiatives that would not only increase access to higher education for low-income students but also ensure their success in completing their degrees.

Proposals were due April 6, 2023. A total of 21 distinct proposals were submitted by Virginia's public four-year institutions, where four of the institutions presented multiple, discrete components resulting in a cumulative count of 27 proposed initiatives.

### ***Proposed Activities Submitted by Institutions***

The following proposals were submitted by the public institutions in Virginia. An asterisk (\*) indicates that an institution is one of the seven Virginia universities that exhibits lower-than-average Pell student enrollment.

The dollar amounts listed below are the original amount requested for each project, followed by the adjusted project cost for ones selected for funding by SCHEV.

#### **Christopher Newport University\***

##### **Project #1: Captain's Peninsula Pathways Project**

*Amount Requested:* \$519,465

*Adjusted Project Cost:* N/A - Not selected for funding

*Phase:* Recruitment/Enrollment (System)

*Executive Summary:* Establish a dedicated pathway for transfer to CNU from Virginia Peninsula Community College (VPCC). Targets nine low-income high schools to recruit students to VPCC. Develop new programs to better inform prospective low-income students about higher education. Would waive application fees and provide up to \$5,500 annually in need-based aid to cover tuition, books and living expenses.

##### **Project #2: Early Admission/Direct Admission for VA students in targeted localities**

*Amount Requested:* \$161,900

*Adjusted Project Cost:* \$161,900

*Phase:* Recruitment/Enrollment (System)

*Executive Summary:* To increase the number of applicants from low-income students at a targeted group of high schools in the Virginia Peninsula and in the South Hampton Roads area. Funds would be used to enhance relationships and collaboration with the high schools. To offer direct admission and on-site counseling, including peer mentorship.

**Project #3: TRIO Groups**

*Amount Requested:* \$ 146,725

*Adjusted Project Cost:* N/A - Not selected for funding

*Phase:* Recruitment/Enrollment (System)

*Executive Summary:* To partner with the 12 VCCS schools to bring TRIO student groups to CNU. Establish an annual TRIO Advisor Visit Day for advisors at each of the 12 schools.

**William & Mary\***

**Project 1a-b: Suite of Programs**

*Amount Requested:* \$840,971 (a), \$905,790 (b)

*Adjusted Project Cost:* \$840,971

*Phase:* Comprehensive – Recruitment and Retention

*Executive Summary:* To launch a series of pilot initiatives.

1. Expand W&M Scholars Program – double number of recipients to 100 (modeled after Michigan HAIL – award amount only) using University resources;
2. Enhance outreach to high-achieving, low-income prospective students; and
3. Enhance academic supports.

**George Mason University**

**Project (1a-c): Access to Excellence**

*Amount Requested:* \$ 536,112 (a), \$733,848 (b), \$370,000 (c)

*Adjusted Project Cost:* \$536,112

*Phase:* Retention/Completion

*Executive Summary:* To expand Access to Excellence program. They would like to expand their Financial Well-Being (FWB) Peer Mentor Program to serve an additional 300 students and add another Success Coach to their staff.

Goal 1: Increase the number and percentage of low-income students who apply to college and complete the FAFSA. Goal 2: Increase the number of low-income students who apply to and enroll at Mason.

**James Madison University\***

**Project #1: Expansion of Centennial Scholarships Program**

*Amount Requested:* \$ 1,000,000

*Adjusted Project Cost:* \$ 1,000,000

*Phase:* Enrollment/Retention/Completion

*Executive Summary:* Selected Pell students receive additional financial aid and support services.

**Project #2: Expansion of Awards to In-State Pell Grant Students First Year Opportunity Plus (FYO)**

*Amount Requested:* \$ 1,000,000

*Adjusted Project Cost:* N/A - Not selected for funding

*Phase:* Enrollment/Retention/Completion

*Executive Summary:* Proposes creating two aid programs: The First Year Opportunity Plus Scholarship and Warden Scholarship. When combining one of these two awards with a Federal Pell Grant, an award from the Virginia Student Financial Assistance Program (VSFAP), and a University Grant, JMU would be able to leverage these available resources to create a grant and scholarship package that makes the ability to secure a college education more attainable.

### **Longwood University**

#### **Project: Together We Support, Together We Succeed: Leveraging Connections to Recruit, Retain and Graduate More Pell-Eligible Students**

*Amount Requested:* \$1,155,753 (a), \$1,315,300 (b)

*Adjusted Project Cost:* \$1,155,753

*Phase:* Recruitment/Retention/Completion

*Executive Summary:* Proposes a project focused on recruiting, retaining and graduating more Pell-eligible students from Southside and Southwest Virginia. Over five years (four of which comprise the grant period), the project team would collaborate extensively with campus partners to:

- Increase admissions applications from low-income, in-state students through a data-informed strategy focused on rural communities;
- Address key financial needs by increasing gift-aid financial aid for admitted low-income, in-state students;
- Retain more of those students by expanding existing successful programs;
- Implement formative evaluation processes to identify effective practices and areas for improvement; and
- Collaborate with campus partners and senior leadership to sustain successful practices beyond the grant period.

### **Norfolk State University**

#### **Project: Spartan Pathfinders Program**

*Amount Requested:* \$1,700,891

*Adjusted Project Cost:* \$1,756,891

*Phase:* Comprehensive

*Executive Summary:* Proposes creating the Spartan Pathfinders program, a collaborative three-pronged initiative that seeks to assist low-income and in-state students in discovering and navigating their educational and career paths. The prongs are: Attract, Support and Connect. The program would employ a holistic approach, utilizing engagement strategies that focus on college access, academic preparedness, career development and readiness, wellness and financial literacy. The initiative would aim to attract and retain Pell-eligible, in-state students at the institution by providing tailored summer bridge and enrichment programs that maximize academic and professional skill development and bolster local connections and partnerships.

### **Old Dominion University**

#### **Project: Discover Your Dominion**

*Amount Requested:* \$773,780

*Adjusted Project Cost:* \$773,780

*Phase:* Retention/Completion

*Executive Summary:* Proposes creating the Discover Your Dominion initiative to support student retention through four main goals: to increase the retention rate of program participants by the end of the grant period, to help

students understand the foundational principles of financial literacy, to enhance family connections and support through multichannel engagement, and to develop a sense of belonging on campus.

### **Radford University**

#### **Project: Suite of Initiatives**

*Amount Requested:* \$1,411,040

*Adjusted Project Cost:* \$1,411,040

*Phase:* Comprehensive

*Executive Summary:* Proposes using awarded funding to pilot programs that support enrollment and retention of Pell-eligible students. These initiatives include a peer-to-peer enrollment coach program and a scholarship program.

### **University of Mary Washington\***

#### **Project: Suite of Activities**

*Amount Requested:* \$5,268,668

*Adjusted Project Cost:* \$3,668,668

*Phase:* Comprehensive

*Executive Summary:* Through a proposed suite of five activities, UMW aims to use digital messaging to enhance recruitment of targeted high schools and community colleges; it also aims to create the STARS Center to enhance interpersonal connections and support; lastly, it aims to provide additional direct financial support to vulnerable students.

### **University of Virginia\***

#### **Project #1: High School Recruitment Pilot Program**

*Amount Requested:* \$926,000

*Adjusted Project Cost:* \$2,431,000 total for both projects combined

*Phase:* Recruitment/Enrollment

*Executive Summary:* To expand applications, admissions and enrollments of Pell-eligible students at 40 public high schools with the highest rates of socioeconomic disadvantage in Virginia.

#### **Project #2: Virginia College Advising Corps**

*Amount Requested:* \$1,787,640

*Adjusted Project Cost:* \$2,431,000 total for both projects combined

*Phase:* Recruitment/Enrollment (Systemic)

*Executive Summary:* To address chronic disparities, UVA proposes funding the Virginia College Advising Corps (VCAC), which provides a near-peer, full-time college adviser in the school building that all students can use as a resource for postsecondary planning, including community college, four-year institutions, and career and technical pathways. VCAC advisers mitigate barriers for students under-represented in higher education, including first-generation students and those from low-income and under-served backgrounds.

### **University of Virginia-Wise**

#### **Project: Mentorship and Adaptability Program (MAP)**

*Amount Requested:* \$354,000

*Adjusted Project Cost:* \$354,000



*Phase: Retention/Completion*

*Executive Summary:* UVA Wise proposes launching the Mentorship and Adaptability Program (MAP), a peer mentor program that will match first-year Pell-eligible students with experienced upper-level students who will offer guidance and support.

**Virginia Commonwealth University**

**Project: Summer Scholars at VCU**

*Amount Requested:* \$1,024,300

*Adjusted Project Cost:* \$1,024,300

*Phase: Recruitment/Enrollment*

*Executive Summary:* VCU proposes the expansion of its Summer Scholars program with the goal of increasing the university's capacity to support Pell eligible students through culturally competent student programming, student support and faculty engagement. Research and institutional data point to amplified and intersecting barriers for first-generation and/or low-income students to access and maximize higher education opportunities. These barriers have resulted in gaps in sense of belonging, utilization of mental health resources, academic performance, retention and graduation.

**Virginia Military Institute\***

**Project: A Holistic Approach to Expanding College and Degree Access to Pell-Eligible Virginians at VMI**

*Amount Requested:* \$ 4,133,026

*Adjusted Project Cost:* \$3,832,025

*Phase: Comprehensive*

*Executive Summary:* VMI proposes focusing much of its proposed effort on the improved recruitment and retention of Pell-eligible students. Through the establishment of a Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) Office, VMI would guide a data-driven effort to engage, enroll and retain at-risk student populations including Pell-eligible students. VMI's SEM Office would direct efforts to increase the Pell-eligible applicant pool, and to encourage engagement with prospective students. In turn, these goals would also serve to increase applications in the pool of potential students.

**Virginia State University**

**Project: Trojan Connect**

*Amount Requested:* \$1,480,450 (a), \$1,997,000 (b), \$4,992,000 (c)

*Adjusted Project Cost:* \$1,997,000

*Phase: Retention/Completion*

*Executive Summary:* VSU proposes the implementation of "Trojan Connect" to assist in retention, persistence and completion of the Pell-eligible students. Trojan Connect is designed to increase student success by (1) connecting early (2) connecting academically and (3) connecting to campus. The overall goal of the program is to:

1. Increase retention rate of Pell-eligible students by 3%;
2. Increase the average GPA of Pell-eligible students by 0.4%; and
3. Increase the graduation rate of Pell-eligible students by 4%.

**Virginia Tech\***

**Project #1: VT GPS**

*Amount Requested:* \$10,714,132

*Adjusted Project Cost:* \$3,461,560

*Phase:* Retention/Completion

*Executive Summary:* Launch multi-year access/success/retention initiative called VT GPS. The three components of VT GPS include:

1. College access tour (special focus on rural areas)
2. Intensive math intervention
3. Credit-bearing summer program

**Project #2: HOKIE Summer Scholars**

*Amount Requested:* \$5,024,840

*Adjusted Project Cost:* N/A - Not selected for funding

*Phase:* Retention/Completion

*Executive Summary:* To extend the successful Hokie Summer Scholars pilot program. The program is a week-long residential program for rising high school juniors and seniors who are interested in exploring academic disciplines, living on a college campus and experiencing campus life. The program provides an opportunity for high school students to participate in college-level coursework, work with Virginia Tech faculty and staff, and learn more about the admissions process and college life in general.

**Project #3: SCHOLARS Career Program**

*Amount Requested:* \$159,933

*Adjusted Project Cost:* N/A - Not selected for funding

*Phase:* Retention/Completion

*Executive Summary:* Proposes creating the SCHOLARS career program to facilitate work-based learning to retain students to graduation.

***Proposal Review Process***

SCHEV selected HCM Strategists and five individuals from SCHEV with different areas of expertise to review the proposals. (HCM Strategists was considered one reviewer.) Each reviewer was assigned to conduct a review of a selection of 14 proposals. During the review process, the reviewer evaluated each proposal based on a set of metrics that included, among other things, the strength of the discussion presented by each institution, their ability to articulate how their project would benefit students and the Commonwealth as a whole, their use of data to identify and address gaps, and the persuasiveness of their overall proposal. Through careful consideration of these metrics, reviewers were able to score each proposal objectively and identify the most promising projects that will have the greatest potential to positively impact Pell student enrollment, retention and completion rates in Virginia.

Following this step in the process HCM debriefed the reviewers to discuss outliers and complete final scoring for delivery to the associate director of financial aid (the director). The director completed a second level review and made preliminary recommendations to staff of the Senate Finance and Appropriations and House Appropriations committees and the Secretary of Education's office with HCM providing additional analysis as requested by participants. Following the direction from this group, the director completed additional analysis, discussions with institutions and presented final recommendations. Upon completion of this process SCHEV will enter into a Memorandum of Understanding (the MOU) with each institution.

***Key Themes***

Several key recurring themes emerged across the proposals, including:

- **Increasing access to higher education for low-income students:** All of the proposals focus on increasing access to higher education for low-income students through various initiatives, such as dedicated pathways for transfer, recruiting students from targeted high schools, enhancing relationships with high schools and providing need-based aid.
- **Increasing recruitment efforts:** Many proposals aim to expand recruiting efforts to target high schools and community colleges in order to increase the enrollment of low-income students. This includes activities such as hiring new admissions counselors, creating tailored student success pathways and enhancing interpersonal connections and support.
- **Collaborating with community colleges:** A few proposals involve partnerships with Virginia community colleges to bring transfer pathways and programs to students.
- **Providing additional support services:** Proposals include expanding peer mentor programs, offering direct admission and on-site counseling and providing additional success coaches to help low-income students navigate the college application process and succeed academically.
- **Increasing enrollment and completion rates:** The proposals aim to increase the number of low-income students who apply to college and complete the FAFSA, as well as increase the number of low-income students who enroll in and graduate from college.
- **Offering financial support:** Proposals involve providing financial support to low-income students to help cover tuition, fees and other basic needs. This includes initiatives such as small grants for Pell students who lost aid between their first and second years and providing direct financial support to the most vulnerable students. Financial aid is seen by institutions as both a recruitment and a retention tool — used to help students see their institution as affordable but as an impediment if the student is unable to maintain specific state award requirements. (This is discussed further in the recommendations below.)

There are a few crucial details that were not fully addressed in many of the proposals, such as:

- **Potential challenges and risks:** The proposals do not address potential challenges or risks that may arise during the implementation of proposed initiatives and how they will be addressed. This is being addressed through the annual review outlined in the Memorandum of Understanding executed between SCHEV and each institution receiving funds.
- **Sustainability and Longevity:** Many of the initial proposals did not address the longevity or sustainability of the projects, which raised questions about whether the proposed initiatives can be maintained over time. SCHEV requested information about the sustainability of the proposals with institutional plans for addressing structures and procedures for attracting, retaining and graduating Pell-eligible students in a second communication with institutions. The institutions identified strategies for continued funding for successful initiatives, including outside sources, efficiencies within the institution, increased revenue from enrollment growth or requesting additional funds from the annual budgetary process.
- **Impact and Reporting:** Several proposals do not address the anticipated or hoped-for impact of the initiatives, which leaves questions about rationale, as well as how institutions will establish a clear framework for measuring the success of their initiatives. To effectively measure and track the success of each project's implementation, we recommend establishing a robust reporting mechanism. The approach taken should consider factors such as natural growth in Pell-eligible student enrollment due to the FAFSA changes, as well as assessing the impact of the interventions and strategies outlined in the approved proposals. As part of this project HCM, in collaboration with its partner Higher Education Insights, has developed a consensus of longitudinal data to serve as a baseline to evaluate progress and success of these new activities. The reporting necessary from the institutions to SCHEV for periodic evaluation against this baseline should be included in the MOU.

## Scoring, Award Amounts, and Future Evaluations

SCHEV and HCM successfully identified one approved proposal per institution, while staying within a budget of \$25 million over a four-year period.

Proposals	Pell Enroll Rate	Pell Retention (Grad Rate)	Original Project Costs	Final Funding Award Amount
CNU – 2	14%	66%	\$161,900	\$161,900
CNU – 3	14%	66%	\$146,725	
CNU -1	14%	66%	\$519,465	
JMU – 1	15%	76%	\$1,000,000	\$1,000,000
JMU – 2	15%	76%	\$1,000,000	
UMW – 1	21%	65%	\$5,268,668	\$3,668,668
UVA - 1	15%	91%	\$926,000	\$2,431,000
UVA - 2	15%	91%	\$1,787,640	
VMI - 1	14%	71%	\$4,133,0265	\$3,832,025
VT - 1 GPS	15%	74%	\$10,714,1320	\$3,461,560
VT - 2	15%	74%	\$5,024,840	
W&M - 1a Recruitment	13%	88%	\$840,971	\$840,971
W&M - 1b Enrollment	13%	88%	\$905,790	
LU - 1a Recruitment	26%	61%	\$1,155,753	\$1,155,753
LU - 1b Retention	26%	61%	\$1,315,300	\$1,756,891
VT - 3	15%	74%	\$159,933	
NSU - 1	67%	31%	\$1,700,891	
UVA-W - 1	38%	45%	\$354,000	\$354,000
VSU - 1a Early	69%	35%	\$1,480,450	\$1,997,000
VSU - 1b Academically	69%	35%	\$1,997,000	
VSU - 1c Campus	69%	35%	\$4,992,000	
GMU - 1c Coaching	31%	66%	\$370,000	\$536,112
GMU - 1a Access	31%	66%	\$536,112	
GMU - 1b Financial	31%	66%	\$733,848	
RU - 1	39%	54%	\$1,411,040	\$1,411,040
VCU - 1	31%	63%	\$1,024,300	\$1,024,300
ODU - 1	38%	45%	\$773,780	\$773,780
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>\$44,913,276</b>	<b>\$24,405,000</b>

While some institutions put forward proposals that did not initially appear to target areas of priority (e.g., applying for recruitment or enrollment funding when the institution is low on Pell-eligible retention and graduation metrics), further discussion with the institutions helped clarify their proposed initiatives and ongoing activities from an extremely complex ecosystem of support for Pell-eligible students. For example, Radford University (RU) places a strong emphasis on financial aid, which supports both enrollment and retention efforts as noted above. On the other hand, Norfolk State University (NSU) has recently implemented several retention initiatives with

funding from the General Assembly and is beginning to see results. Certain aspects of NSU's proposal benefit both enrollment and retention and will be implemented in conjunction with the programs recently initiated.

University of Mary Washington (UMW), Virginia Military Institute (VMI) and Virginia Tech (VT) presented the highest priced requests, but the review team managed to identify methods to reduce costs without negatively affecting the overall proposals. Funding was eliminated for initiatives that the team is comfortable will proceed regardless of funding from this particular allocation. VMI acknowledges the long-term necessity of the new department they have proposed creating, but these funds will enable them to expedite the department's establishment.

Based on the decision regarding the distribution of funds, Higher Education Insights is developing a longitudinal data tool to evaluate the future progress and success of funded activities. This effort will include both a quantitative component (including factoring in natural growth in Pell-eligible student enrollment due to FAFSA changes) and qualitative component (based on the interventions and strategies put forward in the approved proposals). This element of the project is still underway. This work will be included in an upcoming addendum.

## Recommendations

### THE ROLE OF THE COMMONWEALTH

Ensuring equitable access and success for all students, regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds, is a paramount concern for Virginia and its public institutions. Low-income students face unique obstacles that hinder their enrollment and completion rates, perpetuating educational disparities. To tackle these challenges head-on, it is crucial for Virginia to implement targeted strategies and policies that foster an inclusive and supportive environment. A set of recommendations for consideration that are aimed at enhancing access, increasing retention and promoting degree attainment for low-income students across the Commonwealth is outlined below. By considering these measures, Virginia and its higher education institutions can cultivate a more inclusive and prosperous educational landscape for all its residents.

**VGAP/VACOMM Gap.** In Virginia, financial aid is available to help students and their families pay for the cost of higher education tuition and fees. The primary financial aid program in Virginia is the Virginia Student Financial Aid Program (VSFAP), which comprises two distinct programs: the Virginia Commonwealth (VACOMM) Award and the Virginia Guaranteed Assistance Program (VGAP). Together, these provided \$199.5 million to over 41,000 students in four-year public institutions in the 2021-22 academic year.

However, a disparity between financial aid and the funds required to pay for college has emerged, in large part due to the escalating cost of higher education coupled with Virginia families' decreasing capacity to contribute toward these expenses. As a result, the VGAP and VACOMM Awards do not have the same purchasing power as they did previously.

Two institutions requested funding to deal with a problem with the gap between the amounts provided by the VGAP and VACOMM aid awards when students are unable to complete the necessary enrollment hours for VGAP progression requirements. We understand that these requests highlight a broader problem faced by various other institutions in Virginia. This issue appears to be a more significant concern that the Commonwealth as a whole should consider addressing comprehensively, rather than having each individual institution tackle it piecemeal.

**The High School Pipeline.** In Virginia students can earn several types of diplomas. Most common are the Standard and Advanced Studies. For the Standard diploma, a student must earn 22 units of credit, as well as five verified credits (passing associated end-of-course state test). For the Advanced Studies Diploma, a student must earn 26 units of credit, with five verified credits. Students completing the Advanced Studies Diploma are considered better prepared to enter higher education.

In researching the high school pipeline, HCM became aware of the disparity of college readiness among Virginia's high school students based on economic status (readiness as determined by a student graduating with an Advanced Studies Diploma). According to data obtained by SCHEV from the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), 63.07% of graduating students in the 2021-22 school year who were not economically disadvantaged received an Advanced Studies Diploma. Conversely, 33.93% of economically disadvantaged students received an Advanced Studies Diploma. Further analysis into this disparity should yield some options for Virginia's policy makers to consider.

**Data Sharing Between the Department of Education and Institutions.** Institutions asked for more information sharing from the VDOE. Some noted programs in other states where student level information and lists were shared. While student level information is subject to significant privacy concerns, SCHEV could begin a dialogue among several institutions, VDOE representatives and, perhaps, a representative of the Attorney General's office. Institutions were interested in, among other things, the ability to send informational items to the families of high achieving economically disadvantaged students as early in their academic careers as possible.

**Admissions Communications.** The Commonwealth can incentivize institutions to continue to simplify and clarify award letter content. In 2017 the General Assembly directed SCHEV to review financial aid award letters and identify opportunities for improvement. SCHEV issued a report with new policies and guidance in 2018, [SCHEV Financial Aid Award Letters Policies and Guidance](#), to standardize financial aid award letters. Institutions were required to submit sample award letters to SCHEV prior to the 2020-21 award season. HCM provided samples from several institutions to the students participating in the student focus groups conducted by Edge Research. These students found the phrasing within the letters to be confusing and pointed to such letters as another obstacle in their ability to move forward. For example, students felt the award letters were not clear about how much aid they were offered, the specific cost of attendance and if they had to take out a loan. The Commonwealth may want to consider revisiting this issue with an eye toward low-income and first-generation students who don't have a family member or other mentor to assist them in navigating the "language" of financial aid. Including students and institutional financial aid representatives in such a review would be beneficial.

**Going Beyond Financial Aid.** Financial aid matters, but it is more than just money for students. Finding ways to support and provide incentives for institutions and high schools to offer guidance and true mentorship would directly address some of the barriers noted by individuals that participated in the focus groups. Personalized support to students to navigate the process has been proven effective with low-income and first-generation students who may not have members within their own community who can guide them through this process.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONS

### BARRIERS TO ACCESS, RETENTION AND COMPLETION

The Virginia experience is not unique. The literature on college access and success over the last two decades reveals a common set of constraints students encounter in at least four major areas: financial, informational, structural and academic (Avery et al. 2019, Dawson et al. 2020, Long and Riley 2007).

#### 1. Financial

Financial constraints represent a significant barrier to college enrollment, retention and completion. This barrier arises when students face limitations in their financial resources, rendering it difficult for them to meet the financial demands associated with pursuing a college degree. The multifaceted nature of financial constraints includes tuition fees, textbooks, food and housing, transportation, living expenses, childcare and other essential educational and basic needs costs. Additionally, students from lower income backgrounds seem particularly prone to debt aversion (Baum and Schwartz 2015, Callender and Jackson 2005). The "financial risks of student debt and the relatively weak social safety net in the United States also make the stakes around college access and success particularly high for its students" (Dynarski et al. 2023).

As noted in the student focus groups, low-income students face information gaps that often preclude them from applying to and enrolling in more selective schools, even when they are academically qualified to do so and would



pay little to nothing in out-of-pocket costs (Dynarski et al. 2021, Dynarski et al. 2023, Hoxby and Turner 2013). Evidence shows that, often, students are uninformed about the true costs they would face. Taking steps to provide clear information about the costs and benefits of college can make a difference in their decisions (Avery and Kane 2004, Dynarski and Scott-Clayton 2006, Oreopoulos and Dunn 2013; Dynarski et al. 2021).

## 2. Informational

Research in psychology and behavioral economics suggests possible sources of friction in students' college decision-making beyond financial barriers, especially considering young adolescents' complex choice sets and given that the decision-makers are often young and inexperienced (Casey et al. 2011, Thaler and Mullainathan 2008).

Due to their stage of cognitive development, adolescents are inexperienced in handling complex tasks, impulsive and particularly susceptible to present bias (Bettinger and Slonim 2007, Castleman and Page 2015, Chapman, Gamino, and Mudar 2012, Steinberg 2008). For example, students are swayed by small, short-term college costs, such as application fees and the effort required to take the SAT or ACT.

## 3. Structural

These constraints in higher education are deeply rooted in the structure and design of the higher education system, which tend to perpetuate disparities by hindering equitable access and success for students from diverse backgrounds. Addressing these structural constraints is crucial for fostering a more inclusive and supportive educational environment. Examples of these structural challenges include:

- Capacity limitations, which restrict the number of seats available for prospective students.
- Inadequate support systems — including insufficient academic advising, limited mentoring programs and lack of access to other support services — can undermine students' sense of belonging and hinder their ability to navigate the college environment.
- Systemic biases are often experienced by students of marginalized groups or identities. Limited representation of underrepresented populations among faculty, administrators and staff can lead to a lack of culturally responsive support systems and hinder students' ability to find mentorship and role models who share their backgrounds and experiences. This lack of representation can perpetuate feelings of marginalization, limit opportunities for inclusive learning environments and impede student retention and completion.
- Rigid institutional policies and practices — such as fixed program requirements and limited course offerings and scheduling — may stand in the way of students' ability to balance academic and work/family obligations.

## 4. Academic

Inadequate academic preparation — wherein students enter college without possessing the necessary foundational knowledge, skills and competencies to meet the rigorous demands of higher education — constitutes a significant barrier to college retention and completion. The previously noted disparity between the percent of students receiving the Advanced Studies Diploma in Virginia based on economic status is significant and bears further analysis. This lack of preparation can manifest in various forms, such as inadequate mastery of core subjects, insufficient critical thinking abilities, deficient study and time management skills, and limited information literacy. When students lack the essential academic preparation needed to succeed in college, they encounter numerous challenges that hinder their progression and success throughout their academic journey. They can experience difficulties in comprehending course content, possess a limited capacity for analyzing, evaluating and synthesizing information effectively, feel overwhelmed by workloads and struggle to meet the rigorous standards of their coursework — all of which can impede their commitment to remaining enrolled in college and completing their degree.

Research shows significant variation in college enrollment, retention and completion by socioeconomic status (SES), gender, and race/ethnicity (Reber and Smith 2023). Disparities by SES are particularly large for four-year

college enrollment; students in the top SES quintile are three times more likely than students in the bottom quintile to enroll in a four-year institution (ibid).

College enrollment rates vary by socioeconomic status, gender, and race/ethnicity; however, disparities are much smaller when controlling for academic preparation. In other words, students who do not have as rigorous K12 academic opportunities are less likely to enroll in college. The disparities in socioeconomic, gender and race/ethnicity reflect the systemic realities of who is more likely to have access to rigorous K12 educational opportunities. Providing opportunities in and outside of K12 could support college enrollment gaps (Smith, Ember).

#### *STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS*

To address these challenges, there are several strategies that Virginia's colleges and universities can use to recruit, retain and complete low-income students, including:

##### **1. Financial aid and scholarships**

This is one of the most effective ways to make college more affordable for low-income students. All of Virginia's colleges and universities offer need-based financial aid and scholarships that help cover the cost of tuition, fees and other expenses.

Low-income students who received more financial aid in their first year succeeded at much higher rates than those who received less. For example, among students nationally whose resources were insufficient to cover the full costs of their tuition and non-tuition costs, 49 percent of those who received at least \$7,501 in financial aid graduated or transferred compared to 17 percent of those who received between \$1,001 and \$2,500 (ACCT and TICAS 2017).

A study of a statewide need-based grant program in Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Scholars Grant (WSG), found that persistence and bachelor's degree completion rates among students from low-income families increased when they were offered the additional aid (Goldrick-Rab et al. 2016). Among students who were offered the WSG, 21% completed their bachelor's degree in four years, compared to only 16% of students who were not awarded the grant. The WSG helped reduce the gap in on-time bachelor's degree completion rates between Pell-grant recipients and the UW system average from 14 percentage points to nine percentage points.

In the PROSPER Matrix, HCM identified the **Panther Retention Grant** at Georgia State University as a strong example of an effective, pioneering student aid program that has helped increase student retention and completion. The program provides micro-grants of as little as \$300 to students to cover modest shortfalls affecting their ability to pay tuition/fees and prevent them from dropping out.

The program has awarded 12,000 grants over the past six years, with outcomes showing that 86% of grant recipients (around 10,300 students) have gone on to graduate from Georgia State, with most doing so within two semesters.

##### **2. Improved communications strategies for outreach and recruitment**

Many colleges and universities have outreach and recruitment programs that specifically target low-income and under-represented students. These programs may include campus visits, information sessions and other events designed to help students learn more about the college-going process and the opportunities available to them. Additionally, with the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools have shifted to virtual tours, webinars and online information sessions, which allows low-income students to access college information in a more convenient and accessible way.

An exemplary national practice that HCM identified in the PROSPER Matrix as "Strong" in terms of effectiveness and impact is the **HAIL Scholarship Communications Strategy** at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor.

In addition to the financial aid component, the Michigan HAIL Scholarship includes a multi-pronged outreach approach that provides an early, unconditional guarantee of free tuition to targeted low-income students eligible



for funds. The University partnered with the state of Michigan to identify prospective high-achieving, low-income students across 500 high schools, and, in the first year, 2,000 identified seniors received personalized packets with materials and a four-year full tuition scholarship, along with supplemental communication to their parents.

The early nature of the offer locks in a price guarantee at the time of application, reducing uncertainty of future costs and changing the default option. The university has seen significant results, with targeted students being 41 percentage points more likely to apply and 15 percentage points more likely to enroll at the University of Michigan than students who did not receive notice of commitment. About a quarter of the boost in enrollment came from students who would not have attended college otherwise (Dynarski et al. 2018).

Once enrolled institutions use their student information systems to track student performance and can communicate with them to help keep students on track. As noted in the PROSPER Matrix, Virginia State University uses a software system called Navigate to track academic and advising progress with students. Mid-semester grades are required for students. Faculty is required to reach out to students who are not meeting performance metrics. Instructors or advisors can perform different tagging within Navigate to support interventions for students who are struggling. With a 69% Pell-eligible enrollment, this type of routinized engagement with students is crucial to successful retention of students.

### 3. Support services

Many low-income students may need additional support services, such as tutoring, mentoring and career counseling, in order to succeed in college. By providing these services, colleges and universities can help these students overcome any barriers they may face.

#### *Comprehensive Student Support Programs*

Perhaps one of the most successful models for increasing student persistence and completion is the comprehensive approach, also known as the Comprehensive Approaches to Student Success, or CASS, model. CASS programs have three central design components (TICAS 2021):

- 1) A **counselor or case manager** who works with students to determine what challenges they face, connects them with customized resources and helps them address those challenges.

Research shows that advising and mentoring programs can have positive effects on college persistence and completion rates — particularly among low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color (Holland et al. 2020, Fountain 2021, Alamuddin 2018). Advisors and mentors play an important role not only in helping students determine and achieve academic, career and personal goals, but also in connecting students to institutional resources they may need. In other words, they provide students with critical “institutional know-how” and concrete college-related guidance to help them navigate the complex modern higher education system. One-on-one college coaching has been found to increase college graduation rates by four percentage points (Bettinger and Baker 2011). This was clearly borne out by the student focus groups conducted by Edge Research.

In recent years, researchers have come to a consensus that student advising should consist of two elements: it should be comprehensive — meaning it should continue beyond a student’s first year and consist of meaningful relationships — and it should be holistic — meaning that it connect students with a suite of resources and supports that address both academic and life challenges, and it helps students make plans that extend beyond college (Karp et al. 2021, College Completion Network 2022).

A randomized controlled trial at Tarrant County College in Fort Worth, Texas, examined the use of the **Stay the Course (STC) intensive case-management program** there, which is designed to help enrolled low-income students overcome life challenges that might threaten their persistence in community college (Evans et al. 2020). The program was unique in that the intervention did not involve typical college advisors/counselors, but trained social service providers who extended beyond academic counseling, as

well as an emphasis on face-to-face interactions. Researchers found that the STC program significantly increased persistence and degree completion through six semesters, especially for female students who saw a five-percentage point increase in degree attainment.

A 2023 study by higher education tech company, Watermark, found that the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) saw a 24.4% increase in retention rates among new minority-male students who had regular, reliable access to a success coach. Among third-term students identified as “high risk” for dropping out, the persistence rate increased 47% (Watermark 2023).

- 2) A **real-time data system** that tracks student progress toward meeting benchmarks and determines when they have veered astray and need additional support.
- 3) A **strategy to help students stay on track** by encouraging them to follow through on their commitment to complete college. Regular counseling meetings, for example, can hold students accountable to help them achieve their goals.

Some of the most successful examples of CASS programs include the **Monitoring Advising Analytics to Promote Success (MAAPS)** at Georgia State University — which had a small but significant impact, after one academic year, on academic achievement outcomes — and the **Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP)** at City University of New York (CUNY) and three community colleges in Ohio — which has been found to nearly double the graduation rate for participants after three years in both its initial program at CUNY and in the three colleges in Ohio that replicated the program (*see PROSPER Matrix*).

#### 4. Building relationships with high schools

Many low-income students may not be aware of the college-going process or may not have access to the same resources and information as their more affluent peers. By building relationships with high schools and working with guidance counselors, colleges and universities can help ensure that low-income students are aware of the options available to them. In Virginia, The Virginia College Advising Corps (VCAC) at the University of Virginia recruits, hires and trains recent college graduates to serve as near-peer advisers in high schools throughout the Commonwealth. This year, 41 near-peer advisers are serving in 46 partner high schools. Last year the program directly served 5,190 high school seniors across the Commonwealth, primarily students from low-income and under-represented backgrounds, including first generation students. Advisers aided students, meeting one-on-one with them and their families to aid in completing FAFSA, assisting with SAT preparation and generally understanding the application process.

#### 5. Foster a sense of belonging on campus

A growing body of research shows that there is a positive correlation between a student’s ability to find a sense of belonging in college and their persistence to degree completion (Hausmann et al. 2007, Museus et al. 2017). Factors that contribute to a sense of belonging on campus include increased interactions with faculty, living on campus, engagement in extracurricular activities, etc. In recent years, a model of student success for diverse student populations has emerged: the **Culturally Engaging Campus Environment (CECE)** (Museus 2014). The CECE model is developed from interviews with a diverse body of students and faculty across the U.S. The core of the model emphasizes that a greater sense of belonging, motivation and academic performance is fostered by campuses that are more culturally engaging.

Students who participate in peer mentoring programs have been shown to feel significantly more engaged with their institution. Mentored students indicate that some of the most effective supports include general advice provided by mentors, emotional support, encouragement, motivation and help with personal issues (Efrat et al. 2017).

Studies also show that students who engage with their campus, often through work, participation in peer activities or interactions with faculty, and who can focus on studies and perform well in courses, are more likely to succeed.

Students who are actively involved in both academic and out-of-class activities gain more from the college experience than those who are not so involved (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005).

## 6. Basic Needs Supports

More than a decade of research shows that between 34-48% of all college students do not have secure access to food, housing, healthcare, transportation and technology (Hagedorn-Hatfield et al. 2022, Hope Center 2015-2021). In other words, they suffer from basic needs insecurity (BNI). BNI is particularly acute among students of color and low-income students. A lack of access to basic needs is a major barrier to completion, as these students have difficulty concentrating on their studies, building social connections, maintaining mental health and staying enrolled (McKibben and Qarni 2022, Hagedorn-Hatfield et al. 2022). In fact, a recent study found that students who experience BNI are 42% less likely to persist and complete a postsecondary degree program (Wolfson et al. 2021).

There is emerging evidence on effective interventions to reduce basic needs insecurity.

- 1) **“Nudging.”** Nudging is a technique that involves using subtle cues or prompts to encourage people to make certain choices or behave in particular ways. In the context of higher education, nudging has been used to encourage students to engage in positive academic behaviors, such as attending class, completing assignments and studying for exams. This intervention often connects students to resources by text message or email. Several scholars have shown that nudging can help students navigate college and the complex bureaucratic processes that often create barriers to academic success (Castleman et al. 2017, Castleman and Page 2015).

Additionally, a study at Dallas College found that nudging via text messaging increased the proportion of students who applied for emergency aid and used “benefits hubs” to obtain information about a suite of available services (Gill and Miller 2022). Another study of Amarillo College’s comprehensive approach to meeting students’ basic needs found that sending emails to select students doubled the number of students who used the campus basic needs center and increased a student’s chances of completing developmental education by 20% (Goldrick-Rab et al. 2021).




While there is some debate about the effectiveness of nudging (Oreopoulos and Petronijevic 2019, Bird et al. 2019), subsequent research strongly suggests that nudging, if done correctly and with an appropriate level of intention, can improve student outcomes, increase levels of curricular and co-curricular engagement, and enhance student perception of support and connectedness. Firstly, nudging should not be a “catch all” term that encompasses traditional reminders; rather they should be more prevalent and passive, and it is important that they not always require immediate action or response (Manturuk 2019). Secondly, messages should be customized. Georgia State University found that, by customizing nudges, they were able to reduce the number of enrolled students who never show up to campus by 21% (Page and Gehlbach 2018).

- 2) **Emergency Financial Aid.** Many postsecondary institutions provide emergency financial aid to help students attend to unexpected expenses. A preliminary study of the emergency aid program at Compton College found that students who were granted emergency aid quickly and with few administrative barriers were twice as likely to graduate as students who did not receive aid (Anderson 2021). In Virginia, several institutions noted successful use of emergency aid. The University of Mary Washington plans to use a portion of its grant funds for emergency aid.
- 3) **Other BNI Interventions.** Other types of BNI interventions have led to demonstrated increases in persistence and credential attainment. These interventions include transportation subsidies, meal voucher programs and on-campus food pantries, childcare services, etc. (McKibben and Qarni 2022).

## About HCM Strategists

HCM Strategists, founded in 2008, is an impact-driven consulting firm that believes in the transformative power of education and work-based learning to improve social and economic mobility for communities that have been marginalized or historically underserved. Our work delivers a consequential impact on the national narrative, policy options and leaders responsible for change. HCM works across the political aisle and in communities across the country, and we are committed to working with clients that share our passion for reducing disparities and lifting lives through education and training opportunities. We are a group of former senior presidential and gubernatorial staff, state agency and college leaders, teachers and non-profit advocacy leaders committed to removing barriers and transforming how education is delivered. Our work focuses on developing sound public policy, aligning teaching and learning practices, and advancing meaningful accountability and equitable strategic financing. HCM works effectively on our clients' behalf, providing support and strategic guidance to help form policy priorities that are impactful and meaningful in education. We work hard because success is our priority.

## Project Team

<b>HCM TEAM</b>	
	<p><b>Martha Snyder, Managing Director, Postsecondary Education Transformation</b></p> <p>Martha Snyder is an education policy specialist with high-level experience working with federal, state and institutional leaders. Martha provides leadership across the postsecondary team on several major projects and clients. Martha contributes to the postsecondary team on issues of equitable postsecondary finance policies, affordable student pathways and K-12 to postsecondary transitions. She has served several of the firm's largest clients, including foundations, state systems of higher education and university and college systems, and leads a portfolio focused on postsecondary transformation.</p>
	<p><b>Pam Currey, Senior Consultant</b></p> <p>Pam Currey brings more than 30 years' experience in Virginia's higher and public education and public finance policy to the table, serving in both the executive and legislative branches of Virginia state government as well as in institutional roles during her career. As Deputy Secretary of Finance for (then) Governor Mark Warner, Pam collaborated on Virginia's 2005 Higher Education Restructuring Act, working with state agencies and Virginia institutions on the passage of this groundbreaking legislation. Pam would implement the requirements of the Act from an institutional perspective in her positions with both Virginia's Community College System and Virginia Commonwealth University and as a trustee for Virginia State University. Pam has worked with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges as a peer reviewer.</p>
	<p><b>Stephanie Murphy, Ph.D., Director, State Policy &amp; Research</b></p> <p>Dr. Stephanie Murphy is HCM's director of postsecondary state policy and research. Her passion for education policy reform stems from her personal experiences as a first-generation college student from a low-income, immigrant household who directly experienced many of the adversities that underserved populations face throughout the education continuum. Through her various experiences, Stephanie has come to understand the power that advocacy has to affect policy reform.</p>

	<p><b>Nate Johnson, Ph.D., Senior Affiliate</b></p> <p>Dr. Nate Johnson is the founder and principal consultant of Postsecondary Analytics, LLC. He specializes in quantitative and qualitative research in state, federal and institutional policy, flexible strategic planning, financial comparisons, data visualization, student success, and financial aid.</p>
	<p><b>Jessica Collis, Director, Postsecondary Advocacy &amp; Change Management</b></p> <p>Jessica Collis is committed to empowering individuals to overcome obstacles created by poverty, social disenfranchisement, and the consequences of misguided policies. As HCM's director of postsecondary advocacy and change management, Jessica brings that passion to her work as the lead for several client initiatives centered on student advocacy and research, systems change, and emerging degree pathways including transfer policies and dual enrollment opportunities. She is a project manager of Lumina Foundation's Strategy Labs and HCM's Courage and Hidden Collaborative, and brings a state-level focus to her work on such issues as postsecondary value, affordability, and degree attainment. She prides herself in HCM's work to craft and promote good policy and draws from diverse personal and professional backgrounds in her furtherance of HCM's mission.</p>
	<p><b>Rachelle Sharpe, Ph.D., Director, Postsecondary Pathways &amp; Economic Mobility</b></p> <p>With more than 30 years of experience in higher education and state policy, Rachelle Sharpe is skilled in analyzing evidence for decision-making, building coalitions of support, implementing programs, and fostering collaboration. Working across the educational pipeline, she has collaborated with schools, districts, higher education institutions, state agencies, community leaders, policy makers, national organizations, and opinion leaders.</p>
<p><b>EDGE RESEARCH TEAM</b></p>	
	<p><b>Adam Burns, Chief Operations Officer &amp; Principal</b></p> <p>Adam has 22 years of experience designing, implementing, and managing qualitative and quantitative research projects. For the past decade, Adam has focused his efforts on social marketing and communications research, and for the past 9 years, he has applied these skills to education policy research. In the education arena, Adam's recent projects include uncovering the parent perspective on efforts such as year-end assessments, school accountability, social and emotional learning, and equity messaging, partnering with several nonprofits and foundations such as the Gates Foundation, Raikes Foundation, Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, and Learning Heroes.</p>
	<p><b>Lydia Redway, Senior Research Analyst</b></p> <p>Lydia specializes in education research and has worked on several projects specifically in education policy and testing. These efforts include some of the most pressing issues in education today, including an intensive exploration of parents who opt their children out of year-end assessments and studies to determine how best to communicate key elements of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to parents. Prior to joining Edge, Lydia worked as a Special Education Teacher and Case Manager at a behavioral health facility for children and adolescents.</p>



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## Appendix - Institutional Survey

### Virginia Pell Enrollment Success Project

#### 1. Institutional Practice Survey

In 2022, the Virginia General Assembly established a competitive grant program, administered by SCHEV. The initiative provides \$25 million to boost efforts to attract, enroll, and retain Pell-eligible students at the Commonwealth's public institutions of higher education. This survey supports a landscape analysis regarding existing efforts and results will inform how best to support Virginia's public institutions in addressing key barriers for low-income students and implementing effective strategies that expand access and success for this population. We anticipate the survey will take no more than 20-25 minutes to complete.


\* 1. Which institution do you represent? 

\* 2. Please share your contact information in case we have a follow-up question. 

Name

Title

Email Address

3. Please indicate which institutions you identify as your "top 5 peer institutions" to whom you compare outcomes on key benchmarks. Peer institutions can be in- or out-of-state and are ones that are most comparable to yours in terms of mission, Carnegie classification, size, programmatic offerings, etc. 

Institution #1


Institution #2

Institution #3

Institution #4

Institution #5


## 2. Recruitment & Enrollment Strategies


4. During the application review process, does your institution take into consideration an applicant's financial need? 

Yes

No

Explanatory Comments:

5. Does your institution use certain proxies to try to identify and target low-income prospective students during the outreach and recruitment phase? (please share relevant data sources). 

6. Which of the following strategies does your institution employ to help boost recruitment of low-income students? (Please check all that apply.) 


Use the admissions Common App


Participate in Virginia College Application Week


Participate in the Virginia College Tour


Offer application fee waivers


Other (please specify)


7. Please describe any additional marketing/outreach strategies your institution uses to recruit low-income students. 

8. At what point in the recruitment and admissions process is your institution able to ascertain whether an in-state student is from a low-income household? What data/information do you use to make this assessment? 

9. At what point in the recruitment and admissions process is your institution able to ascertain whether an in-state student is Pell-eligible? What data/information do you use to make this assessment? 


10. Please describe any limitations or barriers that hinder your institution's ability to identify in-state low-income students earlier in the recruitment/admissions process. 


11. Once information about a (prospective) student's socioeconomic background becomes available to your institution, who reviews these data and how are they used to support these individuals? 


12. What state-level support would help your institution better identify and more effectively reach in-state low-income students? 

- Data systems and data sharing
- Statewide/regional/targeted marketing about the value of education beyond high school
- Information sharing related to creative practices and outcomes


Other ideas and/or explanatory comments:

13. Please describe any state-level policies you are aware of elsewhere in the U.S. that you hold up as a model for supporting institutions' recruitment and enrollment of low-income/Pell-eligible students. 

14. Please describe any additional institutional-level strategies that your institution has not yet employed but would like to see implemented in order to identify and support in-state low-income students through the enrollment process (such those offered from groups such as the American Talent Initiative). Please describe the constraints or impediments to employing the strategies (e.g. data limitations, privacy issues, capacity, resources). 

15. Please describe any institution- or systems-level practices in place elsewhere in the U.S. that you hold up as a model for the recruitment and enrollment of low-income/Pell-eligible students. 

### 3. Retention & Completion Strategies

16. What supports does your institution provide to help enrolled students before or during their first-year? Are they targeted to or modified for low-income and/or first-generation students? 

- Summer bridge program
- First-year experience or orientation
- Peer mentoring
- Individualized advising
- Other (please specify)

17. What supports are offered to intervene when students are struggling academically?

Are there particular considerations or interventions for low-income students who are struggling? 


18. What are ways your institution is addressing affordability for low-income students once enrolled?



- Optimizing financial aid packaging for students with the most need
- Addressing basic needs through offering food pantries and other assistance
- Offsetting the cost of textbooks
- Other (please specify)
- Specific support for transportation
- Offsetting the cost of technology
- Addressing emergency financial needs

19. Please describe some of your institution's most effective retention strategies?

Are there particular strategies for retaining low-income students? 

20. Do you have a practice or method of assessing the effectiveness or impact of the retention strategies described above? 

Yes

No

Please describe or offer comments.