

IVY LOVE

NAVIGATING THE JOURNEY:

Encouraging Student Progress through
Enhanced Support Services in TAACCCT

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About the Author



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Connecting Communities to Opportunity

Jan Pomeroy decided to give college another shot. At 45, she stepped onto the campus of Anoka-Ramsey Community College (ARCC) in Coon Rapids, Minnesota, a northern suburb of the Twin Cities about 40 miles from the Wisconsin state line. Jan had dropped out of college over 25 years earlier, having felt lost and disoriented in the university crowd. She found the college environment confusing and, critically, did not know where to turn when she had a question or needed support.

But college at Anoka-Ramsey was different. It was a transformative experience and, after she earned her associate degree, inspired her to complete bachelor's and master's degrees. Though bolstered by the support of many around her, Jan credits her initial success at Anoka-Ramsey to the warm and unwavering support of her advisor, who provided the skilled advice and encouragement Jan needed to achieve her goals. Over a decade later, Jan found herself right back where she started at Anoka-Ramsey, but this time as a member of student services staff at the now 8,800 student-strong institution. "I want to be that friendly person and face," Jan says, just as her advisor at ARCC was for her.

During the Great Recession, community colleges emerged as critical first-responders to the sudden and sometimes drastic shifts in the labor market. In 2011, Anoka-Ramsey received a federal grant through Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) program, a federal initiative designed to help individuals and communities pull through in a difficult economy. Jan was assigned to act as a "navigator" for students in TAACCCT-funded programs at the college, guiding and supporting them throughout their educational journey.

More than 700 colleges received TAACCCT grants and many of them used their funding to create "navigator" positions like Jan's. Not all of the colleges used the term navigator – some called them career coaches, advisors, or retention specialists. For convenience sake, I will use the term "navigator" throughout the brief. TAACCCT resources empowered colleges to rethink the delivery of student services and to fashion new positions that combined the responsibilities of multiple student services roles into one person while

also reducing their caseload of student. This report examines innovations in how navigators' roles and responsibilities were conceptualized in TAACCCT grantee institutions and offers recommendations for future federal and state investment in community college student services.

There is evidence that TAACCCT positively impacted both educational and labor market outcomes of participants. A recent meta-analysis of third-party grant evaluations found that students in TAACCCT-funded programs were more likely to complete their training and to earn a credential than their peers. They also experienced better labor market outcomes (employment and/or earnings).¹ The meta-analysis does not isolate the impact of specific interventions, but among the possible uses of TAACCCT funding, one of the most frequent was to enhance student advising services. Colleges created new positions for navigators who were charged with helping students – many of them adults with little or no college experience – through processes like registration and course selection while also providing a shoulder to lean on. This injection of resources into community colleges through TAACCCT offers a clear opportunity to observe how these often-underfunded institutions expanded and reconceptualized student services when the opportunity arose.

TAACCCT Takes on the Great Recession

Community colleges feel the strain of recessions, since enrollment often runs countercyclical to the economy. When waves of students come to the college seeking education and training leading to economic stability in difficult times, a community college's resources may be even more thinly stretched than usual.² Student supports, along with other college programs and services, experience a squeeze just as their communities need them most.

In the midst of the Great Recession, the federal government invested nearly \$2 billion in community colleges through the U. S. Department of Labor (DOL), with the aim of helping adult and dislocated workers earn a credential and enter or re-enter the labor market. Beginning in 2010, DOL administered four grant competitions – one each year – and awarded a total of 256 grants, some to single institutions

and others to consortia. By 2014, the TAACCCT program had reached over 700 institutions in all 50 states and Puerto Rico,³ and supported a variety of initiatives designed to build the college’s capacity to serve adult learners and connect them to economic opportunity. Programs enhanced or developed with TAACCCT support were meant to offer participants the knowledge and skills needed to transition into high-wage occupations that would afford them stability in a tough economic time.⁴

In addition to funding new education and training programs, enhanced employer partnerships, and initiatives to accelerate student progress, TAACCCT grantee colleges were also encouraged to enhance retention initiatives and expand student support services with grant funds. Grantees had quite a bit of latitude in defining how they wanted to strengthen student services with TAACCCT support. For example, the request for proposals in the first round of TAACCCT states that one of the goals of the program is to “increase success rates for students with basic skills deficiencies by...improving student services that

improve retention.”⁵ More often than not, enhanced student support services took the form of a navigator assigned to support progress from recruitment to labor market entry.

Methods

Beginning in summer 2018, as part of a larger analysis of the TAACCCT program, researchers at New America and Bragg & Associates reviewed over 200 TAACCCT final grant evaluations and rated them on a variety of criteria, including the quality of the descriptive analyses and the strength of the evaluation design. From among the top quartile of reports, I selected five TAACCCT grants to analyze closely for this brief. I selected these five because each one focused on developing or enhancing student advising services and because they represent a cross-section of colleges, funding rounds, and industry sectors. The grants funded 42 colleges in 14 states from diverse regions of the country and included rural and urban-serving institutions. Table 1 includes brief descriptions of each grant project.

Table 1: Grants Covered in this Report

Grant	Round	State[s]
<p><i>Health Professions Pathways (H2P)</i></p> <p>The H2P consortium consisted of nine community colleges and was dedicated to building healthcare career on-ramps for adult students through a slate of online, hybrid, and in-person training programs.</p>	1	MN, KY, OH, TX, IL
<p><i>Consortium for Healthcare Education Online (CHEO)</i></p> <p>The eight college CHEO centered on developing online and hybrid allied health programs, with a particular focus on reaching dislocated workers, especially people in rural locales.</p>	2	CO, WY, SD, MT, AK
<p><i>Better Occupational Outcomes with Simulation Training (BOOST)</i></p> <p>The BOOST multi-state consortium comprised six colleges that developed stackable allied health credential programs targeting adults and dislocated workers.</p>	3	NC, SC, AL
<p><i>Washington Integrated Sector Employment (WISE)</i></p> <p>WISE comprised eight community and technical colleges across Washington connecting adults to economic opportunity in clean energy, construction, and advanced manufacturing.</p>	4	WA
<p><i>The Ohio Technical Skills Innovation Network (Ohio TechNet)</i></p> <p>Ohio TechNet was a single state consortium of 11 community colleges focused on connecting Ohioans to advanced manufacturing training while automation was reshaping the industry in the state.</p>	4	OH

I reviewed final evaluations, interim reports if available, and any other written products related to the five grants in question made available in the Skills Commons repository.⁶ Additionally, I conducted 19 phone interviews in July and August 2019 with individuals who are either subject matter experts, grant evaluators, or TAACCCT grant staff for a consortium or college to complement information available from evaluations and other documents.

A Three-Part Framework for the Navigator Role

A central goal of TAACCCT was to develop and scale evidence-based strategies to help adult learners earn postsecondary credentials and move into good jobs. The grant solicitations required applicants to provide available evidence of the effectiveness of their proposed activities. The evidence base on adult training and employment strategies is thin. However, multiple studies have pointed to the effectiveness of advising, counseling, and job search assistance for helping adults progress through training programs and secure employment. For example, a 2006 national evaluation of the Trade Act Assistance program found that displaced workers who accessed counseling services at American Job Centers or community colleges were more likely to complete their programs and return to work.⁷ The recent “Gold Standard Evaluation” of the Workforce Investment Act similarly found that counseling and career advising had a positive impact on employment outcomes.⁸

As one of the few evidence-based practices for helping adult students and job seekers, advising and career navigation became one of the most commonly-funded grant activities under TAACCCT. Still, grantee institutions varied considerably in their use of navigators. The 42 colleges participating in the grant programs reviewed for this brief used their TAACCCT funding to move beyond traditional advising to a much more robust set of activities that followed the student through their educational experience – from recruitment through job placement. Colleges often positioned navigators as hubs who students could approach with a variety of questions, reversing the expectation that students have to go find the office or program themselves to get the help they need.

Looking across the grants, I have identified three overlapping domains where navigators offered support and connected students to resources: 1) the college, which can be a confusing place for adults who have been out of schools for many years, 2) the surrounding community and the many organizations and agencies that can provide supports to vulnerable students, and 3) the industry partners and employers that can benefit from a higher-credentialed workforce. Below are a few examples of how TAACCCT-supported navigators supported students in each of the three areas of practice.

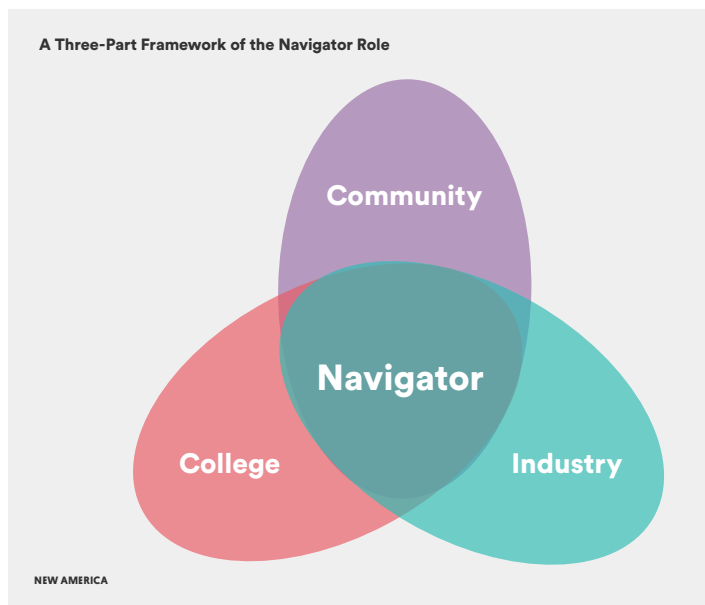
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Navigating the College

Traditional advisors and career counselors are often responsible for serving hundreds of students and, given the volume, can only provide guidance around a narrow set of issues. The TAACCCT grants freed up colleges to deploy student services professionals differently and use them to help students address a much broader set of challenges. With an infusion of much-needed resources from TAACCCT, colleges could embed navigators in particular training programs or academic departments. These navigators developed strong relationships with the students and faculty which, in turn, positioned them better to track students' progress and connect them to needed on-campus resources along the way. For example, at Jefferson Community and Technical College, the navigator was located in the same hall as faculty for TAACCCT-supported programs. Her location enabled her to build relationships easily with students and faculty, and to connect students to other resources on campus as needed.⁹

Leveraging Community Supports

Adult students in community colleges often face significant economic hardships, beyond being able to afford tuition. Housing, transportation, healthcare, and even food can create financial challenges that derail students from completing their programs.¹⁰ Helping students access services and programs provided by entities outside the college can be critical for helping students succeed. TAACCCT funding allowed colleges to develop their capacity to leverage community resources and build stronger relationships with other community stakeholders. Community support comprised both formal and informal networks. For example, a coach in one CHEO institution posted on social media that a student was struggling to make it to class because they were walking long distances. Within a day, a member of the community had donated a new bicycle for the student.¹¹



Connecting with Industry

Students benefit from understanding the needs and preferences of employers in their industry and in navigating the transition from college into the labor market. Similar to academic advising, many colleges have career advisors, but they are isolated from other parts of the institution and have few everyday points of connection with students. Many community colleges also have strong relationships with employers through their workforce divisions, but not through their academic division. The TAACCCT grant allowed colleges to develop staff and services to help connect students with local employers. For example, navigators in the WISE consortium built relationships with employers over the course of the grant and advocated for graduates to move into jobs with local employer partners.¹² Some local employers noted how pleased they were with the outcomes of navigation in the consortium, with new hires from WISE able to present a detailed record of their skills and knowledge and a career plan, thanks to their navigator.¹³

Taxonomy of Navigator Responsibilities

TAACCCT navigators had the opportunity to leverage their relationships and institutional knowledge in multiple areas to ease students' paths through their programs and into the workforce. The range of responsibilities held by TAACCCT navigators points to widespread need for additional college capacity to connect with students about their needs and direct them to available services and resources.

Students' journeys through education and training programs begin even before they hear of opportunities available to them and, hopefully, conclude with a smooth transition into the workforce. Navigators took on responsibilities to support students at many steps along this pathway. At each

milestone, some TAACCCT grantee institutions tasked navigators with providing encouragement, guidance, and access to helpful resources.

At each step along the pathway, navigators used different skill sets and knowledge to support a student's success. The professional competencies needed to recruit members of the community to take advantage of TAACCCT-funded programs were different than those needed to support a current student without a place to live or a student one month from graduation whose resume is several years old. As student advance in their program, the competencies navigators need to encourage student progress also evolve. Table 2 depicts common roles assigned to navigators and the skills they need to successfully complete these tasks.

Table 2: Taxonomy of Navigators' Responsibilities

Place on Student's Pathway	Area(s) of Navigator Framework	Navigator Skills and Knowledge
Recruitment	Community, Institution, Industry	Navigators must build relationships within the local community and need expertise in college admissions process, program content, and local labor market data.
Career Guidance	Institution, Industry	To support incoming students, navigators need to be well-versed in local labor market information and be able to share information about college programs that make sense for students' interests, values, and local job needs accordingly.
Enrollment	Institution	At this stage, navigators should be able to use institutional scheduling and advising platforms, provide information on credit for prior learning policy, and build relationships with faculty and other student services professionals on campus.
Advising	Institution, Community	Navigators should understand academic requirements and course sequencing and be able to offer culturally responsive communication, active listening skills, and the ability to use multiple communications modalities, including tech-enabled advising platforms.
Graduation	Institution	Navigators must understand institutional requirements and processes to ensure students who have met program requirements have a credential in-hand as soon as they earn it.
Workforce	Industry	It is critical that navigators maintain good relationships with industry partners and understand the most valued skills and credentials, as well as hiring needs and processes in target workforce sectors.

A Summary of Findings

As final evaluations of TAACCCT grants rolled in, promising results of enhanced student services emerged. The five grants of focus in this report offer some evidence that navigation made a positive impression on students and institutions. Analysis of one WISE college surfaced a positive correlation between the number of student interactions with navigators and post-program employment, up to eight visits.¹⁴ In the BOOST consortium, the frequency of meeting with a navigator for any reason was correlated with earning a certificate, and visits discussing wraparound services as well as visits with navigators about careers were both significantly correlated with certificate attainment.¹⁵ Likewise, a recent analysis of three H2P colleges shows that connecting with student services improved the likelihood of earning a certificate.¹⁶ Students said in interviews with CHEO evaluators that coaching throughout their TAACCCT-funded programs positively influenced their educational experience.¹⁷ Additionally, most (90 percent) of BOOST program completers who responded to a survey reported being satisfied with their navigator.¹⁸ From the institutional perspective, Ohio TechNet managers and navigators themselves felt that coaching had a positive impact on student success in the consortium.¹⁹ Overall, these are promising findings from the grants covered in this report, even though navigators' responsibilities in each college varied according to institutional needs.

Looking Beyond TAACCCT to the Future of Navigation

Advising students—about their class schedules, available support resources, career path, or personal challenges—is itself a capacity-building role,²⁰ designed to cultivate empowered students who are equipped to meet what comes their way. In this way, the navigator role served as a microcosm of the grand aims of TAACCCT, bringing cohesive student services, local employer partners, and community resources into the reach of community colleges and students. While TAACCCT aimed to integrate these sectors at the college and program level, navigators were knitting together community, institutional, and industry-based networks at the individual student level, as evaluations suggest, to considerable success.

Despite the challenges many colleges faced sustaining navigator roles as TAACCCT grants closed, no college reviewed for this report indicated that hiring a navigator felt like a misplaced investment of grant funds. Though institutions and navigators themselves occasionally struggled to define the role and connect to professional development to expand their skills, the impression of navigation across research for this project was largely positive. The professional skills and human connection that navigators offered to students in TAACCCT programs was one of the brightest among many success stories as the investment came to a close.

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For Jan Pomeroy, returning to an advising and coaching role at Anoka-Ramsey—after benefitting so much from her advisor’s guidance as a student—is a means of carrying on what was given to her. Jan is continuing this mission from her post-TAACCCCT role as adult learner services coordinator. “The role may change a little bit, but you’re still focused on helping students of all ages achieve their goals,” she says. “It’s in our blood to help students be successful.” For TAACCCT grantee colleges and their students, the benefits of navigation will hopefully carry on well beyond the grant itself.

Recommendations for Future Investment in Navigators

The value of holistic student services and supports, of which navigation is one model, is hardly controversial in higher education today.²¹ Likewise, there is strong evidence that coaching in public workforce settings offers similar benefits.²² Yet far too few community colleges are able to sustain advising staff or provide the kind of consistent, one-on-one, wraparound support that many students in TAACCCT-funded programs received. If there is consensus around the benefits of high-quality, personal advising and guidance, why are there not more navigators available to community college students?

The answer may lie in higher education funding models. Most states have weaker funding for public institutions of higher education now than they did before the recession.²³ And as important as financial aid is to student success, it is also critical that states provide robust direct appropriations for public colleges and universities. The stability of state appropriations for public higher education can help institutions maintain strong instructional and student services capacity through enrollment ebbs and flows and economic downturns. The fact that so many TAACCCT grantees prioritized student services in their funding requests shows that community colleges view personal, wraparound

support as a central component of educational and labor market success. Future federal and state investment in community colleges should take this into consideration.

Build state and federal investments in community college student support services. Focused investment in student services and individualized navigation can help students, colleges, and communities meet their education and economic goals. Colleges’ personal, academic, and career-focused support for students depends on staff members with a wide range of interpersonal and managerial skills, as well as institution and industry-specific knowledge.

Support better data collection and infrastructure on student services uptake and outcomes. Tracking navigation is critical to observing trends in student outcomes and can help with case-making for strong student services within community colleges.²⁴ Grants used to bolster student services should include resources to enhance institutional data infrastructure so that navigators’ impact can be properly analyzed. In order to assess the effectiveness of navigation, data on the frequency of contact and exact nature of the intervention are indispensable.

Fund professional development for community college navigators. Federal and state investment should also foster networks of learning among faculty and staff with student support responsibilities, including resources to develop navigators’ capacity to provide services related to institutional programs and processes, community resources, and relevant industry. As was the case with TAACCCT-funded navigators, part of the staying power of institutional capacity-building resources can consist of peer teaching and learning communities among staff at institutions with similar goals and strategies. By investing in these networks, schools help navigators to share best practices for student support.

Notes

1 Grant Blume, Elizabeth Apple Meza, Debra D. Bragg, and Ivy Love, *Estimating the Impact of Nation's Largest Single Investment in Community Colleges: Lessons and Limitations of a Meta-Analysis of TAACCCT Evaluations*, (Washington, DC: New America, 2019).

2 For discussion of the resource needs of community colleges, see "Community College Resources are Not up to the Challenge" in The Century Foundation, *Recommendations for Providing Community Colleges with the Resources They Need* (Washington, DC: The Century Foundation, 2019). For analysis of trends in state higher education appropriations, see Michael Mitchell, Michael Leachman, Kathleen Masterson, and Samantha Waxman, *Unkept Promises: State Cuts to Higher Education Threaten Access and Equity* (Washington, DC: Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, 2018).

3 Elissa Cohen, Kelly S. Mikelson, Christin Durham, and Lauren Eyster, *TAACCCT Grantee Characteristics: The Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training Grant Program Brief 2* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2017), p. 9.

4 See TAACCCT solicitations for grant applications, for example: US Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration (DOLETA), *Notice of Availability of Funds and Solicitation for Grant Applications for Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training Grants Program*, accessed October 1, 2019: <https://doleta.gov/grants/pdf/SGA-DFA-PY-10-03.pdf>.

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9 Call with Margot McGowen, Jefferson Community and Technical College.

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11 Renee Edwards and Heather McKay, *Consortium for Healthcare Education Online Career Coach Report* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers Education and Employment Center, 2016), p. 12.

12 *WISE Career Navigator Guidebook*, (Regional Education and Training Centers, Inc., 2018), section 2.6.10.

13 Call with Bob Topper, formerly WISE consortium.

14 See Third Sector Intelligence, Inc. (3SI), *Washington Integrated Sector Employment (WISE) TAACCCT Round IV WISE Program Evaluation Final Report* (Seattle, WA: 3SI, 2018).

15 Center for Applied Research, *Program Evaluation Final Report Midlands Technical College TAACCCT Better Occupational Outcomes with Simulation Training* (Charlotte, NC: Center for Applied Research, 2017), p 23.

16 Debra D. Bragg and Matt S. Giani, *The Impact the Holistic Student Services on Credential Attainment for Diverse Adult Learners in the Health Professions Pathways Consortium*, forthcoming.

17 Edwards and McKay, p. 23.

18 Center for Applied Research, p. 21.

19 The New Growth Group and the Ohio Education Research Center at The Ohio State University, The Ohio Technical Skills Innovation Network (Ohio Tech Net) Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College Career Training (TAACCCT) Grant Final Evaluation (2018).

20 Call with Molly Chamberlin and Nicole Dunn, Chamberlin Dunn.

21 See Achieving the Dream resources on holistic student supports, particularly: *Implementing a Holistic Student Supports Approach: Four Case Studies* (Silver Spring, MD: Achieving the Dream, 2018).

22 See Forston et al, 2017, and D'Amico and Schochet, 2012.

23 The following report offers a helpful overview of trends in state higher education appropriations, demonstrating that most states' funding has not returned to pre-recession levels. See: Michael Mitchell, Michael Leachman, Kathleen Masterson, and Samantha Waxman, *Unkept Promises: State Cuts to Higher Education Threaten Access and Equity* (Washington, DC: Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, 2018).

24 The value of quality data for use in case-making emerged in several interviews for this project, most notably with staff from the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) and Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA).



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