



memworks

BUSINESS CASE: POSTSECONDARY ATTAINMENT

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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

POSTSECONDARY ATTAINMENT



EMPLOYMENT ROADBLOCK

The lack of resources and support allow seemingly insignificant factors to derail the completion of career and technical education programs.



MEMWORKS OVERVIEW

Employment pathways for Memphians living in poverty are not working. Memphians experience poverty at some of the highest rates in the nation. Finding a way out of generational poverty is difficult, and employment pathways fall short even when employers across the community face demand for workers. Until the community understands why these pathways are not working, leaders in the workforce ecosystem can never hope to implement solutions that will improve them.

MemWorks is a collaboration between MDRC, a national research and social policy institution, and

Slingshot Memphis, a local poverty-fighting center of influence that is helping enhance employment outcomes for people experiencing poverty in Memphis. By utilizing the combined strengths of Slingshot and MDRC, MemWorks is working to amplify, not duplicate, existing workforce initiatives and help unify the numerous disparate efforts across the city. MemWorks hopes to do this by establishing a common understanding of the workforce domain that will increase alignment and facilitate collaboration across multiple entities and endeavors.



ROADBLOCK INTRODUCTION

The lack of resources and support available to students pursuing postsecondary programs allow seemingly insignificant factors to derail the completion of career and technical education programs. Six out of every ten Tennessee community college students experiencing poverty do not continue after the first year, and only [23 percent graduate within six years](#). Program completion is undermined by numerous compounding factors, such as inefficient enrollment processes and communication bottlenecks as

well as incidental life expenses like transportation, groceries, and technology.

This business case proceeds with a discussion of the facts substantiating the roadblock, an introduction to the evidence-based interventions and case studies that are effective at overcoming it, and an analysis of existing efforts in Memphis seeking to address the roadblock. The business case concludes with a discussion of several opportunities to address this roadblock in Memphis.

ROADBLOCK OVERVIEW

The lack of resources and support available to students pursuing postsecondary programs allow seemingly insignificant factors to derail the completion of career and technical education programs. For this roadblock, the relevant postsecondary programs include community colleges, technical programs, and certificate programs while excluding four-year degree programs. This roadblock is most relevant for people who have earned high school diplomas or GEDs.

Six out of every ten Tennessee community college students experiencing poverty do not continue after the first year, and only [23 percent graduate within six years](#). Program completion is undermined by numerous compounding factors, such as inefficient enrollment processes and communication bottlenecks (administrative barriers) as well as incidental life expenses like transportation, groceries, and technology (external barriers). Unless additional interventions are employed to help Memphians experiencing poverty complete postsecondary education, pathways to living-wage jobs will remain inaccessible and employers will continue to struggle to fill open roles.

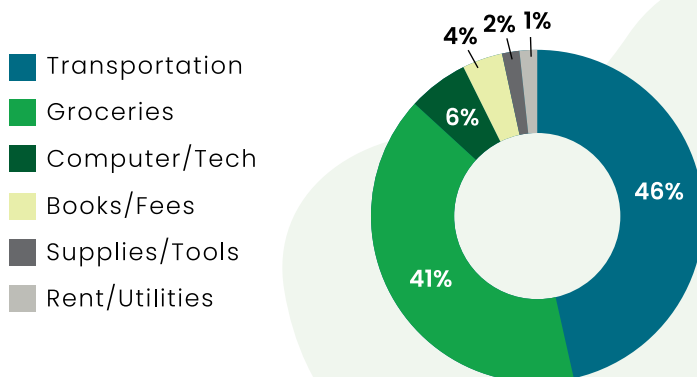
External barriers

External barriers refer primarily to financial barriers that occur unexpectedly, with students frequently lacking the resources to overcome these barriers and remain in school. The most common external barriers include transportation, groceries, and computer or technical issues.

For many students experiencing poverty, these [financial barriers](#) get in the way of postsecondary education attainment. There are limited “Learn and Earn” options for participants to manage both work and training. And for those who manage to juggle both work and training, it can be hard to make ends meet on low-wage work. Even program stipends

Most common incidental financial barriers

Pilot conducted in East Tennessee (2022)



or jobs paying \$15-20/hour do not provide family-sustaining wages. One training participant shared their experience with financial struggles as they were completing a training program:

“That’s one of the main reasons why I had left because of financial troubles. I still have bills to pay, and I’m like, ‘This is just not enough money to live on.’ So, I will say you’ve given up a lot of your time, so I feel like you should be compensated fairly for that.”

Another postsecondary student commented on their experience with managing their family members’ needs while attending school,

“I’m not working [while in school]...I have three children, 21, 16, and 7, so between my schedule, and my son’s therapy, and my daughter’s counseling, it’s hard.”

ROADBLOCK OVERVIEW cont.

Administrative barriers

In addition to external barriers, administrative barriers like scheduling and policy constraints can add additional stress to students and impact their ability to persist in programming. Scheduling and limited class availability may lead to students abandoning their program. For example, there are instances when a required course is not offered immediately after its prerequisite course, creating a gap of one or more terms before it can be taken. These gaps in availability can lead to program drop-off. Additionally, classes or training may have rigid attendance policies that can make it difficult to complete courses when dealing with illness, transportation issues, or childcare issues. When these difficulties occur, there might not be support available to help students persist or, if needed, re-enroll. Furthermore, there may not be clear communication channels that make existing policies accessible to students.

Students frequently lose their [Tennessee Reconnect](#) funding due to these barriers. This state-funded program offers financial support to adults who are returning to pursue higher education and advance their careers. Funding can be lost if a student does not maintain a program requirement or if a student fails to refile their annual application on time. One nonprofit that supports students pursuing community college and technical education shared a representative experience:

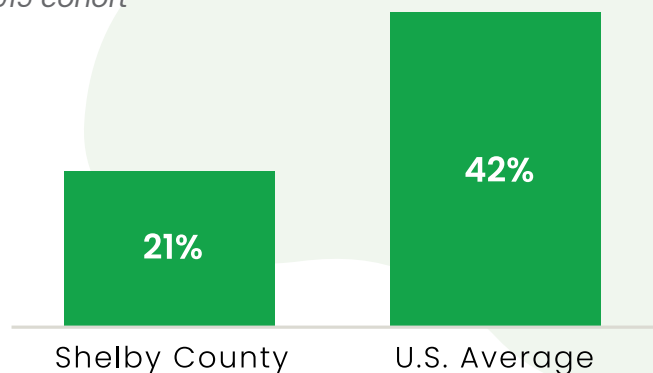
“Students find out on a Thursday afternoon that they need to turn in additional tax documents by 5:00 PM the following day, leaving no time to request documents from the IRS or locate tax information before they are purged from the roster.”

After a student loses Tennessee Reconnect funding, their likelihood of continuing in their program is less than [40 percent](#).

The problems with student persistence caused by external and administrative barriers are particularly severe in Shelby County, as six-year community college [graduation rates](#) are half that of the national average of 42 percent. Shelby County’s six-year graduation rate also lags behind both Davidson and Knox counties, which sit at 26 percent and 38 percent, respectively.

Six-year community college graduation rates

2015 cohort



The external and administrative barriers to program persistence compound and create insurmountable challenges for students. An opportunity exists to overcome both types of challenges with a student-centered approach.

EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTIONS

Summary of effective interventions

MemWorks uncovered eight examples of interventions that, when used in the appropriate combination and context, minimize the impact of external and administrative barriers and increase the likelihood of graduation from community colleges and the completion of technical training programs. These effective strategies can be broken down into four groups:

- 1 **Case management supports**
- 2 **Skill building instruction**
- 3 **Modifications to program design**
- 4 **Provision of resources**

1 CASE MANAGEMENT SUPPORTS

Case management supports are the most targeted and customized interventions, and as a result, frequently show the largest positive effects on graduation rates. The [Comprehensive Approaches to Student Success \(CASS\)](#) model provides wraparound programming complete with targeted financial, academic, and other student support services in community college settings. Students receive personal counseling and career advising. The model requires a dedicated coach and holistic case management, and the required ratio of one coach to 150 students demands investment to reap the significant gains from targeted, tailored support. When implemented effectively, the model has been shown to nearly double graduation rates in multiple community colleges across the United States in varying student populations.

[Early Alert and Intervention Systems](#)

complement Comprehensive Approaches to Student Success by providing a formal, intentional process of identifying, monitoring, and supporting students throughout their coursework. Alerts provide formal, proactive feedback, and student-support agents are alerted to red flags. For example, an early alert could trigger a slip in attendance or an uptick in tardiness. Interventions immediately follow, with strategic outreach in response to the alerts to provide individualized interventions. The model requires campus-wide buy-in for success but it can be implemented alongside several other existing models to enhance the reactivity of faculty and mentors.



EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTIONS cont.

2 SKILL BUILDING INSTRUCTION

While time and resources are required to generate favorable outcomes for case management interventions, there are lower-cost forms of group instruction that are shown to impact student persistence. A [first-year seminar course](#) or college survival skills course have been associated with higher first-term grade point averages and faster degree completion. The most effective courses retained an academic component and were not just strictly focused on life skills.

The [Connected Scholars Program](#) focuses on cultivating skills and attitudes needed to forge connections to help advance students' academic and career goals but does not require the pairing of formal mentors. Students learn about the important role of social capital in advancing their goals through experiential activities and real-world practice reaching out to university faculty and staff. Social capital refers to the networks of relationships among people that could be relied on in the event support is needed, such as navigating a career choice or finding the appropriate postsecondary program. Research suggests social capital is a critical factor in educational success, including the transition to postsecondary institutions.



Finally, [Values Affirmation Exercises](#) are used as an instructional tool to lessen psychological threat in stressful environments by refocusing students on their core values, which provides an enduring source of self-worth. One study that employed student subgroup analysis found that Black students who received the intervention saw the most benefit and experienced an improvement in grades for two, and in some cases three, years following the exercise. These improvements led to a significant reduction in the achievement gap.

3 MODIFICATIONS TO PROGRAM DESIGN

In some cases, shifting the design of the programs themselves limits the impact of both external and internal barriers to student achievement. Institutions that offer [Stackable Credentials](#) enable students to pursue a sequence of industry-recognized credentials that can accumulate over time to demonstrate a person's expanded competencies, which enables career advancement and increased wages. This program structure alleviates risk for students who can accumulate credentials and lessens the consequences of program pauses. The program model also enables students to attain degrees more quickly because they are packaged in more attainable segments. It is important, however, to ensure that students are stacking credentials progressively and not merely participating in

EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTIONS cont.

unrelated course sequences that do not build toward certifications that will result in career advancement or income growth.

The [I-BEST model](#) (Integration of Basic Education and Skills Training) offers similar parallel paths where the teaching of foundational basic skills is integrated with college-level technical content through team teaching by a basic skills instructor and an occupational instructor. Evaluations of the model demonstrate it increased college enrollment by 22 percentage points and increased enrollment in occupational training courses by 41 percentage points.

burdens. Last-dollar scholarships help students overcome any final expenses needed to pursue a postsecondary education program. These could include funds to purchase a computer, software subscriptions, or books for coursework. The models also offer near-peer coaches that offer mentorship to students in addition to financial support. Tennessee Promise students outpace their peers in first-year retention, three-year graduation, and six-year graduation rates. COMPLETE students who receive coaching are 80% more likely to remain in the program than non-COMPLETE peers. For these programs to capture persistence gains, they must have straightforward application processes with minimal document requirements.

Otherwise, they run the risk of creating the same barriers to success they aim to resolve. Both Promise and COMPLETE programs exist outside of Tennessee in similar formats.

Concluding thoughts

These models need not be viewed in a vacuum and tailoring to local contexts is critical. Programs can adopt stackable or concurrent models while offering targeted case management along with tailored instruction that builds students' skills. The exact complement of models will depend on student needs and the degree or certificate in question.



4 PROVISION OF RESOURCES

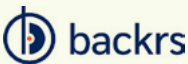


[Promise Programs](#) and the [COMPLETE MODEL](#) provide last-dollar scholarships for tuition and grants to help students cover unexpected financial

EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTIONS cont.

Case examples of successful approaches

The research identified several examples that provide powerful illustrations of the above models and can help inform how they might be successfully implemented in Memphis. Prior to any attempt to implement these models, they need to be adapted and refined for the local Memphis

context. The first column lists the name of the organization, the second column identifies the interventions described above that it employs, and the third column provides a brief description and commentary about its applicability for Memphis.

Organization	Interventions Employed	Description
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • COMPLETE • Professional mentorship and social capital 	<p>Backrs is an online platform that supports high-performing, under-resourced, often first-generation college students, primarily through mentorship and financial stipends. The platform connects students with experienced adults for guidance and college access support. Active in several cities, including Memphis, Backrs focuses on fostering educational opportunities for students who lack resources.</p>
 <p>THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION</p> <p>LEAP (Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehensive Approaches to Student Success • COMPLETE • Social and emotional coaching/CSP • Stackable credentials 	<p>LEAP is a national organization targeting youth aged 14-25 who are disengaged from school and work. It aims to provide pathways to employment and further education. The program's success relies on cross-system partnerships, which can be particularly effective in Memphis by pooling local resources. However, its impact in Memphis may depend on the specific socioeconomic and educational context and the presence of suitable partner organizations.</p>
 <p>City University of New York (CUNY) ASAP (Accelerated Study in Associate Programs)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehensive Approaches to Student Success • Fostering community • First-year seminar course 	<p>CUNY ASAP is a community college model in New York aimed at facilitating students' completion of Associate's degrees by reducing access barriers. It offers services that include academic support, financial assistance, and career development. A significant challenge for similar programs like tnAchieves is student recruitment, an area CUNY ASAP may need to emphasize in its strategy.</p>

THE MEMPHIS LANDSCAPE

The Memphis landscape analysis highlights six organizations that address external and administrative barriers to postsecondary persistence. While this list might not be comprehensive, it provides a valuable understanding of the current services available in Memphis seeking to address this roadblock. In some cases, the organization does not directly employ one of the interventions noted above,

but it employs a similar model that illustrates the purpose or function of the intervention. In cases where the model is not directly employed, italics are used to denote the distinction. The first column lists the name of the organization, the second column identifies the interventions described above it employs, and the third column describes the organizations' work as it relates to this roadblock.







Organization	Interventions Employed	Description
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehensive Approaches to Student Success • Promise Programs • College Survival Skills Course 	<p>The Collective Blueprint aims to provide relationships, resources, and a network of support to help young adults discover and develop their unique talents in order to advance their personal and professional objectives. The Collective Blueprint provides a \$400 per month stipend to students in the program in addition to individualized coaching which mirrors the CASS model and Promise Programs. The program also offers training on behavioral skills and mental health and wellness akin to a College Survival Skills Course.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehensive Approaches to Student Success • Early Alert and Interventions systems • <i>Connected Scholars Program</i> 	<p>Agape Child & Family Services is a holistic two-generation (2Gen) program that meets families where they are and helps create healthy homes, thriving communities, and supportive relationships for children and families. Agape has two primary program areas relevant to this roadblock. The Stars program helps high school students prepare for postsecondary opportunities. Staff, called School Connectors, monitor student performance and intervene when necessary, using an early alert and intervention-like system. Agape's TeamWorks program aims to provide case-managed interventions to families, including opportunity youth, as they pursue postsecondary opportunities. Teamworks' efforts resemble the CASS and COMPLETE models. Agape also provides last-mile funding for training programs.</p>

Chart continued on next page.

THE MEMPHIS LANDSCAPE cont.

Organization	Interventions Employed	Description
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Comprehensive Approaches to Student Success</i> 	<p>Moore Tech is a technical trade higher education institution offering a number of technical certifications. Moore Tech offers consolidated support services to its students through academic advising, tutoring, and financial aid. While Moore Tech does not directly implement any of the models described above, some of its wraparound supports resemble the CASS model.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Early Alert and Intervention Systems</i> 	<p>The Soulsville Charter School has a Career and Alumni Support Team (CAST) that provides support to its alumni as they pursue postsecondary education opportunities. It employs a type of early alert and intervention system through regular check-ins with alumni. Students in need of help receive direct support from school staff and also connections to supportive services.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Comprehensive Approaches to Student Success</i> 	<p>Persevere is a national workforce development program with a local affiliate in Memphis that teaches adults impacted by the criminal legal system how to code and guarantees them jobs as software developers, web developers, software engineers, and full stack developers. While Persevere does not directly employ the CASS model, it offers wraparound services, resource referrals, and financial education to adults participating in their coding programs.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promise programs • Early Alert and Intervention Systems • Comprehensive Approaches to Student Success 	<p>tnAchieves provides a suite of student-focused programs to help Tennessee Promise Scholarship recipients pre- and post-enrollment in postsecondary education. All supported students have access to last-dollar tuition scholarships at postsecondary institutions across Tennessee along with guidance from mentors. Students who are economically disadvantaged are automatically enrolled in COMPLETE, which provides a near-peer coach who provides resources, answers questions, and serves as an accountability partner. COMPLETE eligible students also have access to grants that can cover costs outside of tuition such as groceries, gas cards, bus passes, rent support, etc.</p>

THE MEMPHIS LANDSCAPE cont.

After reviewing the available services in Memphis seeking to support postsecondary attainment, several potential gaps were identified. These gaps include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Established technical training programs and community colleges often implement homegrown wraparound supports that can resemble the models described above, but they are frequently implemented in ways that do not meet the evidence-based standards described in the models above which can limit their effectiveness
- First Year Seminar courses and College Survival Skills courses are not currently provided consistently across the Memphis ecosystem
- Early alert and intervention systems are employed by a few niche programs, but they could be more robustly used across the Memphis landscape. Furthermore, data sharing restrictions exist that make these systems less effective.



OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPACT

Several opportunities for impact could improve student persistence through career and technical education programs in Memphis. The opportunities will insulate students against the impact of external shocks while enabling them to

more easily navigate internal challenges within their programs. These recommendations aim to empower stakeholders in Memphis' workforce ecosystem with specific, evidence-backed ways this roadblock can be effectively overcome.



OPPORTUNITY #1 **Enhance existing community college persistence programs**

An opportunity exists to enhance some of the existing postsecondary persistence programs at the community college level to help ensure they are incorporating best-in-class models and implementing the models effectively.

A best practices diagnostic could be conducted to determine the level of performance across the core models that encourage persistence. A transformation plan could be developed from the results of the diagnostic to make adjustments that would further insulate students from external barriers and administrative barriers that would impact persistence. This would include updating and enhancing programs across each of the four areas described above: 1) Case management supports; 2) Skill building instruction; 3) Modifications to program design; and 4) Provision of resources.

This opportunity could likely be initiated, and perhaps fully addressed, through existing budgets for tnAchieves and Southwest Tennessee Community College. Additional external funding, however, would greatly contribute to the quality of the comprehensive diagnostic and especially to ongoing technical assistance and the implementation of identified enhancements. Technical assistance from experts and well-placed stakeholders would help enhance the quality and speed of the diagnostic, as well as the success of the transformation program to implement the identified enhancements.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPACT cont.



OPPORTUNITY #2 **Implement formal persistence programs** **where they do not currently exist**

Targeted student support through case management is critical to student persistence and long-term success. These supports predominantly exist in the community college context, but the principles that underlie their impact could be replicated in smaller technical training and certification programs. Where possible, training programs in Memphis can build these programs into their model utilizing the CASS Model and Early Alert and Intervention Systems. Technical assistance should be provided to help ensure the effectiveness of these adaptations.

Some training and certification institutions might not have the scale sufficient to enable them to internally offer the wraparound support described above. In this case, local partners can be found to shoulder the administrative and implementation burden while providing support for smaller career and technical education programs. These partners would likely be existing nonprofits that already provide these kinds of wraparound services. This will require flexibility from funders, and perhaps creativity from policymakers, to ensure the requisite funding is provided to the partners providing wraparound support. In any case, ensuring that every student experiencing poverty who pursues a career or technical education program has access to wraparound support would significantly improve outcomes.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPACT cont.



OPPORTUNITY #3 **Strengthen postsecondary persistence efforts at the K-12 level to smooth the transition to postsecondary education for students**

Many students graduate high school and immediately enroll in a community college or career and technical education program but fail to show up for the first day of school. While postsecondary institutions shoulder some of the burden to help carry students forward to the first day of classes, there are effective interventions that local K-12 school districts can employ to help ensure students enroll in their postsecondary education programs and persist from the start.

These interventions at the K-12 level include implementing more standardized support to assist families with filling out the FAFSA as a first step. From there, a formal bridge program could be offered or a strong pipeline created to programs like tnAchieves' existing summer bridge programs to keep students on track to starting their postsecondary programs. Finally, there are opportunities for K-12 school districts, tnAchieves, and other high school advising programs to coordinate directly with each other to track student progress from the end of 12th-grade into the summer, providing targeted support where necessary to keep students on track.

Additional funding would likely be necessary for local K-12 school districts to support the staff and advisors needed to provide the additional programming as well as the technical assistance and change management needed to improve coordination across entities. Funding to help families cover document fees in order to complete the FAFSA would also greatly support these efforts.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPACT cont.



OPPORTUNITY #4 **Enhance existing persistence programming provided by tnAchieves and expand its implementation in the Memphis area**

tnAchieves' persistence programming employs several practices that are indicative of best-in-class persistence programs. Opportunities remain, however, to further refine existing practices and implement additional practices that research suggests would lead to even greater persistence and graduation rates. In addition, tnAchieves' programming was initially developed in eastern Tennessee which does not have the same concentration of urban and lower socio-economic environments found in Memphis. Working to apply tnAchieves' programming for the local context in Memphis would support its expansion and efficacy.

Similar to Opportunity #1, a best practices diagnostic could be conducted to determine the level of performance across the core models that encourage persistence. A refinement plan could be developed from the results of the diagnostic to make adjustments that would further enhance the impact of tnAchieves' persistence programming and adapt it for the Memphis context. This would include updating and enhancing programs across each of the four areas described above: 1) Case management supports; 2) Skill building instruction; 3) Modifications to program design; and 4) Provision of resources. With these program enhancements, tnAchieves would be even better positioned to expand its support across Memphis, both increasing its services with institutions it already works with and expanding its services to additional institutions.

Funding for technical assistance would be needed to support a best practices diagnostic and the implementation of program refinements. Additional funding would be necessary to support greater programming at existing partner institutions and to embed programming at new partner institutions in Memphis. Longstanding funding would be needed to maintain these ongoing supports. No policy changes, however, are anticipated to implement this change.

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

Coordinated action on these opportunities for impact would not only improve persistence and completion rates for postsecondary programs, but it would also create a less stressful and more supportive environment for students and their families as they enter adulthood and begin their careers. Each evidence-based solution has been shown to contribute to improved enrollment, persistence, or graduation rates. Some individual practices have contributed to graduation rates nearly doubling. If these practices were combined in a coordinated manner in Memphis, it is reasonable to expect graduation rates could more than double and exceed the national average for community college and technical training programs.

More plentiful wraparound support would enable students to persist in their studies and would also have spillover effects into other parts of students' lives. Postsecondary and technical training programs in Shelby County will become easier to navigate, and data-driven approaches will help students stay on track by recognizing risk factors and red flags as they appear. While upfront investment is required, long-term efficiencies could be captured through quicker student pathways to degrees and more efficient processes within career and technical education programs. The result will be improved student outcomes and a greater number of workforce participants who are able to perform skilled labor.

