



Launching A 15 to Finish Campaign: A Program Evaluation

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation in memory of my parents-in-law, who showed me through their educational journeys that anything is possible in this country, and to my husband, who from the day I arrived in the United States inspired me to go as far as I could in learning what I am passionate about and never let anything get in my way.

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Abstract

Many community college students do not finish their 2-year degree on time, and there are several institutional barriers that prevent students from taking 15 college credits per semester. Students are not aware of the academic and economic benefits of taking 15 college credits per semester. A 15 to Finish communication campaign, which has been successfully implemented in many institutions around the country, informs students of the benefits of taking 15 credits each semester by providing clear messages and advisement. The campaign empowers students to make informed decisions on the number of credits to enroll in per semester. The purpose of the 15 to Finish program implementation evaluation at a community college in the northeast of the United States was to evaluate training that provided evidence-based data to college professionals and assess if first-time, degree-seeking students saw and received the 15 to Finish campaign messages. The campaign's impact on student enrollment behavior was calculated by analyzing Fall 2021 enrollment data of students who took 15 or more credits and comparing them to previous fall semesters' student enrollment data. Analyses also determined if student enrollment behavior was equitable across race and ethnicity after messages were seen and received. Results showed the program was successful. Students saw and received messages from different sources, and enrollment in taking 15 credits during Fall 2021 increased, including by race and ethnicity. A step-by-step program recommendation for future practitioners who wish to implement a 15 to Finish campaign and resources are provided.

Keywords: community college, on-time graduation, 15 to Finish, communication campaign, implementation program evaluation

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Chapter 1

Full Time Does Not Equal On Time: Why Mindsets and Policies Are Roadblocks for Full-Time Community College Students to Graduate On Time

Abstract

Only 5% of community college students graduate in 2 years (Complete College America [CCA], 2021). On-time graduation rates are even lower for low-income and racially and ethnically minoritized students. More time spent in college results in more money spent for a degree. Extra time leads to delayed entry into a good-paying job and therefore missed opportunity costs and lost retirement savings (CCA, 2013; Jones, 2015). The mindset of college professionals easing students into college with fewer credits is well intentioned but impairs less academically prepared, low-income, and racially and ethnically minoritized students in their pursuit of a degree (Belfield et al., 2016; Szafran, 2001). Students lack guidance and information on the academic and economic value of earning a degree on time (Belfield et al., 2016). A comprehensive literature review and conversations with advisors and students of the current culture in community colleges on students' time spent in college from start to graduation offers insight on the academic and economic hurdles full-time students face that prevent on-time graduation. The following themes emerged: (a) students are not informed of the positive effects of academic momentum, (b) students receive insufficient academic guidance on benefits of on-time graduation, and (c) financial aid programs disincentivize 15 credits per semester by making 12 credits the default for full-time enrollment. Based on findings, an intervention using a communication campaign can ensure college professionals and students are informed of the benefits of 15 versus 12 credits.

Keywords: on-time graduation, academic momentum, financial aid policy, advisors

Full Time Does Not Equal On Time: Why Mindsets and Policies Are Roadblocks for Full-Time Community College Students to Graduate On Time

There is an “on-time” degree completion crisis in the community college system, which has existed for decades. Community colleges are 2-year institutions, but few students complete a degree in 2 years. The inability to finish a degree on time harms the interests of the student, the educational institution, and the nation. Forty-one percent of college students attend a community college, also known as a 2-year college, of which 36% attend full time (American Association of Community Colleges, 2020). Only 5% of full-time students graduate in 2 years (Complete College America [CCA], 2021). Each extra year a student delays graduation results in lessening their post-college earnings (Davidson & Blankenship, 2017). Time is money. The additional time spent impacts students’ costs due to rising tuition rates and missed opportunity costs associated with the loss of wages and retirement savings. For each additional year at a 2-year institution, attendance and lost wages cost the student over \$50,000 per year (CCA, 2014). By increasing completion rates, higher education institutions benefit by receiving more state funding to aid their mission. Additionally, by setting up systems and structures that encourage students to enroll in 15 credits each semester, community colleges diminish the equity gap for low socioeconomic and racially and ethnically minoritized students, as these students attend college mostly part time (Attewell et al., 2012).

Unfortunately, completion rates are not equally dispersed among student subpopulations. CCA, a nonprofit organization advocating for higher graduation rates and closing the equity gap in higher education, analyzed data for 2-year graduation rates, disaggregating students into subgroups of ethnicity, race, and socioeconomic status. The data were troublesome. Their report indicated community colleges graduate just 1% of Blacks, 4% of Hispanics, and 4% of Pell

Grant students in 2 years. This report is particularly alarming when considering the community college student population mostly comprises Black, Hispanic, and low-income students. Low graduation rates for students of color do not help the achievement of student equity. According to Johnny Taylor, president and CEO of the Thurgood Marshall College Fund who presented at the CCA 2016 Annual Convening, this low completion rate is a national tragedy for all low socioeconomic students, and racially and ethnically minoritized students who started college and did not get to the finish line. The inability to finish a degree hits them extremely hard as they acquire debt with no degree. In Taylor's words, "We take their money, their time, their dream and their hopes" (CCA, 2016d, 1:19). Since 2021, 36 million Americans have earned college credits without earning a degree (CCA, 2021).

Many students start with the intent to earn a degree but lack the knowledge they need to make informed decisions about their enrollment to graduate in a timely and cost-effective manner. A major hurdle to complete a degree on time is colleges define full-time attendance as 12 credits per semester because this is the definition to receive maximum financial aid (Belfield et al., 2016; Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2017; Park, 2015). This policy delays a "full-time" student's graduation by at least 1 semester at 2-year institutions. The number of college credits to take per semester to graduate on time is 15 credits. Numerous studies focusing on academic momentum have shown students who start with 15 credits in their 1st semester have a higher grade point average (GPA) and have a higher probability of persisting and completing their degree (Adelman, 1999; Ann & Chang, 2019; Attewell & Monaghan, 2016; Crosta, 2013).

Attending college full time with 15 credits per semester increases chances of graduating. Many colleges are ignoring or not advocating improvement in the on-time completion rates at 2-

year institutions (CCA, 2021; Johnson & Zaback, 2016). There might be inequitable practices at community colleges preventing low-income and racially and ethnically minoritized students who have the greatest need to achieve an on-time college degree. These assumptions require further analysis, as 55% of students enrolled in community colleges come from a low-income family making below \$30,000 a year, 44% are Hispanic, and 35% are Black (Community College Research Center [CCRC], 2020). Community colleges serve as the engine of opportunity for many low-income students and for racially and ethnically minoritized students. If this population's low graduation rates continue, the country will miss the economic opportunity to increase its global competitiveness (CCA, 2011). Low-income individuals are 5 times more likely to move out of poverty if they attain a college degree (McNair et al., 2016). The college culture must change and focus on the importance of on-time graduation. There is no time to waste. The longer it takes to earn a degree, the more life can get in students' way, and the less likely they will graduate (Jones, 2015). If higher education fails to apply urgency by encouraging students to take 15 credits per semester, thus getting them to the finish line as soon as possible, students' dropout rates before earning a degree will remain (Johnson & Zaback, 2016; Jones, 2015). By delaying their graduation, students decrease their chances of achieving social and economic mobility. In turn, colleges will miss out on performance-based funding and increased graduation rates, and the United States will continue to lose the opportunity to regain the number 1 spot it once held in 1992 for most graduates in the world (CCA, 2011).

College administrators in higher education do not strongly emphasize the academic and economic value of finishing a community college associate degree in 2 years. The purpose of the literature review presented herein is to identify studies and reports on why many community

college students are not enrolling in 15 college credits each semester and therefore not graduating on time.

Method

To develop a deeper understanding of why students are not graduating in 2 years by taking 15 credits per semester, I used a 2-step process. First, I sought students' and advisors' perspectives to better understand their views on the problem of students not enrolling in 15 credits per semester. I then identified peer-reviewed articles and gray literature on benefits of enrolling in 15 credits per semester for students to earn a degree in 2 years.

By obtaining students' and advisors' perspectives, I became aware of cultural standards at the community college in advising and financial policies that influenced students' academic trajectory. Based on my communication with advisors and students, I created criteria for the literature review and searched databases. The purpose was to find research done at community colleges on students taking 15 versus 12 credits per semester and studies that addressed advising and financial policies contributing to low on-time graduation rates. When viewing references of peer-reviewed articles, I discovered gray literature about the problem of practice. I became aware of nationally known universities and research organizations. I searched their websites and found working papers, research briefs, dissertations, newspaper articles, conference presentations, blogs, PowerPoints, and data dashboards that fit the criteria set forward in the search. I connected with these organizations on social media and discovered experts in the field with whom I created a personal contact to engage in conversations on the problem of practice.

Student and Advisor Perspectives

In the first phase of the research, I connected with four advisors and seven students at one community college to learn why students take 12 credits versus 15. I talked to a faculty advisor

who guided honors students in course selection and enrollment, a full-time academic advisor who advised scholarship recipients enrolled at the college, and two part-time advisors who advised students who came into the advisement center. Two students with whom I interacted were attending the college through the New Jersey Student Tuition Assistance Reward Scholarship Program, four students were Pell Grant recipients, and one student paid out of pocket while working part time. I assumed students coming to the honors faculty advisor and the advisor for the scholarship recipients would be the academically well-prepared students advocating for an intensive course load, and, inversely, I assumed advisors who saw all students would have different stories to share. I sought advisors' perspectives on how and why they advised students on course load intensity for each semester. I also asked their opinion on why students take 12 credits versus 15. The limitation of my discussion with advisors was I only engaged in conversations with four of them. I did not seek out advisors from other institutions where they might have established another mindset on taking 15 credits versus 12.

I spoke to seven students enrolled at the community college. I invited students from my language classes who were enrolled full time that semester to speak with me during my office hours. Three students taking 12 credits were in their 1st semester, two students were in their 3rd semester, and two students were in their 5th semester. I first engaged in a conversation with them to understand their mindset as to why they were taking 12 credits versus 15. Next, I sought to identify if any outside factors or individuals influenced their decision. I also wanted to know if they understood the course load needed to graduate on time. There were multiple limitations of connecting with only seven students. The community college student population is diverse, and by only discussing the issue of full-time attendance with volunteers, I did not receive opinions of all subgroups of students enrolled at the college. A survey involving more students from all

subgroups at a community college with open- and closed-ended questions would help me understand the mindset of different student subgroups and their reasoning for or against taking 15 credits per semester.

Peer-Reviewed Research

In the second phase of the research, I identified the following 10 electronic databases to investigate the problem of practice: ABI/INFORM Collection, Academic Search Complete, ArticleFirst, EBSCO, ERIC, MasterFILE Complete, Project Muse, Proquest Central, SAGE Journals, and WorldCat. I searched databases for peer-reviewed articles published between 2000–2020. Using the Boolean operators, the search terms included “community college” OR “2-year institution” AND “academic momentum” OR “early momentum” OR “advisement” OR “economic benefits” OR “financial aid” OR “completion” OR “on-time graduation.” The initial search resulted in 1,367 articles. Criteria addressing the problem of practice for inclusion in the peer-reviewed search for the literature review were: (a) academic momentum of taking a high-credit load versus a lower credit load for persistence and completion, (b) the influence of advisement toward completion, (c) financial aid policies concerning the completion of a college degree, and (d) facts on community college students’ demographics and completion. I removed duplicates and 782 articles remained. By screening titles, I excluded 151 articles that did not pertain to the United States and another 387 articles irrelevant to the search. During a second screening, I reviewed abstracts and excluded articles that did not relate to academics, advisement, economic value, or higher education finances. This selection process left a total of 38 peer-reviewed articles.

After summarizing articles in an annotated bibliography, I organized key findings by the following themes: (a) academic momentum, (b) advisement, (c) financial policy, and (d) data

related to community college demographics. I color coded the annotated bibliography by themes and created a synthesis matrix. Through this process, I selected eight of the peer-reviewed journals to include in the literature review, which pertain to the importance of student momentum, persistence when taking a high-credit load, and the economic benefit of finishing on time at a community college. The 30 excluded peer-reviewed articles failed to meet the criteria for the literature review—they were not pertinent to early momentum, advising issues, or financial policies. I excluded several articles, as they related to transfer to 4-year institutions. Other articles addressed retention theories or focused on researching an intervention for the problem of practice. They pertained to (a) summer programs increasing academic momentum, (b) factors leading to persistence and academic momentum, (c) providing student loans or solutions, (d) incentives, and (e) innovative programs to raise retention and completion rates.

Gray Literature and Public Scholarship

Reviewing references of sources I identified through the databases resulted in the addition of three books to the literature review. Two pertained to the issue of students attaining academic momentum and the other to on-time graduation issues. I discovered working papers, research briefs, conference presentations, PowerPoints, and data dashboards relevant to the problem of practice by viewing the educational organizations' websites of CCRC, Achieving the Dream, CCA, the Center for Community College Student Engagement, and the Lumina Foundation. Connecting with these organizations on social media led to personal communication with experts in the field.

Altogether, the search produced 104 second-source materials. I created an annotated bibliography for each of the sources and color-coded them by themes. In the literature review, I included 33 of the gray literature sources on research relating to the problem of on-time

graduation. These 33 sources include 19 concerning students' academic momentum, five on the advisement of students, and six on the flawed federal policies that disincentivize students from completing college on time. The gray literature also includes four sources that offered data on community college demographics and completion. Included in the academic momentum resources were four videos from CCA of plenaries at their annual conventions. Plenaries included scholars and experts reporting the most updated information and data in the quest for on-time completion and early momentum, misguided conceptions of advisors on students' ability to take 15 credits per semester, and the economic benefits of taking 15 credits per semester at higher education institutions. The recorded plenaries address the importance of looking at on-time degree attainment through an equity lens. I did not include reports, articles, and working papers on policy changes and innovative programs to improve completion rates, as they pertained to the solution, not the problem of practice. I excluded several organizations, governmental departments, and universities that reported duplicate data of community college students and completion. I also excluded articles on academic consequences of employment, as those articles did not focus on full-time enrollment or on-time graduation. Finally, I excluded all newspaper articles, as I had already retrieved information from other sources with more validity.

Results and Discussion

Based on a review of articles, I found the following themes relate to why full-time students take 12 versus 15 credits per semester and therefore cannot graduate in 2 years: (a) absence of information on the positive effects of academic momentum, (b) insufficient academic guidance, and (c) financial aid programs disincentivize 15 credits per semester.

The current culture in community colleges pertaining to students' time spent in college—from onboarding to graduation—requires an examination of college and federal policies and the mindset of students and professional staff advising students.

Absence of Information on Academic Momentum

Many community college students do not enroll in 15 credits per semester because they do not seem aware increasing the intensity of their credit load offers them academic momentum (Belfield et al., 2016). There is ample literature on the benefits of enrolling full time with 15 credits per semester, especially during the 1st semester. Adelman (1999) was the first to employ the term “academic momentum” to indicate the benefits of taking a high-intensity credit load during the 1st year to improve college completion. Adelman found students enrolled in fewer than 20 credits their 1st year were less likely to complete a degree than those who enrolled in more credits and noted (a) students' academic preparedness played an important role in the decision to enroll in a high-credit load and (b) the academic preparedness is a dominating factor driving racial inequity at higher institutions. Bowen et al. (2009) agreed with Adelman's statement but also showed low socioeconomic status widened the achievement gap. They found many academically, economically, and socially disadvantaged students do not enroll full time in college classes and, therefore, do not benefit from academic momentum, which increases educational inequalities by diminishing their chance for degree completion.

Studies have shown enrollment in 15 credits in the 1st semester is associated with persistence and degree attainment (Ann & Chang, 2019; Attewell & Monaghan, 2016; Belfield et al., 2016; Crosta, 2013). This finding is precious information for higher education institutions, as the college completion rate is meager for racially and ethnically minoritized, low-income, and less academically prepared students. Refining Adelman's (1999) concept of academic

momentum, Attewell et al. (2012) used the same National Education Longitudinal Survey data as another Adelman (2006) study, following eighth graders all the way through college from 1988 until 2001, testing momentum indicators in student enrollment. Attewell et al. modified Adelman's (2006) methods as these approaches were considered too broad. Their strategy narrowed Adelman's methods to avoid selection bias and causal circularity issues. They equally narrowed their analyses to four indicators, or treatments, and analyzed 2- and 4-year institutions using several matching methods.

Indicators of importance to this review were two relating to momentum. The first referred to part-time student status in the 1st semester, as defined by attempting fewer than 12 credits. The other momentum indicator focused on students who took a high course load in the 1st semester. After addressing selection effects using different matching techniques, Attewell et al. (2012) found students starting part time in their 1st semester at the community colleges in their study had weaker academic preparation and an 8%–13% lower chance to complete a degree versus students attending full time. These results intensify social and educational inequalities, as less academically prepared and low-income students are overrepresented at community colleges and tend to take fewer than 15 credits. These students have the lowest academic momentum and completion rates, often dropping out of college. The study's most significant finding was academic momentum early in the 1st semester, regardless of their socioeconomic status, academic preparedness, race, or ethnicity, positively affected students' paths in later semesters toward degree completion. The study's limitation was researchers could not assess the heterogeneity of early momentum across race due to sample size issues. However, their first impression was Adelman (1999, 2006) was correct about academic momentum: There was no significant association with race on degree completion.

Attewell et al.'s (2012) findings on 1st-semester momentum raise the question of whether increasing a student's credit load in the 2nd semester from 12 credits to 15 would improve degree completion chances. Attewell and Monaghan (2016) attempted to address this idea in a study examining two questions. After studying if attempting 15 credits in the 1st semester improved graduation rates for students of color, less academically prepared students, and students with work obligations, they questioned the effects of increasing the credit load from 12 credits to 15 in the 2nd semester.

To assess the relationship between early full-time enrollment and its effects, they examined significant factors that would impact students' initial choices about number of credits and capability to succeed. These factors were (a) resources available to students, (b) precollege academic preparedness, and (c) attributes of the institution in which they enroll. Researchers used data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, following 1st-year students entering postsecondary education in the 2003–2004 academic year, conducting interviews at that time and then again in 2006 and 2009. They applied a propensity-score matching method and sensitivity test to minimize bias resulting from unmeasured differences between different student groups. Results showed low-socioeconomic-status and less academically prepared students took fewer credits early in their college careers. There was a 3.6% increase in degree attainment for students who increased their course load from 12 to 15 credits in the 2nd semester. Their findings demonstrated students starting college full time with 12 credits per semester were 9% less likely to graduate with a degree than those who started with 15 credits, and enrolling in a high-credit load was even more beneficial for racially and ethnically minoritized students than students from families with a college education. Their overall findings validate taking 15 credits early on has a positive effect on degree completion.

A CCRC study by Belfield et al. (2016) offered support for previous findings on academic benefits of taking 15 credits in the 1st semester. They examined the effectiveness of early momentum in college and researched college completion for students taking 15 or more credits their 1st semester and at least 27 credits their 1st year, whom they termed “momentum” students. They compared the success of momentum students completing a degree to full-time students taking 12 credits per semester. Researchers adopted a momentum framework, allowing them to assess results with existing literature on momentum. By modifying Attewell and Monagan’s (2016) method, they examined the relationship between students’ 1st-semester and 1st-year credit loads and total credits accumulated. The researchers also examined degree completion for each of the student groups in the study.

Belfield et al. (2016) used a large student-level data set from the Tennessee Board of Regents. The students in the study were first-time college students who enrolled in at least 12 credits in their 1st semester of college, 27 or more credits in their 1st year, and completed a degree within 6 years. The data set was drawn from students at 2-year and 4-year institutions, with 28% from 2-year and 71% from 4-year colleges. The researchers included all courses taken and followed Attewell and Monagan’s (2016) estimation approach using ordinary least squares and propensity score matching techniques. Their findings showed momentum students were accumulating credits faster the 1st semester and their 1st year due to their greater persistence. They were also more likely to attain a degree. The limitation of the study was a student taking 15 credits might be influenced by different factors than one taking 12 credits, as they were unable to control for students’ financial limits and employment status while taking courses. They observed momentum students tended to have an academic scholarship versus financial-need-based aid and were less likely to be Black. Using a sensitivity test, the authors confirmed 1st-semester and 1st-

year momentum contributed to credit accumulation. They concluded taking 12 credits instead of 15 in the 1st semester had a negative effect on degree completion. Early momentum students' probability of earning an associate degree in 2 years increased by 18% versus students enrolling in 12 credits. Tennessee Board of Regents data for the Fall 2008 community college cohort showed early-momentum students in the 75th percentile accumulated 60 credits in 2 years, but the average momentum student needed 6 years to reach 60 credits. As the average student in the study who took 12 credits each semester only accumulated about 45 credits after 6 years, additional research from these data could shed light on why early-momentum students in this study lost momentum and needed 4 extra years to reach the 60 credits needed to graduate. The researchers did not disaggregate the data between Hispanic and Black students; however, they pointed out racially and ethnically minoritized students can handle 15 credits per semester just as well as all other subgroups on campus, a message of which advisors need to be made aware (Belfield et al., 2016).

Peer-reviewed articles and the study completed at CCRC showed not encouraging students to engage in early momentum in the 1st year delays their degree completion. Students not enrolling in 15 credits as full-time status have a lesser probability of graduating on time. According to Ancel (2017), "Speeding up, not slowing down, ensures success" (p. 11). There is a lack of clarity in the literature on the meaning of the term "full-time status." Researchers in numerous studies stated students were full time or part time but did not define the term by number of credits taken. Future studies also need to address momentum over the entire degree acquisition, versus the 1st semester or 1st year, which will allow an even better understanding of these students' characteristics and demographics and which initiatives institutions need to implement so other students could attain the same benefit.

Insufficient Academic Guidance by the Institution

Many students attend college part time and are unaware taking 15 credits each semester is necessary to graduate in 2 years. A Center for Community College Student Engagement study showed beginning students have an unreasonable expectation of the length of time it takes to graduate with a college degree (Waiwaiole & Elston, 2017). According to the study, those who enrolled part time in community college have the most unrealistic expectations. Of part-time students who were 2 semesters into their college work, 47% assumed they would graduate in 1–2 years. This percentage changed to 38% for those who had been attending 3 semesters part time (Waiwaiole & Elston, 2017).

The vice president of CCA expressed their experience with students' unrealistic expectations when they attended a new student orientation at Purdue University. They asked students at orientation who had enrolled in more than 12 credits for the semester. About one tenth of the students raised their hands. They then asked who planned to graduate in 4 years. Everyone raised their hand. They concluded students did not know the course load required for on-time graduation because the institution had not informed them how many credits were needed each semester to complete a degree (CCA, 2016b). The ignorance by students of the course load required to graduate is a common phenomenon at institutions. Numerous colleges enroll students full time with 12 credits per semester.

Institutions are unintentionally delaying students' graduation, adding time and unnecessary extra expenditure by not informing them 15 credits per semester are needed to graduate on time (Attewell & Monaghan, 2016; Margarit & Kennedy, 2019; Pongracz, 2016; Szafran, 2001). Many students are unaware of the definition of academic full time. They believe they are on track to graduate in 2 years by taking 12 credits, equating the definition of full time

for financial aid with full time to graduate on time. During discussions in my office with students in their 1st semester at the college, I learned they were unaware they needed to take 15 credits per semester to graduate on time unless they enrolled in summer sessions. Their thought was being full time (i.e., taking 12 credits) meant they were going to graduate on time.

Certain programs on campuses that encourage student success have a minimum GPA attached to the program. This requirement might push students to take a lighter load to meet the program's requirement. Therefore, a GPA requirement could negatively impact students' on-time graduation when they lower their course load or even drop a course to have a better GPA (Carlson & Zaback, 2014).

When I sought perspectives from an honors program advisor, they explained they advised full-time students to take only 12 credits per semester. This number is considered full time by financial aid standards and the default number of credits to take for full-time enrollment. The advisor did not oppose advising students to go part time to college for them to be more successful in their academic coursework. According to the advisor, it was more important to have the honors students take fewer credits to have a better GPA to receive scholarships and be accepted at the 4-year institutions of their choice. Another advisor had a similar mindset: They often advised students who were studying engineering and needed to take rigorous major classes to take nine credits per semester. The advisor was convinced allowing students to enroll in more courses would lessen their success and even set them up for failure. They also offered returning students a lighter course load. The reason they gave was students had not been sitting in a classroom for a while and needed to ease into the learning environment. They advised high school students entering their 1st semester of college to start their college career in the same way as returning students. According to the advisor, students needed to be introduced to college with

a lighter course load to adjust to the academic rigor. Both advisors believed taking 15 credits is considered a heavy course load and not beneficial to student success at their community college.

This mindset exists nationwide. Dr. Spiva (n.d.), president of CCA, stated many community college students are already at a disadvantage to on-time graduation when they begin their 1st semester, as their advisors are trying to ease them into college life by not offering them 15 credits. This action sets them up for a longer stay and more debt. Spiva claimed research has shown bias against students of color, leads to less equitable outcomes on campus and in advising practices. Jenkins from CCRC, and coauthor of the aforementioned Tennessee study on early momentum (Belfield et al., 2016), spoke at a CCA (2016c) convening on this issue. They found attaining early momentum for students of color and of low socioeconomic status is significant to their success. Jenkins voiced that, with their best intentions and life situations outside of college, advisors are telling these students to take it slow and easy and pace themselves in taking college courses. They emphasized how this advice was terrible, and advisors need to raise their expectations. Jenkins also asserted their study found students could gain early momentum and succeed favorably regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.

Szafran (2001) examined the assumption a lighter academic load in a student's 1st year of college could lead to success. They studied the effect of a heavier course load on the student's GPA and persistence during the 1st semester and the 1st year. They discovered the credit load's effect did not vary much by the student's academic preparedness. Students who registered for more credits tended to have a higher GPA and were more likely to persist. They studied a cohort of new college students entering in the fall at a state university in Texas. The students registered for 12–19 credits for their 1st semester. Szafran decided to only take 25% as a sample of the cohort due to the extensive data coding of all variables. They measured all chosen variables

using the college database. The limitation was Szafran was not able to measure all variables. If they had, the study would have offered more variations on the influence of students' GPA. Szafran concluded the effect of credit load mattered on the success of 1st-year students. Students who enrolled in a heavier credit load the 1st semester and the 1st year had a higher GPA and higher retention. Results showed no differences in terms of race or academic preparedness. Students with less academic success in high school and racially and ethnically minoritized students were able to be successful in taking a heavier college course load like their White peers. Szafran implied there is a great deal of incorrect advising on campuses. Advisors offer 1st-year college students an easier load to attain greater success. Szafran pointed out this mindset goes back to the 1970s and 1980s, when developmental psychologists believed a person's natural progression was to move from something simple to something more challenging. However, offering advice to start with a lighter course load is widely contradicted by current research (Attewell & Monaghan, 2016; Belfield et al., 2016, 2019; Huntington & Gill, 2018). Studies in the last 2 decades have shown students wanting to raise their GPA need to enroll in a heavier course load their 1st year. Students who take more courses in a semester are more likely to succeed and persist.

Pongracz (2016) examined the relationship between advising types and time to complete a community college degree in Ohio. Pongracz (2016) defined three advising types among students in their study: (a) "consistent advisor type" (p. 10) were students who self-selected to make appointments with the same academic advisor during their months enrolled at the institution; (b) the "inconsistent advisor type" (p. 10) included students who made academic advising appointments with any academic advisor available; and (c) the "no advisor type" (p. 10) were students who did not make any appointments. The quantitative research study focused on

the relationship between advisors and first-time, full-time students seeking on-time degree completion and how advisor types were related to degree completion. Results indicated students who never met with an advisor graduated faster than those met with an advisor. Depending on the type of advisor, the delay of graduation averaged 4–6 months. This delay was attributed to advisors not meeting students' needs and expectations to graduate on time. They concluded students who did not use an academic advisor did not need advisement, as they had clear goals in mind, and likely considered an appointment with an advisor unnecessary. The study's limitation was the lack of information on the institution's academic advising structure and practices. Inadequate resources did not enable Pongracz to determine the best methods to increase the graduation rate at this Ohio community college. The study did not address the importance of advisors in encouraging early momentum for students to attain better completion rates.

Attewell and Monaghan (2016) suggested the student's first choice of credit load might foster a behavioral habit by which the student will follow the same choice the next semester. Headlam et al. (2019) recently reported this habit through a behavioral science lens. They identified certain barriers to credit intensity and satisfactory academic progress. Using data from three community colleges in Minnesota, the MDRC's Center of Applied Behavioral Science focused on an examination of why students were taking a lesser load. The project, called the Finish Line project, strived to address if certain students could increase their load intensity and determined what barriers the students were facing that prevented them from increasing their load. One barrier was institutional and social norms would not support higher credit loads. Certain students copy what others do and enroll part time. According to the authors, this copying is something most low-income students and racially and ethnically minoritized students tend to do due to "social influence." The institution can influence their decision by stating a heavier load is

risky, or they may be unaware 15 credits are the standard credit load to finish on time. Another barrier they discovered was new students might become “anchored” to what advisors tell them to take during the 1st or prior semester. An advisor might have encouraged the student to take fewer credits to ease into college-level work. This advice has a negative effect on the student, as students tend to repeat the same action for future enrollment and take the same number of credits in subsequent semesters. A third barrier was students did not completely understand the consequences of attending college part time. They did not realize its impact on on-time completion due to limited information offered by the institution. This last barrier was clear in the interaction I had with students at a community college. They were signed up as full-time students with 12 credits but unaware they needed 15 credits per semester to graduate on time.

Unconscious stereotyping or implicit bias and expectations might influence determining students’ course load. Lubbers (2014), a former Indiana commissioner for higher education, agreed students have mistaken full-time status with 12 credits for on-time graduation. They were also concerned about college advisors advising low-income students to take just 12 credits instead of 15 to ease into college, despite studies showing the opposite. Economically disadvantaged and academically less prepared students have often been unintentionally advised to enroll in a lower credit load, which is a social inequality that directly leads to an educational inequality (Attewell & Monaghan, 2016).

During CCA’s (2016a) Summer Policy Institute, some academic advisors expressed the skepticism of community college advisors when their state decided to participate in the “15 to Finish” initiative, which required all advisors to encourage students to enroll in 15 credits each semester. Academic advisors’ responses included this initiative would not work for their students, as community college students’ lives were too busy for full-time enrollment and

therefore students could not handle full-time schedules. They also voiced students would not be able to financially afford 15 credits each semester and institutions would have more students on academic probation if students enrolled in 15 credits during a semester. These reactions are typical from advisors across the country in believing students cannot handle a higher credit load.

If college advisors advise students to take an intensive course load, they persist and complete a degree. There has been ample literature on relationships between students and advisors and the benefits of advising pointing to students being more engaged (Fosnacht et al., 2017; Hatch & Garcia, 2017; Karp et al., 2008; Moore & Tan, 2018). There is, however, very little research on community college advising methods and the effect of student advisement for on-time completion.

Financial Aid Programs Disincentivize 15 Credits Per Semester

The amount of time community college students take to earn degrees is important, as this length of time has significant financial implications (Shapiro et al., 2016). The Federal Pell Grant program, which offers low-income students funding for up to 12 credits per semester, was created to ensure low-income students could have access to higher education and presents millions of Americans—many of whom are racially and ethnically minoritized students—access to financial aid for their education to pursue the “American dream” (Johnson & Zaback, 2016). Johnson and Zaback (2016) explained how the Federal Pell Grant program holds students hostage to more time in college. State and federal policymakers have not designed policies to offer financial-aid-eligible students the academic momentum they need to successfully finish in 2 years. Financial aid federal standards designed the traditional definition of being a full-time student, which specifies enrolling in 12 credits per semester would offer the maximum financial

aid award (Johnson & Zaback, 2016). This definition has serious consequences for delaying graduation.

Davidson and Blankenship (2017) showed 82% of community colleges in the country have students pay tuition per credit hour. If students want to enroll to complete a degree on time, they must pay the remaining credits out of pocket. The number of credits to graduate on time with a Pell Grant is three credits short per semester of being academically full time. Many students would benefit from receiving extra funding to cover expenses, allowing them to take 15 credits each semester.

Pell Grants allow students to enroll full time or part time during any semester for 6 years and receive full financial aid or a portion of it. This policy is not an incentive to attend full time with 15 credits to earn a 2-year degree. Time is their worst enemy, but students do not know or understand that. The Pell Grant program disincentivizes students from earning a degree on time and brings financial strain to low-socioeconomic-status students (Johnson & Zaback, 2016).

Only 4% of Pell-Grant-eligible community college students graduate in 2 years (Attewell & Monaghan, 2016). Although they have yearly access to 24 credits in financial aid money, 73% take fewer than the 24 credits allowed (Johnson & Zaback, 2016). Davidson and Blankenship (2017) found although most low-income students at Kentucky community colleges receive enough Pell Grant funding to pay the additional tuition cost, only 15% enroll in 15 credits their 1st semester. This finding contradicts Johnson and Zaback's (2016) claim the few-Pell Grant-eligible students who graduate in 2 years must spend money out of pocket for six credits of tuition and fees.

Since the summer of 2017, Pell-Grant-eligible students have an option to apply for a year-round Pell Grant (Johnson & Zaback, 2016). Students who enroll in at least 24 credits

before their 3rd semester and six or more credits over the summer are eligible. Students might not apply for summer aid if they do not receive information on how or receive help with the process. Community colleges are losing students, as completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid can be an obstacle for students and their families (Dembricki, 2020).

Next to the Pell Grant program, federal need-based financial aid, colleges also provide state grant aid programs for their students. These grant aids can either be need or merit based. However, grant aids are not always enough to help students with tuition and living costs. Carlson and Zaback (2014) addressed this issue. They reported states are offering more aid for merit to students who would normally complete college without any aid. In 2011–2012, nearly 40% of undergraduate state aid included some merit, and 19% of the aid was based entirely on merit (Carlson & Zaback, 2014). Low-income students, who are most in need of financial support, are not receiving enough aid. Without financial aid, low-income students drop out of college (McKinney & Burrridge, 2014; Orozco & Cauthen, 2009). Orozco and Cauthen (2009) articulated, to increase socioeconomically disadvantaged students' success, significant financial aid reform needs to happen.

Conclusion

The factors determining why community college students do not graduate on time are understood and documented in the literature. Two-year colleges use 12 credits per semester as the default for a full-time student. Mathematically, students must take 15 college credits per semester, or take 12 credits per semester and six in the summer to total 30 credits per year to receive an associate degree and graduate on time. Those in higher education who guide and advise students when entering and attending their college jeopardize students' path to finish on time. They advise students to ease into college, take fewer credits, and delay students' transition

to a good-paying job in the least amount of time with the lowest cost. Although advice on easing into college with lighter course loads is well intentioned, research into academic momentum shows this “caring” mindset is harmful. This advice especially impairs less academically prepared, low-income, and racially and ethnically minoritized students in pursuit of a degree, as they have the most to lose.

Taking a high-credit load in the 1st semester enables momentum and persistence, which is key to student success. The institution must take accountability and make students aware 15 credits are the required number of credits per semester. Even the academically well-prepared students in honors programs receive misguidance in the false notion taking fewer than 15 credits will raise their GPA. In reality, the advice delays degree completion and harms the student and the institution. Many students are unaware adding time to get their degree also adds cost. Delaying degree completion creates a lost opportunity cost in wages and retirement savings, which typically cannot be recovered. Students who receive financial aid and sign up for a maximum of 12 credits per semester believe they are academically on track as full time. This belief is not true. Students and their families lack information on the economic value of earning a degree on time. They are unaware of the lost opportunities of earning a sustainable wage and accumulating retirement savings when delaying or going part time to college. Understandably, some students have personal obligations that prevent them from enrolling full time; however, they need to be informed of all possibilities and consequences of delaying degree attainment. The bottom line is on-time graduation rates at community colleges are 5%, and the 12-credit approach contributes to this low rate.

When students fail to graduate, institutional leaders must fix practices and policies at the institution where they receive the education instead of blaming students. Everyone desires a fair

opportunity to get to the finish line on time, and institutional change is needed. Ensuring professionals on campus know the research and benefits of 15 credits per semester versus 12 is essential. Developing a strong communication plan for all students is crucial. That is social justice. That is equity. For social justice and equity at the institutions to occur, there need to be cultural and policy shifts among all policymakers, financial aid offices, faculty, advisors, and other support groups to support on-time degree attainment. The fact the student does not understand the consequences of delay is not the student's fault. Institutions must become more equity minded and student centered by examining their mindset, policies, and practices. This issue has persisted for too long. Institutions and policymakers have created a cultural environment where practices, beliefs, and assumptions have resulted in accepting long delays in graduation, generating consequences to student outcomes and institutional health. Students need to be made aware of all the benefits of on-time graduation. There needs to be communication from all internal stakeholders to all external stakeholders and vice versa on the academic and economic benefit of taking 30 credits per academic year to ensure graduating on time. Taking 15 credits per semester should become the norm for students to enroll full time, including low-income and racially and ethnically minoritized students. Marketing information on why taking 15 credits per semester is key to finish on time.

A communication campaign is a great intervention to make all students aware of positive outcomes of attending college full time. Using an evidence-based strategy to aid in the awareness, all stakeholders on and off campus need to be included in the communication campaign. A cultural transformation that changes mindsets must occur. Data from the literature review, the individual institution, and other institutions in the country must be presented to external and internal stakeholders on campus.

Certain colleges and universities across the country have implemented communication campaigns to make students, parents, and the community aware students will not graduate on time unless they take 30 credits per year and have been successful. The University of Hawaii System, which pioneered this communication campaign, saw the percentage of community college students attempting 15 or more credits per semester go from 8% in 2011 to 16% in 2016 and closed the equity gap (Straney et al., 2017). Belfield et al. (2019) remarked institutions need to focus on closing the early momentum gap by increasing the number of low-socioeconomic-status and racially and ethnically minoritized students taking 15 credits per semester before they can see the equity gap in degree completion close.

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Chapter 2

Essential Factors of a 15 to Finish Campaign: Increasing On-Time Completion Rates for Community College Students

Abstract

The “on-time” degree completion crisis in the community college system is alarming. Only 5% of students graduate in 2 years (Complete College America [CCA], 2021). Many community college students are low-income and racially and ethnically minoritized, and their graduation rates are even lower (CCA, 2021). Community colleges around the country have begun to implement intervention strategies to improve on-time graduation and close attainment gaps. One of the most successful interventions implemented across the country has been a 15 to Finish campaign, a campus-wide effort aimed to increase the number of college students taking 15 credits per semester (CCA, 2016a). A comprehensive review of the literature and conversations with college professionals were conducted to better understand factors that contribute to a successful 15 to Finish campaign. Findings indicated a successful 15 to Finish campaign includes: (a) maintaining a high level of institutional commitment and effective leadership, (b) making the case with data, (c) reaching all key stakeholders including students and their support system, (d) providing professional development to internal stakeholders, (e) avoiding a one-size-fits-all model and accounting for the unique institutional culture, (f) sending clear messages, (g) providing incentives, and (h) engaging in continuous improvement efforts. Based on these findings, recommendations are provided for those who wish to increase on-time completion rates for community college students.

Keywords: 15 to Finish, completion, full-time enrollment, on-time graduation, academic momentum

Essential Factors of a 15 to Finish Campaign: Increasing On-Time Completion Rates for Community College Students

Only 5% of community college students complete their degree in 2 years, according to Complete College America (CCA, 2021), a nonprofit organization that advocates for higher graduation rates and closing equity gaps in higher education for traditionally underrepresented populations. There is a vital need for colleges to implement a sustainable solution to combat this low completion rate. The average associate degree completion time is 4 years (CCA, 2016c). Many community college students are low income and racially and ethnically minoritized. CCA indicated community colleges graduate just 7% Asian, 5% White, 4% of Pell-Grant-eligible recipients, 4% of Hispanic, and 1% of Black students in 2 years (CCA, 2021). Understanding issues surrounding low on-time completion rates and devising a plan of action to alleviate the root causes of this concern are critical. Providing an equitable education for those who are often left behind, thereby enabling them to transition into high-potential jobs in the least amount of time with the lowest cost, is crucial to our society.

Barriers to Timely Completion

Three main barriers contribute to why community college students are not graduating on time. The first barrier is students are not informed of the academic benefits of taking 15 credits per semester (Attewell & Monaghan, 2016). Research in the last decade has indicated students who enroll in their 1st semester with 15 credits gain early momentum, attain a higher GPA, and are more likely to graduate than those who take fewer credits (Attewell & Monaghan, 2016; Belfield et al., 2016).

The second barrier to on-time completion is the institution does not encourage students to enroll in 15 credits each semester. Social norms in higher education institutions do not support

course loads above 12 credits (Headlam et al., 2019). The norm at colleges across the country has been to ease students into college academics, especially minoritized students (Spiva, n.d.). Due to social influence, these students often emulate what their peers do and attend full time with 12 credits. This phenomenon creates an “anchoring” effect, whereby students continue into their next semester with the same habit of enrolling in the number of credits they did or were told to do by their advisor in the 1st semester (Headlam et al., 2019).

Financial aid procedures contribute to a third barrier to finishing on time. Federal financial aid policies do not offer incentives for students to take 15 credits per semester. Financial aid policies created a default of 12 credits per semester as full time (Jones, 2015). This policy promotes a delay in finishing a degree on time. By not graduating on time, students add unneeded time and money, which adds to higher tuition and fees expenses and loss of opportunity and retirement wages (Abel & Deitz, 2014).

15 to Finish: An Intervention to Timely Completion

Community colleges across the country have begun to implement intervention strategies to diminish or eliminate institutional barriers to improve on-time graduation and close the disparity in attaining a college degree between low-income and racially and ethnically minoritized students, known as attainment gaps. One of the most successful interventions being implemented is the 15 to Finish campaign. This campaign increases awareness of the academic and financial benefits of enrolling in 15 credits per semester (Klempin, 2014).

Merely 11% of students at community colleges are taking 30 credits a year to be on-time students (CCA, 2016c). At least 30% of community college students are taking 24 credits, only needing one more course per semester to become on-time students (CCA, 2016c). The first university system in the country to study “momentum students”—students taking 15 or more

credits per semester—and initiate a strong intervention to increase students’ enrollment to 15 credits per semester was the University of Hawaii (UH) System. In 2010, researchers at the UH System analyzed 1st-year student data and found students were more likely to earn their degree on time if they completed 30 credits, including college-level English and math in their 1st academic year, and declared a major by their 2nd year (American Youth Policy Forum, 2014). First-time, 1st-year students at the UH System carrying 15 credits in a semester were more persistent and more successful than students taking fewer than 15 credits across all levels of academic preparation (C. Bio, personal communication, September 15, 2020).

As a result of the study, the UH System embarked on a major initiative to change mindsets and pioneered a 15 to Finish communication campaign. They raised awareness of the academic and economic benefits of enrolling in 15 credits versus 12 each semester. Although the campaign was named 15 to Finish, the UH System was interested in students finishing 30 credits per year, which included taking 15 credits per semester or taking 12 credits per semester plus six over two summers. The campaign was a great success, with on-time graduation rates at the 2-year institutions increasing by 84% since the implementation (CCA, 2020).

Since the implementation at the UH System, numerous institutions across the country have launched such a campaign, increasing the number of students enrolling in 30 credits per year. CCA Vice President Elston stated the 15 to Finish strategy sets the bar at the level needed for students to achieve on-time completion (CCA, 2016c). The strategy is integrated into academic maps, metamajors, math pathways, structured schedules, corequisite remediation, and gateway courses in the field of study during the 1st year. Elston asserted the 15 to Finish strategy was “the catalyst that moves the momentum for students to finish on time, no matter at what strategy one looks at” (CCA, 2016e, 1:31).

Several institutions that implemented a 15 to Finish campaign reported completion rates increased, and attainment gaps narrowed or disappeared. For example, as of 2020, improvement in on-time graduation at 2-year institutions in Nevada had risen by 243% (CCA, 2020). Jim McCoy, associate vice president of academic affairs for the colleges of southern Nevada, stated they had closed the achievement gap after implementing a 15 to Finish campaign. The 12% of Black students enrolled at their colleges are now equaling their peers' percentage rate in taking 15 credits, and the 35% of Hispanic students are exceeding their peers' percentage rate in taking 15 credits (J. McCoy, personal communication, February 11, 2020). The UH System reported in 2017 they also closed the equity gap, which is inequality in educational achievement between underserved students and their peers, with the 15 to Finish campaign, both at 2-year and 4-year institutions (Straney et al., 2017).

Given the extensive data that illustrate the 15 to Finish campaign's effectiveness, understanding the elements that make a 15 to Finish campaign work is important. This familiarity can shed light on what is needed to successfully implement a campaign to increase on-time graduation rates and narrow attainment gaps in credit and completion between ethnic and racially minoritized students and their peers.

Methods

I performed a wide-ranging review of qualitative and quantitative information to gain an understanding of key success factors related to implementation of a 15 to Finish campaign at higher education institutions. I used three methods: (a) engaging in conversations with practitioners and administrators across the country, (b) an examination of peer-reviewed articles, and (c) the exploration of gray literature and public scholarship. This triangulated approach allowed for a comprehensive review of data related to 15 to Finish campaigns.

Professional Perspectives

To better understand the implementation of a 15 to Finish communication campaign at a higher education institution, I engaged in conversations with administrators and practitioners across the country whose institutions implemented a 15 to Finish campaign or who have been part of the movement to have students finish college on time. I first sought out five experts in the field of the 15 to Finish strategy who were posted as fellow experts on the CCA website (<https://completecollege.org>). CCA is a nonprofit educational organization that launched a network in 2010 composed of state and educational institutions committed to their cause of on-time degree completion and closing attainment gaps. They formed an alliance that includes 35 states and numerous higher education systems in the country.

I communicated with the associate vice president of academic affairs at a community college in southern Nevada, who contributed to scaling the implementation of a 15 to Finish campaign in his state. I spoke to a former president of one of the City University of New York community colleges and a founder of CCA who aided in implementing the 15 to Finish strategy. To better understand how a university system successfully implemented a 15 to Finish campaign and how they collected data to measure success, I connected with the associate vice chancellor of the University System of Georgia, together with the research associate for the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia Division of Research and Policy Analysis. The chief of staff and senior vice president of strategy at CCA, who has been a keynote speaker at numerous events nationwide on the benefits of 15 to Finish, contributed to success stories in the implementation of the 15 to Finish campaign across the country. A conversation with the executive director of student success and university initiatives at Sacramento State University

was instrumental in understanding the dramatic changes at that institution when he implemented a 15 to Finish campaign as soon as he joined the institution.

A few of the CCA fellow experts suggested other prominent individuals whose viewpoints I needed to seek. I connected with the president and chief operating officer of the Gardner Institute, who discussed the importance of looking through an equitable lens for students taking 15 credits per semester to finish on time. I sought the perspective of the student success director for community colleges in Hawaii, which is the state that pioneered the 15 to Finish campaign. She offered insight into the original campaign at 2-year institutions in the UH System and how it had evolved. Finally, I communicated with the director of strategic outcomes for the Education Foundation of Mobile Alabama, who provided insights on Bishop State Community College (BSCC), which recently launched an extensive 15 to Finish communication campaign. The limitation of conversing with practitioners and administrators who have implemented a 15 to Finish campaign is individuals might have a biased view, as they all focused on the campaign's success.

Peer-Reviewed Research

I conducted a literature search by using the following five electronic databases: Academic Search Premier, Educational Administration Abstracts, Education Source, ERIC, and MasterFILE Elite. I searched the databases for peer-reviewed articles published between 2010 and 2020. Using the Boolean operation system, the search terms included “higher education” OR “college” AND “15 to Finish” OR “Complete College America” OR “early momentum” OR “academic momentum.” The initial search produced 98 articles for review. After removing duplicates, 41 articles remained.

I only included in this literature review articles focused on higher education institutions that (a) implemented an intervention requiring students to take 15 credits per semester as a strategy for achieving on-time completion or (b) launched a campaign to promote 15 to Finish. I first scanned the abstracts of the 41 articles for relevance to the criteria. Twenty-three articles did not involve student enrollment in higher education, and I therefore eliminated them from further examination. I maintained the remaining 18 articles for analysis. I reviewed the full text of the 18 articles to search for the research on implementing a 15 to Finish campaign at a higher education institution. Three articles were relevant to the intervention. They included initiatives for a campaign to have students graduate on time. I excluded all other articles, as they focused on other college completion strategies or addressed the problem of not taking 15 credits per semester rather than the campaign intervention.

Gray Literature and Public Scholarship

The 15 to Finish campaign started in 2011. As such, it is a recent strategy implemented at higher education institutions across the country. Many practitioners have discussed this strategy in blogs, interviews, and articles but have not published their findings and experiences in peer-reviewed literature. Because their expertise is important to consider, these resources were included to better understand the benefits of a 15 to Finish campaign and what contributes to its success. I searched the websites of the following educational organizations and nationally known universities to retrieve materials of professionals who published on the 15 to Finish campaign: Achieving the Dream, Community College Resource Center [CCRC], CCA, League for Innovation in the Community College, the UH System, the University System of Georgia, and the Tennessee Board of Regents. In those sources, I discovered four working papers from the CCRC, five articles on the CCA website, one article at the League for Innovation in the

Community College, and one article on the UH System website relevant to a 15 to Finish campaign. Through the snowball effect, which is a way of discovering articles not appearing in the search but relevant to the research by consulting the references of already attained articles, I added an article from the College and Career Readiness and Success Center relating to time to completion with a 15 to Finish strategy. I attained 11 forum discussions and presentations from the CCA convenings between 2016 and 2018 on the intervention associated with the research. They represent human voices of practitioners and administrators telling the story of institutions in the nation that have implemented a communication campaign that reached students of all walks of life and clearly communicated the benefit of completing college in the least amount of time with a minimum cost. I found additional material with evidenced-based data on the 15 to Finish strategy and the campaign through university websites and social media.

Results

Many factors that make implementing a 15 to Finish campaign successful at community colleges emerged from conversations with administrators and practitioners and the literature research conducted. These factors are bringing change to time to degree completion, and I have organized them by the following eight themes: (a) commitment and leadership, (b) making the case with data, (c) reaching students and their support system, (d) professional development, (e) one size does not fit all, (f) clear messages, (g) incentives, and (h) continuous improvement.

Commitment and Leadership

Bruce Vandal, senior vice president at CCA, asserted the way to establish conditions for change is to receive the institution's commitment where the 15 to Finish campaign will take place (CCA, 2017d). Numerous states formed an alliance through CCA and demonstrated strong leadership starting from the governor's office to implement game changers in all institutions,

including the 15 to Finish campaign (CCA, 2016a). Other institutions' leaders have also illustrated urgency to drive change. The president of BSCC showed the campaign's importance by holding a signing day on campus, indicating to the community they were committed to launching a 15 to Finish campaign (C. Scott, personal communication, September 21, 2020).

Commitment across campus is important, especially from key stakeholders, such as the academic affairs, student affairs, institutional research, and communications offices. Advisors, financial aid counselors, and faculty are at the onset of the needed culture shift and are also critical internal stakeholders who need to be included in initial conversations related to vision, research, and plan (CCA, 2016d).

Advisors are the staff members on campus who are immediately connected with students, identifying academic options and providing them with resources and information (CCA, 2016a). Disclosing data to advisors is important to ensure student success is "speeding up, not slowing down" (Ancel, 2017, p. 11) enrollment in academic courses. Chandra Scott (personal communication, September 21, 2020), director of strategic outcome in the Mobile Alabama Education System, observed, at her institution, financial aid staff needed to be trained, as they had been telling students during their entire career to take 12 credits to receive full aid.

In addition to advisors and financial aid staff, faculty are critical in implementing the campaign and need to be engaged from the beginning. Kim Beatty, from Houston Community College, reported faculty are focused on learning and not necessarily on what is happening beyond their classrooms. However, when faculty see evidence-based data and notice the gaps, they become more committed to a 15 to Finish campaign (CCA, 2016f). Faculty serve in advising capacities and play an important role in 15 to Finish messaging.

Making the Case With Data

Data are the sources of information to understand the problem, identify interventions, and then drive the innovation needed to obtain student success. Institutional commitment to access, collect, analyze, and communicate data associated with the campaign to stakeholders is essential (A. Bell, personal communication, August 26, 2020). CCA cautions in their scaling standard report data collection on its own will not drive change. The change comes when college professionals “interact and internalize the data, draw their own conclusions, and take action” (CCA, 2017c, p. 9). When the UH System noticed low graduation rates, they examined their data and discussed how they could create a culture change based on student success data. Data showed students taking 15 credits per semester did better in their courses and completed their degrees on time (Institutional Research and Analysis Office, 2013). By disaggregating the data, they observed there were no disparities between subgroups. Students who took 30 credits in a year and completed a degree were students from all levels of academic preparedness and socioeconomic status, first-generation students, and racially and ethnically minoritized students.

Collecting and disaggregating data by various student subgroups is vital to evaluating educational equity outcomes. Elston (personal communication, September 4, 2020) stated disaggregated data are important to analyze, as they give “a voice to the students who have been underserved by higher education.” Data must drive any decision. When sharing data, Wendy Kallina, director of academic analytics at Kennesaw State University and member of the Complete College Georgia initiative, suggested institutions find someone who is an empirical storyteller and an advocate for the 15 to Finish implementation initiative who makes data come alive to stakeholders. Kallina emphasized every meeting should start with data because using data-driven results will show interventions can effect change (CCA, 2017b).

A fundamental step for the implementation team on campus is to work with data professionals to first identify the data and then identify the right audience with whom to communicate the data (CCA, 2017a). The Indiana Commission for Higher Education produced data sheets on 15 to Finish for advisors that told the story of their campus. For the Ivy Tech Community College campus, they produced a data sheet showing how many students were taking 12–14 credits per semester, how grades improved when students took 15 or more credits, and how likely the students who took 15 or more credits were to complete college (CCA, 2016a).

Data can inspire faculty, staff, and administrators to take action and get involved in 15 to Finish campaign efforts. However, institutions need to go beyond creating a sense of urgency for action and provide paths of action. The implementation team must introduce a plan of action that offers details of the campaign's implementation to the institution's stakeholders (CCA, 2020).

Reaching Students and Their Support System

Jim Dragna, executive director of student success and university initiatives and the director of institutional research at Sacramento State University, emphasized communication directly to students—either through text or email messages—is important. Students can make informed choices after being encouraged to take on the challenge of a full 15-credit load (J. Dragna, personal communication, September 16, 2020). Nia Haydel, the current vice president at CCA for alliance engagement and institutional transformation, pointed out students want direction and, in general, want to finish on time. Students typically follow the path advisors suggest (CCA, 2016e). Therefore, colleges cannot rely on text and email messaging alone; advisors must encourage students to take 15 credits.

Although students are the most important stakeholders, another key factor related to increasing academic momentum for students is to involve parents and other caretakers. A strong

communication campaign providing this population with beneficial information on the importance of taking 15 credits per semester is needed. These messages position parents and caretakers to support students in making better academic and financial decisions (CCA, 2016e). While at the University System of Georgia, Helen Tate helped parents during summer orientation understand the benefits of 15 credits per semester (CCA, 2016b). Parents and guests were in attendance when the institution played a short video clip Complete College Georgia created on the financial benefits of taking 15 credits to finish on time. This video often resulted in parents not allowing students to leave the orientation session until they signed up for 15 credits. Ashley Ruby, an advisor at a community college in Western Virginia, used the open-source materials from CCA to engage in a 15 to Finish campaign during welcoming sessions for new students and their support systems (CCA, 2018). Her goal was to inform all stakeholders in attendance of the importance of taking 15 credits per semester.

Professional Development

Institutions need to provide professional development to support college professionals in changing the advising culture that has prevented many students from taking 15 credits per semester (CCA, 2016a). Elston (personal communication, September 4, 2020) pointed out the National Academic Advising Association stated implicit bias is present in advisement. It is therefore vital for training to happen to make this change occur. Advisors are part of the culture shift and must inform each student what is needed to get to the finish line. Elston asserted advisors must look at 15 to Finish as a tool to start a conversation with students about their trajectory while in college. The National Academic Advising Association, the global community for academic advising, has been working closely with CCA in sharing best practices with the academic advising community. They ensure key individuals responsible for providing students

with guidance toward on-time completion provide the same message across the country (Waiwaiole & Elston, 2017).

When the Indiana Commission for Higher Education produced data sheets on 15 to Finish, it sparked conversations and discussions with advisors on shifting the bar to 15 credits and using an opt-out versus opt-in approach. Students opting out did so with full knowledge of what enrolling in fewer credits than 15 would mean to on-time degree attainment (CCA, 2016a). Nichole Mann, an advisor at Ivy Tech Community College, revealed the Indiana Academic Advisory Network created a fall institute to share ideas and offer advisors strategies related to “how” and “why” when discussing 15 to Finish with their students (CCA, 2016a). The training was focused on how to tell a particular population at their campus about options, how to help students with decision making, and how students can overcome certain barriers. An expert in financial aid offered a session on how to advise financial aid recipients taking 15 credits. The workshops and discussions resulted in advisors putting completion goals for each student at the center of the educational planning process from the start.

Faculty, both full- and part-time, also need to be engaged in on-time completion discussions and receive professional development on how to improve students’ on-time completion. Often, according to a report on the faculty voices project done by the League for Innovation in the Community College (2018), faculty express a lack of information from the institution with important data on student success. Faculty indicated a strong desire to be more engaged in institutional decision making on how to improve completion rates. They requested faculty training that would allow for strong collaboration with advisors. Colleges need to share completion data with faculty and assist them in accessing and interpreting their significance. To

maintain a focus on equity, disaggregated data are important to help faculty understand completion rates for different demographics at their institution.

One Size Does Not Fit All

Elston (personal communication, September 4, 2020) believed there is no set procedure to implement a 15 to Finish campaign; it depends on each institution's culture. He advised starting by analyzing the institution's data and then assessing the current situation at the institution. An analysis of the data will likely show many students are not taking 15 credits, which was a consistent message from conversations with practitioners. The common phrase conveyed during the communication was "let the data guide you"—the data and the institutional culture will drive the decision on how to proceed.

Many different approaches can work. For example, a traditional approach in the campaign is often to first engage internal stakeholders. Indiana higher education institutions and BSCC in Alabama first communicated data to college professionals, offered them professional development, and then launched the campaign (CCA, 2016a; C. Scott, personal communication, September 21, 2020). Some colleges opted to first engage external stakeholders. The UH System first targeted students and parents in their campaign before internal stakeholders. Risa Dickson, vice president for academic planning and policy at UH System, indicated they made the decision knowing they would receive opposition from advisors and faculty but were hopeful once the data came in, figures would speak for themselves (CCA, 2017a). Faculty and advisors were offered the results by the institutional leaders and received workshops on implementing the 15 to Finish strategy. A similar tactic was used at Sacramento State University. Dragna (personal communication, September 16, 2020) expressed the institution blamed students for not finishing on time due to their socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, and low academic preparedness. When

he joined the institution, he immediately analyzed the data and created a communication campaign during the summer. Messages went directly to 1st-year students, presenting all the positive aspects of getting a degree on time. After 1 semester, the leading indicators of 15 credits came back with positive results, which were then shared for discussion with staff and faculty.

Clear Messages

Communicating a message through branding that is clear and easily understandable is highly important. According to Elston (personal communication, September 4, 2020), all parties must answer the same question, “What does the institution mean by 15 to Finish?” to effectively communicate the message. The original 15 to Finish campaign the UH System pioneered did not literally mean a student had to take 15 credits per semester. The UH System implied the message was to get students to graduate “on time.” This on-time graduation could also be accomplished by taking 4 semesters of 12 credits and six credits for two summers.

The institution needs to have a communications strategy in place (C. Scott, personal communication, September 21, 2020). Messages need to be tailored to motivate different stakeholders, and data should be presented in the form of persuasive visualization (CCA, 2017c). BSCC used infographics posted on classroom doors and on their website and social media (C. Scott, personal communication, September 21, 2020). The communications office assisted by advertising 15 to Finish messages on their website. This office also created infographics and a tag in the footer of emails and posted numerous quotes from students tailored to stakeholders. BSCC took advantage of the open-source material CCA provided to everyone who intended to offer a 15 to Finish campaign (C. Scott, personal communication, September 21, 2020). This material included posters, brochures, presentations, videos, and social media ads found on their website to promote 15 credits per semester. The UH System involved public relations

professionals to develop a strong media campaign to reach students and parents through television advertisements (C. Bio, personal communication, September 15, 2020). They crafted messages for their target audiences and posted 15 to Finish slogans on t-shirts, cups, and pens (Korn, 2016).

Incentives

Incentives are a great way to promote the 15 to Finish strategy. Institutions can offer motivational and financial incentives to increase the number of students taking 15 credits. For example, Union County College in New Jersey offered a flat tuition as an incentive for students to take more than 12 credits. The tuition rate between 12 and 18 credits is fixed, allowing full-time students to enroll in 15 credits for the same price as enrolling in 12 (M. McMenamin, personal communication, August 30, 2020). At Lorain County Community College in Ohio, students enrolling in over 13 credits do not pay extra tuition (Klempin, 2014). The legislature in West Virginia capped the tuition cost whereby full-time tuition is calculated per credit up to 12 credits; beyond that, students do not pay for extra credits taken (Klempin, 2014).

Korn (2016) noted the UH System incentivized students who enrolled in 30 credits their 1st year with a yearly drawing to receive free textbooks. BSCC organized a day in the semester when students signed a pledge of taking 15 credits the next semester (C. Scott, personal communication, September 21, 2020). The institution offered incentives for students who pledged, such as having their name posted on the website, having a picture taken with the mascot, and enjoying free pizza.

Motivational incentives may only be needed when first launching the 15 to Finish campaign. At BSCC, incentives are no longer needed, and it is no longer a campaign. Now, 15 to Finish is a strategy ingrained in the institution's culture. Taking 15 credits per semester or 12

credits per semester and six credits in summer sessions are normal conversations students have with advisors and financial aid staff during registration (C. Scott, personal communication, September 21, 2020).

Continuous Improvement

After the campaign has taken place, the institution must assess its outcome to see if it was successful. Specifically, assessing its effectiveness in terms of student performance, student experience, and narrowing equity gaps is important (L. Hagood, personal communication, August 26, 2020). Data analysis can determine changes in enrollment patterns and determine if there was an increase in students enrolling in at least 15 credits over the previous semester.

When the UH System implemented its 15 to Finish campaign, they saw a big rise in the percentage of students taking 15 credits. They went back to the data, making sure those students who were taking 15 credits were still performing well. They continued to validate and revalidate their data (CCA, 2017d). Jenkins and Bailey (2017) proposed using early momentum key performance indicators to examine the success of reforms at many institutions, such as the 15 to Finish strategy. Key performance indicators are leading indicators that use short term measurements to predict longer term outcomes to assess effects of the reform being implemented (Jenkins & Bailey, 2017). For example, key performance indicators based on 1st-year students' performance metrics can be correlated to long-term outcomes like higher completion rates. Belfield et al. (2019) created early momentum metrics for colleges to assess and measure students' progress during educational reforms. By disaggregating data of student demographics in subgroups, they examined momentum measures that formatively assessed the effectiveness of institutional reforms such as a 15 to Finish strategy. For example, they analyzed transcript data for first-time college students who had entered between 2010 and 2012 from three community

college systems and followed them for 6 years. The researchers looked at the credit momentum metrics (CMM) to determine students' progress toward completing their degree on time when taking 15 credits per semester in their 1st academic year. Student success was measured by credential completion using two subgroups to study if the equity gap would close when there was early momentum. The study addressed how many students met each of the CMM, how strong the association was between CMM and student success, and the predicted outcomes if students were to meet CMM. The study showed CMM accurately indicated future degree completion regardless of the subgroup. If more students meet the CMM, the predicted outcome, according to this study, is a substantial improvement in college-level outcomes.

Change in higher education is not easy, and thus changing the cultural mindset of students and college professionals cannot happen without significant intervention and will take time. Cathy Bio (personal communication, September 15, 2020) revealed, at community colleges in Hawaii, the culture of taking 15 credits is more ingrained at 4-year institutions as compared to community colleges. Although there has been a shift, advisors at community colleges in Hawaii still sometimes ease students into the college experience. She indicated the onboarding works, but there are not enough advisors to help students once they are taking classes. She considered having coaches as a solution to encourage and remind students they need 15 credits per semester to finish on time.

Benefits of the 15 to Finish campaign must be expressed through data to stakeholders, especially at community colleges. CCA implied in their scaling standards measuring, monitoring, and mending are important parts of making sure the campaign continues to be successful (CCA, 2017c). Using the data, the institution can make adjustments to achieve the maximum impact of the campaign (S. Evenbeck, personal communication, August 26, 2020).

In 2013, Union County College (UCC) in New Jersey had the lowest graduation rate (6.8%) of the state's 19 community colleges. To remedy this, UCC implemented a 15 to Finish strategy. In 2019, UCC had the sixth highest graduation rate (33%) in the state (M. McMenamin, personal communication, August 30, 2020). UCC President McMenamin voiced the work was not done. When disaggregating the data, there were still attainment gaps by race and ethnicity, even though each subgroup's completion rate increased. Institutions must then refine their 15 to Finish strategy. Jim Koch (personal communication, September 22, 2020), president of the Gardner Institute, explained conveying the message of taking the "right" 15 credits to finish on time and subsequently refining the campaign when assessing data by redesigning courses and curricula are both important steps. BSCC took action by adding strategies when they noticed attainment gaps between White and Black students taking 15 credits did not close even though credit attainment and GPA for Black students increased (C. Scott, personal communication, September 21, 2020). They reassessed the data and noticed most students in developmental courses were Black. They decided to refine their 15 to Finish strategy by creating academic maps and offering corequisites aligning with 1st-year college math and English courses. When Scott showed the 2019 data to college professionals, they were astounded how these strategies were making such a difference. The corequisite passage rate for Black students increased dramatically to 60%. BSCC has started to see the early momentum gap narrowing (C. Scott, personal communication, September 21, 2020).

Kathy Johnson stated when the University of Georgia System measured data from their campaign, findings showed students enrolled in 15 or more credits who did not complete those credits in the semester (CCA, 2016e). They broke down data into withdrawals and grades of D and F and used the information to better advise students. They found the biggest predictor of

students not completing courses was the amount of nonacademic unmet need. This insight allowed them to increase need-based aid and support programs at the institution.

Conclusion

The 15 to Finish campaign is a strategy that works. Students benefit academically and financially because institutions recognize the advantages of launching a 15 to Finish campaign. The literature review and conversations with practitioners and administrators provided insight into key factors contributing to the successful implementation of a 15 to Finish campaign.

Colleges that wish to implement such a campaign should begin by seeking commitment from internal stakeholders at the institution and offering professional development where evidence-based data proving the strategy works are shared and discussed. This professional development is critical to change the internal stakeholder's mindset. College professionals who are fully aware of the benefits of and evidence for the 15 to Finish campaign are more likely to encourage students to enroll in 15 credits per semester. Institutions will need to establish clear campaign messages tailored to external stakeholders, such as students and parents, so the benefits of enrolling in 15 credits resonate with them. Financial and other incentives the institutions offer can contribute to students taking 15 credits per semester.

Implementing the features identified through this review will greatly contribute to a successful 15 to Finish campaign. As a result, all students will receive valuable and critical information about getting to the finish line on time. Such efforts position students to make better choices, which will positively affect their future career, earnings, and savings. Institutions that use the 15 to Finish strategy are committing to creating an environment where students perform better academically and where race, ethnicity, and family income are no longer the predictors of student success (A. Koch, personal communication, September 22, 2020).

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Chapter 3

Program Description and Program Evaluation Design Method

The chapter provides a description of the 15 to Finish communication campaign and associated methods used in conducting a program's formative outcome and implementation outcome evaluation at a suburban community college in the Northeast. In addition to investigating implementation strategies, I focused this evaluation approach on determining if the program campaign's outcome successfully increased students taking 15 credits per semester.

The program description includes a logic model (see Appendix A) that visually illustrates (a) the resources, (b) activities, (c) outputs, (d) formative and summative outcomes, and (e) impact of the 15 to Finish campaign. A cost analysis of the program's implementation offers an understanding of the campaign's cost and demonstrates why the campaign is a good investment. A theory of change provides an explanation of why the implementation of the campaign had the anticipated results, and the theory of action contains a description of how the change was put into action. The chapter's method section presents the program evaluation design and how the program evaluation questions were collected and analyzed. This section includes the setting where the evaluation occurred, a description of the participants in the evaluation, and the steps involved in conducting the program evaluation. The chapter concludes by offering why evaluating a 15 to Finish campaign is valuable for community college professionals.

Program Description

The 15 to Finish communication campaign is a campaign at higher education institutions that increases awareness of students' academic and economic benefits of taking 15 credits per semester. Few community college students graduate in 2 years with an associate degree, as they do not enroll in enough credits each semester for on-time completion (Complete College

America [CCA], 2021). Students are advised and offered messages to encourage them to enroll in 15 credits per semester through the communication campaign. Enrolling in 15 credits per semester allows students to receive a degree in the least amount of time with the lowest cost.

Rice and Atkin (2009) defined a *communication campaign* as

purposive attempts, to inform, persuade, or motivate behavior changes in a relatively well-defined and large audience, generally for noncommercial benefits to the individuals and/or society at large, typically within a given time period, by means of organized communication activities involving mass media and Internet, and often complemented by interpersonal support. (p. 436)

The 15 to Finish campaign attempted to reach all community college stakeholders who could positively affect the desired outcome. There were two primary components of this campaign. First, three training sessions were conducted for college professionals who advise incoming 1st-year students. In May 2021, there was one 30-minute training session for department chairpersons and academic program coordinators and two 30-minute training sessions for advisors. Sessions focused on providing evidence-based data on students' benefits that result from taking 15 instead of 12 credits per semester. Second, clear messages were delivered to incoming 1st-year students about the value of registering for 15 credits per semester via various media tools and at new student orientation sessions. CCA's open-source materials and materials the college created were used for promoting the student messaging. The following were some of the CCA (2018) messages shared with students on posters around campus and social media: "you need 15 credits per semester (or 30 a year) to graduate in 2 years," "an extra year in college can cost you thousands of dollars," "taking 15 credits per semester saves you money," "taking 15

credits per semester (or 30 a year) increases your chances of reaching graduation,” and “students who take 15 credits per semester tend to earn a higher GPA.”

I was an internal evaluator for implementing the 15 to Finish campaign at a northeast 2-year public higher education institution. According to Leavy (2014), the definition of an *internal evaluation* is “a process that uses people internal to the organization to evaluate the organization’s own programs. Internal evaluators are directly accountable to the organization they are evaluating” (p. 473).

I conducted an internal implementation and a formative outcome program evaluation to assess the impact of the 15 to Finish campaign. I did the formative outcome evaluation during the implementation of the program. Its purpose was to evaluate the effectiveness of the training sessions and messaging campaigns. I used surveys, student focus groups, and an interview to determine communication effectiveness relating to the value of enrolling in 15 credits to professional and student stakeholders. I did the implementation outcome evaluation after the 15 to Finish communication campaign was implemented. The purpose was to evaluate whether the percentage of students enrolling in 15 credits increased compared to previous fall semesters due to the campaign. I used the formative outcome and implementation outcome evaluation results to determine if the campaign was successful and if it needed improvements in subsequent semesters.

Budget

The cost analysis to implement the 15 to Finish campaign is provided in Table 1. This analysis helps institutional leaders understand the cost of implementing the 15 to Finish campaign and the economic benefits the institution received through the expected increase of students taking 15 credits. The cost analysis is given for the implementation period from May

2021 through September 2021. Resources in the cost analysis are organized as follows: personnel, materials, and facilities. Unless otherwise stated, the estimated costs per unit were derived from CostOut (www.cbcsecosttoolkit.org), a tool for estimating costs and cost-effectiveness of educational programs. A net price value cost was applied to show cost in dollars, taking into account U.S. inflation factors (U.S. Inflation Calculator, n.d.).

Table 1

Total Cost of the 15 to Finish Campaign Implementation

Resources and ingredient	Price per unit	Quantity	Total cost by year priced	Total cost adjusted for 2021 (NPV)
Personnel				
Dean of academic affairs	Education/administrators college (2019): \$45.87/hour (hr)	3 hours	\$229.35	\$235.82
Dean of student affairs	Education/administrators college (2019): \$45.87/hr	3 hours	\$229.35	\$235.82
Director of advisement	Education/administrators college (2019): \$45.87/hr	3 hours	\$229.35	\$235.82
Director of communications	Education/administrators college (2019): \$45.87/hr	9 hours	\$412.83	\$432.24
Executive vice president of academic and student affairs	Chief executive officer (2019): \$88.68/hr	1 hour	\$177.36	\$182.32
Director of student support services	Education/administrators college (2019): \$45.87/hr	3 hours	\$229.35	\$235.82
Dean of liberal arts	Education/administrators college (2019): \$45.87/hr	3 hours	\$229.35	\$235.82
Dean of math and sciences	Education/administrators college (2019): \$45.87/hr	3 hours	\$229.35	\$235.82
Orientation staff member	Academic advisor/ counselor/ junior college (2019) \$26.45/ hr	½ hour	\$13.23	\$13.60
15 to Finish program director	Education/administrators college (2019): \$45.87/hr	25 hours	\$1,146.75	\$1,178.86
Research analyst	Education/administrators college (2019): \$45.87/hr	2 hours	\$91.74	\$94.33
Web specialist	Web developer (2017): \$35/hr	6 hours	\$210.00	\$225.09
Social media specialist	Web developer (2017): \$35/hr	6 hours	\$210.00	\$225.09

Resources and ingredient	Price per unit	Quantity	Total cost by year priced	Total cost adjusted for 2021 (NPV)
Worker at copy center	Administrative assistant (2019) \$19.16/hr	½ hour	\$9.58	\$9.85
Materials				
Flyers	Paper copies, color (2020): \$0.13/page	200	\$65.00	\$65.91
Posterboard	\$7.01/pack of 10 Staples (2021)	50	\$37.50	\$37.50
Facilities				
Online video conferencing	No cost		\$0	\$0
Total cost				\$3,860.30
Total cost per participant				\$3.70

Note. NPV = net price value cost.

The cost to implement the program was \$3,860.30 (see details in Table 1). Although the program director was not paid for the implementation, the cost has been included for practitioners who would like to replicate such a program. Participants in the intervention were first-time students in Fall 2021, academic advisors, department chairpersons, and academic program coordinators at a community college in the Northeast. When dividing the total cost, with 992 first-time students in Fall 2021 and 53 internal stakeholder participants in the intervention, the calculated price is estimated to be \$3.70. This cost is minimal compared to the revenue the college gains by having students add three credits to their schedule to reach 15 credits per semester. Students enrolling at the institution in Fall 2021 paid \$1,824 for 12 credits and \$2,280 for 15 credits in tuition and fees. The cost is a difference of \$456 in more revenue to the college from each student. If nine students who planned to enroll in 12 credits added three more credits to their course load, the college would recuperate the 15 to Finish campaign cost and receive more revenue. There was a 13.5% increase in students enrolling in 15 credits Fall 2021 versus Fall 2019. The college had 36 more students enrolling in an extra three credits, which resulted in

a revenue of \$16,559.64, and the return on investment for the college was 329%. To calculate the return on investment, the following formula was used:

$$\frac{(\text{Tuition Revenue} - \text{Program Cost})}{\text{Program Cost}} \times 100\% \qquad \frac{(\$16,559.64 - \$3,860.30)}{\$3,860.30} \times 100\%$$

The cost analysis demonstrates the program was a good investment for the college economically. The impact of the program increased student credit enrollment, and this increase benefitted the college and the student. The college increased revenue, as the percentage of students taking 15 credits increased and benefitted from the potential of increasing on-time student graduation rates. Students reaped economic benefits, as research has shown students save money in the cost of degree acquisition by taking 15 credits per semester (Belfield & Jenkins, 2014).

Theory of Change

Implementing a 15 to Finish communication campaign at the college was projected to result in the short-term outcomes communicated in the logic model during the program's implementation. For the communication campaign to be successful and the short-term outcomes to come to fruition, there had to be (a) leadership support and campus-wide collaboration to lead change, (b) evidence-based data to shift mindsets of college professionals, and (c) clear messages to change students' enrollment behavior.

Leadership Support and Campus-Wide Collaboration to Lead Change

Ruben et al. (2017) stated obtaining the institution's attention and support, as well as campus-wide collaboration, are crucial for leading change. When implementing change, the first thought is to gain the attention of those at the institution who believe in the change and support

it. The 15 to Finish communication campaign at the college received strong administrative support from college leadership. Key stakeholders were contacted to gain their attention on the change needed in students' credit load. They were offered clarification on the need for a 15 to Finish campaign, including how it can increase credit enrollment and benefits to the institution.

I created a task force comprising key stakeholders to help offer awareness on campus and facilitate campus-wide dialogue on the 15 to Finish campaign in their divisions or departments. The task force's involvement helped the college's internal stakeholders understand the reason for the proposed change and how this change would affect them and the institution. College professionals who advised students and volunteered to participate in the training sessions on campus to become knowledgeable about the students' benefits in taking 15 credits during the semester demonstrated commitment to working together on campus toward change.

Evidence-Based Data to Shift Mindsets

Dr. Spiva (n.d.), president of CCA, expressed many college professionals believe students should be eased into college by enrolling them in fewer than 15 credits to succeed. This mindset follows the 1970s and 1980s developmental psychology theory that accepts a person's natural progression of moving from something simple to more challenging, therefore, allowing 1st-year college students to start easily (Szafran, 2001). More recent literature contradicts this theory, as researchers in the last 2 decades have not supported the notion of a lighter load resulting in better academic success. Research has shown students who enroll in their 1st semester with 15 credits gain early momentum, attain a higher GPA, and are more likely to graduate than those who take 12 or fewer credits (Ann & Chang, 2019; Attewell & Monaghan, 2016; Belfield et al., 2016; Crosta, 2013; Szafran, 2001). Evidence-based data from community colleges that implemented a 15 to Finish campaign in states that have applied this campaign at

scale—such as Georgia, Indiana, Nevada, Hawaii, and Tennessee, plus numerous other community college institutions such as Union County College in New Jersey—have increased the number of students enrolling full time with 15 credits per semester and have seen an increase in their graduation rates (M. McMenamin, personal communication, August 30, 2020; C. Scott, personal communication, September 21, 2020; Straney et al., 2017, 2021).

A shift in mindset can be accomplished by offering training to make college professionals aware of the benefits of taking 15 credits by sharing evidence-based data showing easing students into college is not improving their outcomes and offering a full credit load to students will lead to better success (Belfield et al., 2016; Szafran, 2001). The Indiana Commission for Higher Education produced datasheets on 15 to Finish to be offered for training to all advisors at the 2- and 4-year institutions in the state (CCA, 2016). Each datasheet showed how many students were enrolled in 12–14 versus 15 credits per semester and how grades were better when students took 15 or more credits in a semester. Professional training resulted in advisors shifting their mindset and encouraging students to take 15 credits per semester (CCA, 2016).

Clear Messages to Change Students' Enrollment Behavior

According to Headlam et al. (2019), behavioral science functions on the principle that people act predictably. This principle is evident in college students' enrollment behavior. The MDRC's Center of Applied Behavioral Science looked through a behavioral science lens to examine why students enrolled in fewer than 15 credits per semester (Headlam et al., 2019). The study found (a) social influence at the institutions and (b) the anchoring effect prevented students from taking 15 credits per semester. However, these behaviors can positively affect students taking 15 credits when the communication campaign provides clear messages on the benefits of enrolling in 15 credits.

Social Influence. According to Allcott (2011), *social influence* is the inclination of people to follow what they believe others are doing. Students often copy what friends do and enroll in fewer than 15 credits due to social influence (Headlam et al., 2019). This action is consistent with the idea a person's behavior may be influenced by others' views in their social environment (Zhang et al., 2014). Headlam et al. (2019) also suggested the institution influences students' decisions by stating a heavier load is risky. According to Dahl (2013), expectations they feel from others may determine people's actions. When advisors believe students are not academically prepared or are not ready to enroll in 15 credits, this decision influences students. They will adhere to the number of credits in which the advisor expects them to enroll. The communication campaign sought to shift the advisor's mindset to inform students of benefits of taking 15 credits versus 12 or fewer. When college professionals begin informing students on benefits and colleges continue to advertise clear messages of student benefits, the chance students will enroll in more credits and influence friends signing up for more credits should increase.

Anchoring Effect. Furnham and Boo (2011) defined the phenomenon of *anchoring* as using an originally presented value to make upcoming decisions. An example commonly noticed at community colleges is students becoming "anchored" to the number of credits during the 1st or previous semester advisors told them to enroll in, therefore, repeating the same action in future semesters (Headlam et al., 2019). When students are advised to take 12 credits during their initial advisement visit, they will continue enrolling in 12 credits. Students regress to the initial advice of taking fewer than 15 credits and therefore do not make any changes to their original behavior (Samuelson et al., 1988). Using clear messages in the communication campaign to convince

students starting in the 1st semester taking 15 credits per semester is academically and financially beneficial should positively affect the anchoring phenomenon.

A 15 to Finish communication campaign results in a change of attitude and behavior of stakeholders. Institutions that have implemented a 15 to Finish campaign report changes in advising at their institutions as advisors inform all incoming students, no matter their income, race, or ethnicity, of the benefits of taking 15 credits per semester and encourage them to enroll in such a full load (CCA, 2016). These institutions also report a behavioral change in the number of credits students consider to be the norm as full time, which is 15 credits (CCA, 2017a; J. McCoy, personal communication, February 11, 2020; C. Scott, personal communication, September 21, 2020). This change has narrowed achievement gaps, and in some cases, it has completely closed the equity gap (J. McCoy, personal communication, February 11, 2020; Straney et al., 2017).

Theory of Action

The theory of change was implemented through various actions. The first action implemented was creating an implementation task force at the college comprising college members who advocated for the success of a 15 to Finish campaign. This task force included members from the academic affairs, student affairs, and marketing and communications offices. This team met three times during the implementation period to ensure the timeline and activities of the program were accomplished for the internal and external stakeholders to lead to short- and long-term outcomes. Activities to improve the awareness of college professionals on the benefits to students of taking 15 credits per semester were implemented and consisted of informational meetings and workshops with evidence-based data and presentations. Short-term goals were for college professionals to understand a change in the advising culture needed to take place to

encourage and advise students—no matter their income, race, or ethnicity—to take 15 credits per semester to be full time so they could graduate on time. They needed to advise more students to take 15 credits to complete their degree on time. This activity's long-term goal is a mindset change whereby college professionals believe 15 credits per semester is the norm. I expect to see the percentage of students who sign up for 15 credits increase, which should increase the completion rate of the institution. I also expect to see a decrease in the achievement gaps among the different student demographics.

I implemented activities to increase students' awareness of the academic and economic benefits of taking 15 credits per semester: I conducted presentations at new student orientation sessions and created messages for students through various media. The expected short-term outcome from implementing the activities was students would understand the importance and benefits of taking 15 credits per semester and then use this information as motivation to enroll in 15 credits. The expectation was they would then continue taking 15 credits per semester during their time at this institution. The expected long-term outcomes from implementing the activities were an increase in enrollment of students taking 15 credits and an increase in on-time graduation.

All activities set forward in the logic model were implemented with the expectation the percentage of students taking 15 credits each semester would increase, which would lead to an increase in the degree completion rate of county residents and an increase in social and economic mobility of the Black, Hispanic and low-income county students—all contributing to completion goals set forward by the state. By advising low-income and racial and ethnic minoritized students to take 15 credits, the credit achievement gap and completion achievement gap should close and eventually become nonexistent.

Method

This section provides a positionality statement acknowledging my position and background, which might have impacted the evaluation process. I present the program evaluation questions with the research design that aligned with each question. I describe information on the setting and participants in the program evaluation. I identify data tools, explaining the procedure on how I collected and analyzed. The section ends with this study's significance to the community college sector.

Positionality Statement

I was both an insider and an outsider regarding the implementation and formative outcome evaluation of the community college's 15 to Finish communication campaign. I was an insider, as I participated in colleagues' professional development at the community college where I worked at the time of this study, and I evaluated their knowledge of and attitude toward the 15 to Finish campaign information provided to them. Due to my age and my professional status as a community college professor in foreign languages, I was an outsider to the community college students. I participated in offering informational sessions to students on the benefits of taking 15 credits per semester and evaluating their knowledge and behavior during implementation of the 15 to Finish communication campaign.

I empathize with the nontraditional community college student because I attended a community college in New Jersey many years ago as a European, White female student in her late 20s raising a young family. Before living in New Jersey, I briefly lived in North Carolina and Texas, but I grew up in Belgium, where my educational upbringing differed from the norm in the United States. I received a higher education degree in Belgium, where everyone attended school full time. There were no other options. Classes were held every day, and the degree path

was mapped out without any course choices. Classes were not offered by semester but by academic year. Degrees were posted in a catalog with each year's courses. Students were automatically signed up again for the next academic year. No advisors were needed, nor was there a financial aid office. The government funded higher education, and each student's focus was solely on their studies. College students did not work during the academic year, except in the summers to earn spending money. Attending school all day was the norm, and unless a student failed a course or courses, for which they had to retake the entire academic year, they graduated on time.

Arriving in the United States, I initially thought it was a clever system to have a choice in selecting classes and to take as few or as many classes in a year as was desired. After understanding the social impact of delayed graduation, I have come to understand this approach may not be in the student's best interest. Although I can identify with both educational cultures, as I did return to school full time in the United States to attain a teaching position, I noticed numerous community college students' priority was not their studies but their work.

Over the 25 years I have taught in a languages and communications department, I have observed students believe they cannot or will not enroll in their studies full time. Many students opt to work low-paying jobs while attending some classes. They often end up not graduating due to life situations, or they end up taking more years than needed to graduate, not realizing the disadvantages of their actions. Although I rely on my own schooling experience and that of my husband and daughters, my position on students' enrollment behavior became more fluid over the years living in the United States. I understand there are personal circumstances in which it is not possible to attend full time. However, I believe most students attending full time can take 15 credits each semester instead of 12, but they do not. I believe it is possible to change the

behavior, as I have been in an educational system where completing a degree on time is the norm. Students in Belgium know what is expected and understand they must attend every day to receive their degrees. I presume students in the classes I teach at the community college, no matter their ethnicity, race, or economic status, do not fully understand the implications for their future of not enrolling in 15 credits. Students have options not communicated to them by the institution to attend full time with 15 credits and graduate in 2 years, as the institution's name intends it to be. I attribute their lack of awareness not to enroll in 15 credits per semester to graduate on time to the cultural mindset ingrained at educational institutions across the country. I consider this mindset change necessary for the benefit of the student. Therefore, I implemented professional development to offer evidence-based data showing taking 15 credits each semester benefits students to change college professionals' attitudes. Only then can there be a change in students' attitudes and behaviors regarding the number of credits they take to be full time. If other countries can create a successful educational environment where students graduate in the timeframe the degree states, then so can the United States.

I believe barriers students face with on-time degree completion can be fixed by changing institutional policies and the attitudes and behaviors of college professionals and students. Therefore, I considered it important to implement an intervention that can aid students' awareness of the opportunities to finish on time. A communication campaign informs students of the possibility of getting a degree in the least amount of time with the lowest cost. This intervention can have positive results. The 15 to Finish communication campaign has been launched across this country at multiple community colleges, resulting in increased on-time completion rates. It is a matter of implementing the right messages on the academic and

economic benefits of taking 15 credits per semester to all community college stakeholders to change institutional culture.

Program Evaluation Questions

The following are the program evaluation questions that were researched to determine if the 15 to Finish program implementation was successful.

1. To what extent were college professionals knowledgeable about the importance of students taking 15 credits each semester after participating in training?
2. To what extent did the campaign get the 15 to Finish messages across to students?
3. What 15 to Finish messages resonated the most with college professionals and students?
4. To what extent did college professionals encourage students to register for 15 credits?
5. To what extent did the 15 to Finish campaign impact students' enrollment behavior, and how did students' enrollment behavior vary by demographics?

Research Design

To assess the program evaluation questions, two methods were used. First, a descriptive single-case study, a nonexperimental design, was used to answer the first four program evaluation questions focusing on the professional and student experience with the 15 to Finish campaign. In addition, a quasi-experimental static-group comparison design was used to compare enrollment data before and after the intervention.

Descriptive Single-Case Study

Creswell and Guetterman (2019) defined a *case study* as “an in-depth exploration of a bounded system based on extensive data collection” (p. 477). The descriptive evaluation focused on collecting data that allowed for a more complete description of the participants' behavior (Fox

& Bayat, 2007). External threats could impact the evaluation's validity of a case study, as the concern is generalizability and transferability of the evaluation's outcome (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Merriam, 2015). The evaluation was conducted at one community college, so it might not be generalizable and transferable to all other community colleges. In collecting qualitative data for a case study design, there were no statistical conclusions stakeholders interested in the evaluation results could generalize. However, using qualitative data should not be a plausible threat to the evaluation I conducted. Merriam (2015) stated a case study is specifically put in place to understand the implementation of a program "in-depth" (p. 37). They explained, by using detailed and thick descriptions in a qualitative evaluation, those interested in implementation results at that institution should decide if the results can also pertain to their environment.

I assessed the following program evaluation questions using the single-case study design:

- **To what extent were college professionals knowledgeable about the importance of students taking 15 credits each semester after participating in training?** To answer this program evaluation question, I asked college professionals to complete a survey comprising open-ended questions with a multiple choice and an agree–disagree scale as response options. I administered the survey in May 2021, immediately after training sessions.
- **To what extent did the campaign get the 15 to Finish messages across to students?** To answer this program evaluation question, I used a survey comprising closed-ended questions with multiple-choice response options, together with open-ended questions from the focus groups. I administered the survey to full-time students

at new student orientation sessions during the summer. I conducted the focus groups in September 2021 through video conferencing.

- **What 15 to Finish messages resonated the most with college professionals and students?** To answer this program evaluation question, I used a survey comprising open-ended questions in which college professionals provided free-form responses with their own words. College professionals received the survey after the training in May 2021. I conducted student focus groups and a student interview in September through video conferencing to receive free-form responses on what 15 to Finish messages resonated with them.
- **To what extent did college professionals encourage students to register for 15 credits?** I conducted focus groups and an interview to answer this program evaluation question in September, through video conferencing. The student survey also addressed this question in one of the closed-ended questions with multiple-choice response options.

Static-Group Comparison Design

McDavid et al. (2019) defined static-group comparison design as a design in which participants in the program are compared to participants who are not in the program. I compared student enrollment data from 2021, after the implementation of the 15 to Finish campaign, and Fall 2019 and 2020, prior to the campaign.

When using a quasi-experimental static-group design for data collection, possible threats could hamper an evaluation and create an altered result, not stemming from implementing the intervention. Just as with a case study, there is the external threat evaluation results at one institution might not be generalizable and transferable to other institutions. There is a potential

threat to the intervention's internal validity when considering history's threat (McDavid et al., 2019). Using a control group, the COVID-19 global pandemic significantly impacted students enrolling in 15 credits during Fall 2020. Therefore, the pandemic might have contributed to a different outcome when comparing the control group with students who received the intervention and enrolled in 15 credits during Fall 2021. Due to the pandemic, fewer students might have enrolled in 15 credits during Fall 2020. To address this issue, I also compared student enrollment data from Fall 2019 to student enrollment data from Fall 2021 for better validity.

The following program evaluation question was assessed via the static-group design:

- **To what extent did the 15 to Finish campaign impact students' enrollment behavior, and how did students' enrollment behavior vary by demographics?** To answer this program evaluation question, I used existing enrollment data from prior 1st-year, full-time students taking 15 or more credits during fall semesters for 2019 and 2020 as the control group. I used as the treatment group enrollment data from 1st-year, full-time students taking 15 or more credits in Fall 2021. The control group was the group for whom the intervention did not occur but was similar to the treatment group who received the intervention, as they enrolled in 15 or more credits. I collected the treatment group's data after the last Fall 2021 session started (end of October) to get the entire student population attending the community college during the Fall 2021 semester. I conducted an internal comparison of the treatment and control groups to determine the impact of the 15 to Finish campaign, dividing the data by demographics of race, ethnicity, and Pell-eligible students.

Setting

I conducted the program evaluation at the two campuses of a community college in the Northeast. The main campus is in a suburban setting and the second campus is in an urban setting. The college offers degree programs in associate in arts, associate in science, associate in applied science, and numerous certificate programs. The student body in Fall 2021 comprised 7,658 degree-seeking students. In Fall 2021, 713 students were first-time, full-time students. The definition of a *full-time student* at the community college was enrolling in 12 or more credits during a semester, as 12 credits is the number of credits a student is eligible for full financial aid. The definition of a *first-time student* is the definition Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System uses, which defines it as first time ever, not including students transferring from another college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). The percentage of first-time, full-time students who received an income-based federal Pell Grant for 2019–2020 was 56%. Table 2 shows the student body's distribution for retention and completion by race and ethnicity.

Participants

Two groups participated in the program evaluation. The first group included academic advisors, department chairpersons, and academic program coordinators participating in the training in May 2021. There were 53 participants in the group: 40 faculty members who were chairpersons or program coordinators, six full-time academic advisors, and seven part-time academic advisors. They received a survey immediately after the training to evaluate the activity voluntarily.

Table 2*National Center for Educational Statistics: Community County College in the Northeast*

Race/ethnicity	Undergraduate enrollment ^a (%)	1-year retention ^b (%)	3-year graduation rate (%)	2-year graduation rate ^d (%)
All	100	60	21	9
Asian	6	64	25	12
Black/African American	18	52	13	6
Hispanic/Latinx	16	54	12	4
White	58	67	26	11
Other/unknown	9	66	35	14

Note. From the community county college annual institutional profile report for FY2021. The 1-year retention and 2-year graduation data are not accessible to the public. I received it from the community college's institutional research office.

^a*N* = 8,122 (Fall 2020). ^bThe 1-year retention for 1st-year, full-time students from Fall 2019 to Fall 2020.

^cThe 3-year graduation rate for 1st-year, full-time students who began in Fall 2017. ^dThe 2-year graduation rate for 1st-year, full time students who began in Fall 2017.

The second group included first-time, degree-seeking students in the Fall 2021 who attended one of three summer orientation sessions for new students. Of 992 first-time, degree-seeking students, 267 attended one of the new student orientations. I provided all students in attendance with a survey right after the presentation on the benefits of taking 15 credits per semester. In addition, I conducted a student interview and two focus groups, each comprising two to four 1st-year, full-time students enrolled in 15 credits or more. I used a self-selecting sample for student focus groups. I invited the first 30 students who responded to the email invitation to attend. I used a census sample of 1st-year, full-time students enrolled in 15 credits or more for enrollment data analysis, comparing students' percentage taking 15 credits or more in Fall 2021 versus students' percentage who took 15 credits or more in Fall 2019 and 2020. The

student count for taking 15 credits or more was 280 in Fall 2019, 269 in Fall 2020, and 269 in Fall 2021.

Data Sources

I collected quantitative and qualitative data to answer the five program evaluation questions. I used this mixed-method evaluation design because one method complements the other. The complementarity rationale allowed for quantitative data to offer information of a particular aspect of the intervention and allowed the qualitative data to complement the quantitative data by providing rationale and reasons for another intervention aspect (Adu, 2015). This rationale is associated with a concurrent nested mixed-method evaluation design. I used both design methods during the same period when collecting and analyzing data. I nested the qualitative approach in the evaluation's quantitative data approach (Adu, 2015).

The tools I used to collect data were: (a) statistical survey questionnaires, (b) focus groups and an interview, and (c) enrollment data. Using multiple measures allowed for a more complete understanding and better validity of the intervention's implementation, as each measure had its limitations. By corroborating evidence using different data collection methods, an evaluator can use one method to neutralize the other method's limitations and strengthen the validity of the findings (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Survey Questionnaires

I sent surveys to college professionals and students. I collected surveys from college professionals on the knowledge they acquired on the intervention topic during training. I collected them electronically through the online survey software Qualtrics. This tool can be administered through email and used to collect and perform preliminary data analysis. I collected

the college professionals' survey after the May 2021 training. I used the following survey items used for professionals:

1. The training helped me understand the importance of students taking 15 credits.
2. The training helped me understand the importance of having a conversation with students in their first semester on the consequences of taking fewer than 15 credits.
3. I am more likely to encourage students to take 15 credits after participating in this training.
4. What are the benefits of taking 15 credits per semester?
5. What messages from the training resonated the most? Why?

I collected the students' surveys electronically using Qualtrics after the summer student orientation sessions. I used the following questions for the student survey:

1. How many credits did you sign up for this semester?
 - Less than 12 credits
 - Between 12 and 14 credits
 - 15 or more credits
2. Do you plan on talking to your advisor to add another course this semester?
 - Yes
 - Maybe
 - No
3. Do you plan on taking summer classes?
 - Yes
 - Maybe
 - No
4. If you do not plan on taking summer or winter-session classes, how many college credits must you take each spring and fall semester to graduate in 2 years?
 - 9 credits
 - 12 credits
 - 15 credits
 - 18 credits

5. Did you see the “15 to Finish” messages on the college website?
 - Yes
 - No
6. Did you see the “15 to Finish” messages on social media?
 - Yes
 - No
7. Did you see the “15 to Finish” messages on campus flyers?
 - Yes
 - No
8. Did you receive “15 to Finish” messages from advisors?
 - Yes
 - No
9. What are the benefits of taking 15 credits per semester?

Questions 1–8 had multiple-choice responses, but students could pick only one response for each question. Question 9 allowed students to type in a response.

Before collecting the data, I required participants to read and sign an informed consent agreement. This signed agreement demonstrated the participant was knowledgeable of potential benefits or risks while partaking in the evaluation (Giancola, 2021).

Focus Groups and Interview

I used two focus groups and an interview to ascertain through open conversation how students received campaign messages, which messages resonated with them, and why they registered for 15 credits. I asked the following questions of the groups and interviewees, which allowed for more detailed and richer information on the topic than closed questions in a survey:

1. Warm-up question: How many of you came to the college originally planning to take 12 credits?
2. Why are you taking 15 credits?

3. Where did you see or hear about the advantages of taking 15 credits each semester?
Who spoke to you about this strategy?
4. What message of the 15 to Finish campaign did you see or hear on campus that you think is important for every student to know? (Can you explain the importance of that message?)
5. Wrap-up question: What is one word that describes what it is like so far to take 15 credits in semester?

The students I invited to participate in the focus groups were enrolled as first-time students taking 15 or more credits during the fall semester. A moderator collected the responses to the focus groups and interview questions at the end of September 2021 through recordings using my video conferencing Zoom cloud. Zoom is a tool that allows students to sign in for free to attend my virtual space for the interview and focus groups. I recorded the conversations for later analysis. Prior to participating in the focus group and interview, I asked students to sign an informed consent form.

I did the interview and focus groups' data collection through video recording in Zoom. Data collection and analysis must protect confidentiality by ensuring no personal information is revealed during analysis and reporting. When collecting data, confidentiality must be respected not only by the moderator but also by all participants. The moderator must request the group maintains confidentiality for each other. No names or names of professors, advisors, or any college professional were to be mentioned during the discussion. Krueger (2015) explained maintaining confidentiality can be a sensitive issue in internal focus groups. Students might see each other in classes they take together. To provide the moderator with clear instructions, I developed a moderator's guide. I assigned a trained moderator to each focus group and the

interview. In the introduction, the moderator explained confidentiality to participants and promised no names would be mentioned when the evaluator analyzed and reported the findings.

Enrollment Data

I collected quantitative data from the office of institutional research by requesting enrollment data from first-time, full-time students seeking a degree of three consecutive fall semesters (2019–2021) to find out if students' enrollment behavior was impacted during the program's implementation stage. Data from Fall 2021 were available in November 2021.

Procedure

The first step I took in the evaluation procedure was to seek approval of the Institutional Review Board at New Jersey City University and the institutional review committee at the community college in the Northeast, the site where the evaluation occurred. The next step was to invite academic advisors, department chairpersons, and academic program coordinators at the community college to participate in the training that took place in May 2021. I sent an email with the information on training and the reason the training would occur. Due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, I held the training remotely using Zoom. I explained a survey after the training was voluntary. Immediately after the training, in Zoom's chat tool, participants read an electronic letter of informed consent and agreed to it before they filled out the electronic survey for the evaluation. The letter of informed consent followed U.S. federal guidelines, which entailed "a fair explanation of procedures, description of risks reasonably to be expected, a description of benefits reasonably to be expected, an offer of inquiry regarding the procedures, and an instruction that the person is free to withdraw" (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008, p. 75). If participants signed the informed consent, they were asked to complete the 10-minute survey.

The tool in which the consent form was read and agreed upon was Qualtrics. I received results anonymously.

The admission's office invited 1st-year students during the summer to attend one of the new student orientations in late August 2021. One orientation took place remotely through video conference, and two were in person. I offered a 5-minute presentation on the benefits of taking 15 credits to all students in attendance. After the presentation, students received an electronic link and a QR code. I explained to the students that taking the survey was voluntary and it would take no more than 10 minutes to read the informed consent, agree to the informed consent statements, and take a brief survey in Qualtrics. I received results anonymously.

After the semester began in September, I asked the registrar for an email list of the first-time, degree-seeking students taking 15 credits or more and obtained 253 email addresses. These students received an email with an invitation to participate in one of three 1-hour focus groups. In the email, I explained participation was voluntary. There were three available dates from which to choose for the focus group activity. The invitation required those who would like to participate to return the signed informed consent. The consent form included the purpose of the focus group and procedures. The invitation also had information on a \$10 Amazon gift card to compensate for the time of those who participated in the focus group. The first 10 respondents for each date the focus group took place would be accepted to participate. Two dates had several students who signed up to participate and one date only had one student participating. The focus groups and interview took place through the Zoom platform and were recorded in my Zoom cloud. I contacted participants in the focus groups and interview 2 days prior as a reminder of their participation. A trained moderator asked participants the questions outlined in the protocol (see Appendix B). Each focus group had a moderator to conduct the focus groups and record

responses to the protocol. The moderator followed a guide that outlined the roadmap containing opening and closing statements about the purpose of the student focus group and the protocol questions (Danner et al., 2018). Students who attended received an electronic Amazon gift card in their individual chat box immediately after the focus group meeting.

The final step in the procedure was to contact the office of institutional research at the community college to receive Fall 2019–2021 data of students taking 15 credits or more, including by race, ethnicity, and Pell eligibility. Data were enrollment numbers and, therefore, anonymous. The office collected the data after the last fall session started in October, and I received on a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet through email in November.

Data Analysis

To analyze data collected electronically for all program evaluation questions, I had to organized them to facilitate the analysis (Giancola, 2021). There were three kinds of analyses used in this program evaluation. I used descriptive statistics analysis for the closed-ended statistical survey questionnaire's responses. I used manual coding for the open-ended statistical survey questionnaire's responses and responses to the focus groups' protocol and from the one interview. I used inferential statistics analysis for the enrollment data.

Survey Questionnaires

I used descriptive statistics to analyze responses to closed-ended questions from the electronic surveys. According to Giancola (2021), "Descriptive statistics is a number that summarizes a data set in a meaningful way" (p. 214), which allowed for making valuable interpretations of the data. Data I collected from the closed-ended questions in the surveys were nominal and ordinal data, which provided the frequency of responses and most common responses, or mode. I found the results under the Report tab in Qualtrics and exported them to a

Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. To analyze responses to open-ended questions in the surveys, I coded them. Coding is using a word or phrase that captures the essence or meaning of phrases or excerpts when tagging data collected to be analyzed for the findings of a program evaluation question (Adu, 2016). I copied the responses under the Data and Analysis tab in Qualtrics into a Microsoft Word document, where I applied coding. I then copied the codes into another Microsoft Word document, where I sorted them alphabetically and counted them for frequency.

Focus Groups and Interview Data Analysis

I did the qualitative data analysis of the focus groups and interview responses by coding free-form responses in the excerpts of all focus groups' responses to the protocol and the one interview conducted. The purpose was to categorize similar data to find themes and meaningful materials associated with the questions.

The strategy to categorize the data was individual-based sorting. Individual-based sorting is when the evaluator codes and clusters the data themselves without another person (Adu, 2020). I reviewed the full transcripts of the focus groups and interview to properly understand the context. I copied the document into Microsoft Word. I selected relevant excerpts when reviewing each transcript. To organize the data, I assigned an anchor code to label each question. I generated codes to assign excerpts of responses. I compiled all codes by sorting them based on the relationship between the codes. I arranged the codes alphabetically and tallied them by frequency. I transferred codes under themes and categories in a Microsoft Word document's table. After going through the coding process, I reported findings using the codes and themes as valuable responses.

Enrollment Data

I received the inferential statistics data in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet from the office of institutional research and put it into a statistical tool for analysis. According to Giancola (2021), inferential statistics refer to “a number calculated based on one set that is used to conclude about the greater population that your data set is intended to represent” (p. 217). I performed a z test to analyze data for the program evaluation question. The statistical tool allowed for more information than describing data. It allowed me to compare more extensive raw data, make interpretations, and confirm if results were significant for the two data groups in the evaluation.

Enrollment data for the program evaluation question were from fall semesters 2019–2021 of first-time, full-time students seeking a degree and taking 15 credits or more. I used the data to compare the fall semester percentage of students who received and did not receive the 15 to Finish campaign intervention. I used a z test instead of a t test because the sample size was over 30. I used the test to determine whether the two groups differed significantly on a categorical characteristic (i.e., taking 15 credits per semester). Using a z test to analyze the documents’ data answered the program evaluation question about (a) the program’s impact on first-time, full-time students enrolling in 15 credits and (b) the program’s impact on enrollment in 15 credits by racially and ethnically minoritized students and Pell-eligible students.

To analyze the treatment group of all Fall 2021 1st-semester students taking 15 credits, I used a z test to compare two groups and see if the percentage of students taking 15 credits increased with the intervention. The z test permitted discovering whether the difference between the treatment and control groups was statistically significant.

In the second part of the evaluation, I categorized by race, ethnicity, and Pell eligibility the treatment group's and control group's data for enrollment behavior. Comparing, using a z test, these groups of students the year the intervention took place and the years it did not, offered the answer to the question if the percentage difference of students enrolling in 15 credits per semester showed significant statistical difference.

Significance of the Study

I outlined two methods in this chapter to answer the program evaluation questions. First, I used a nonexperimental design, applying a case study using surveys and focus groups to understand the effectiveness of the training and messages. Second, I used a quasi-experimental design, applying a static-group comparison design to determine how this 15 to Finish campaign impacted 15-credit enrollment.

The 15 to Finish campaign implementation program evaluation provided great value to community college professionals who wanted to see an increase in students completing degrees in a timely matter due to encouragement to take 15 credits each semester. The evaluation of the training provided to college professionals who advised first-time, full-time students, and the presentation provided to first-time students at the new student orientation offered information on the knowledge received of the benefits for students taking 15 credits and what campaign messages resonated with them. The focus groups and interview provided more in-depth information on how the messages got across to them and if college professionals encouraged them to take 15 credits. The enrollment data I assessed determined if the campaign impacted the percentage of students taking 15 credits. Together, this information can provide community college practitioners with helpful information as they make a case for engaging in the implementation of a 15 to Finish campaign.

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Chapter 4

Program Evaluation Results and Discussion

This chapter focuses on a discussion of results of the 15 to Finish program evaluation. A summary of the purpose of the 15 to Finish program and methods used during the evaluation provide context to the reader. I share the results and interpretation of the findings from the data I gathered. I examine a discussion of the limitations associated with the findings and their impact. Finally, I disclose key findings and discuss the potential value of the findings for the 15 to Finish program implementation.

Purpose of the Evaluation

The purpose of the formative outcome and implementation outcome program evaluation was to assess the effectiveness of a 15 to Finish campaign at a community college. The need to implement and then evaluate a 15 to Finish communication campaign is derived from national data on 2-year graduation rates, which are in the single digits (Complete College America [CCA], 2021). Community college students often do not take enough credits to graduate in 2 years. They might be unaware of the academic and financial benefits of on-time graduation. By implementing a 15 to Finish campaign, college professionals advise students and offer messages to enroll in 15 credits per semester to receive a degree on time, ensuring the lowest cost. The program implementation's goal was to inform college professionals and students of the benefits of taking 15 credits each semester to empower students in making informed decisions on how many credits they must take in a semester.

I conducted an implementation and formative program evaluation to assess the impact of the campaign. I used the results to determine if the campaign was successful and what

improvements may be needed for the future. I used the following questions to evaluate the program:

1. To what extent were college professionals knowledgeable about the importance of students taking 15 credits each semester after participating in training?
2. To what extent did the campaign get the 15 to Finish messages across to students?
3. What 15 to Finish messages resonated the most with college professionals and students?
4. To what extent did college professionals encourage students to register for 15 credits?
5. To what extent did the 15 to Finish campaign impact students' enrollment behavior, and how did student enrollment behavior vary by demographics?

Method Summary

I used two research design methods to answer the program evaluation questions. First, I used a nonexperimental design—specifically a descriptive, single-case study design—to answer the four formative program evaluation questions that focused on the college professionals and students' experience with the campaign (Evaluation Questions 1–4). In addition, I used a quasi-experimental static-group comparison design to compare enrollment data before and after implementing the campaign (Evaluation Question 5).

I collected quantitative and qualitative data during the late spring and summer of 2021 at a community college with two campuses in the Northeast. The main campus is in a suburban setting, and the second campus is in an urban setting. The tools I used to collect data were survey questionnaires, focus groups, an interview, and enrollment data.

Reports in Qualtrics, the survey platform I used, provided the survey results to be analyzed. I downloaded results to Microsoft Excel and copied the open-ended questions from

Microsoft Excel to a Microsoft Word document for coding. I collected data from the focus groups and interview in Zoom, where a transcript was available to copy into a Microsoft Word document for coding.

I used inferential statistics data to compare enrollment data before and after the 15 to Finish campaign. I received from the office of institutional research Fall 2019–2021 enrollment data in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for statistical analysis. I applied a z test to evaluate if the difference between the treatment and control groups was statistically significant. I also conducted the test to discover if the percentage of students taking 15 credits or more per semester for race, ethnicity, and Pell-eligible students from the treatment and control groups would be statistically significant or not.

Two groups participated in the formative program evaluation. The first group consisted of 53 college professionals. They were academic advisors, department chairpersons, and academic program coordinators from both campuses who participated in training on benefits to students when taking 15 credits per semester. The training was provided in May 2021. Participants received an electronic survey questionnaire immediately after the training to provide feedback.

The second group participating in the formative program evaluation were 1st-year students for the Fall 2021 semester who attended one of the three new student orientations (NSO) at the end of August. NSO at this community college are scheduled right before fall classes start. Students have already enrolled in courses during the spring and summer advisement period prior to attending NSO. There were 267 students who attended. I offered all students in attendance at the three NSO access to an electronic survey after the presentation on the benefits of taking 15 credits per semester. In addition, I invited three focus groups, comprising 1st-year,

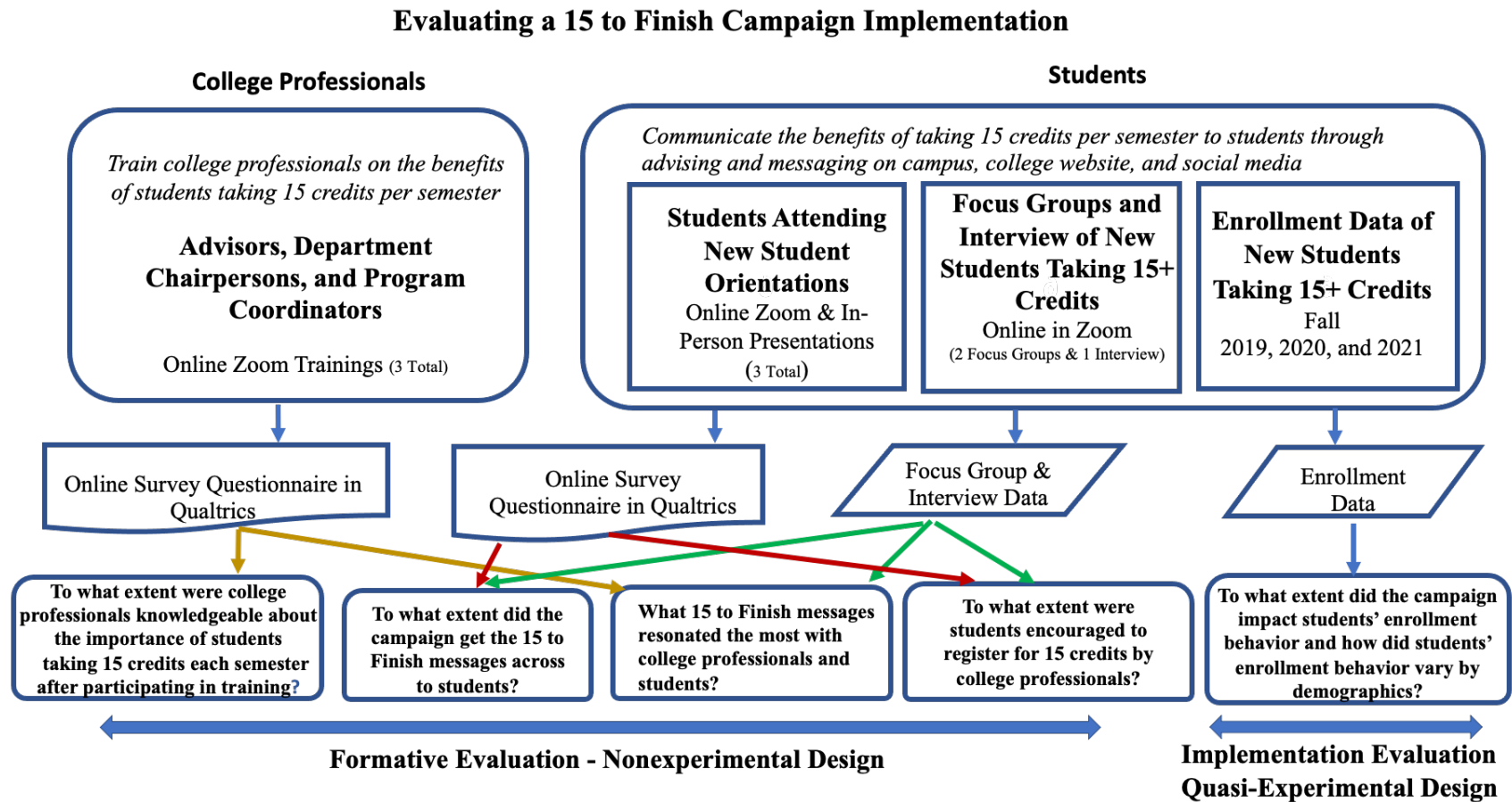
full-time students enrolled in 15 credits or more. I used a self-selecting sample for the student focus groups, inviting students responding to the email to attend. One of the intended focus groups turned into an interview as only one student participated.

I used a census sample of 1st-year, full-time students enrolled in 15 credits or more for the implementation outcome evaluation. I conducted enrollment data analyses to compare the percentage of students taking 15 credits in Fall 2021 to the percentage of students who took 15 credits or more in Fall 2019 and 2020. The student headcount for carrying 15 credits or more was 280 in Fall 2019, 269 in Fall 2020, and 269 in Fall 2021.

I used three types of analyses in the program evaluation. First, I used a descriptive statistics analysis to evaluate responses from college professionals and students to closed-ended statistical survey questions. Next, I used manual coding to evaluate responses from college professionals and students to open-ended statistical survey questions in addition to focus group responses to the protocol and the interview. Finally, I used inferential statistics analysis for the evaluation of enrollment data. Figure 1 provides a summary of the program methodology I used for the implementation of the 15 to Finish program evaluation.

Figure 1

Summary of Program Methodology



Findings

In this section, I share answers for each of the five program evaluation questions. I provide a brief description of the participants and data source, followed by a narrative explanation of the data paired with tables to convey the findings.

To What Extent Were College Professionals Knowledgeable About the Importance of Students Taking 15 Credits Each Semester After Participating in Training?

An essential component of the 15 to Finish campaign implementation was professional development training. I presented evidence-based data on benefits of taking 15 credits per semester to college professionals. A total of 53 participants, 40 chairpersons and academic program coordinators of the two academic divisions and 13 academic advisors, participated in one of three 30-minute training sessions offered through video conferencing. The training focused on students' academic and financial benefits to enrolling every semester in 15 credits, or 30 in a year. Thirty-three participants completed the survey I distributed at the end of the session. The survey yielded a 62% response rate from college professionals who attended the training.

Table 3 shows 88% of college professionals somewhat or strongly agreed the training helped them understand the importance of students taking 15 credits per semester.

Table 3

The Training Helped Me Understand the Importance of Students Taking 15 Credits

Response	<i>n</i>	%
Strongly agree	22	67
Somewhat agree	7	21
Neither agree nor disagree	0	0
Disagree	0	0
Strongly disagree	4	12
Total	33	100

Table 4 demonstrates 91% of college professionals stated, after the 15 to Finish training, they strongly or somewhat agreed the training helped them understand the importance of having a conversation with students on the consequences of taking fewer than 15 credits in a semester.

Table 4

The Training Helped Me Understand the Importance of Having a Conversation With Students in Their 1st Semester on the Consequences of Taking Fewer Than 15 Credits

Response	<i>n</i>	%
Strongly agree	22	69
Somewhat agree	7	22
Neither agree nor disagree	0	0
Disagree	0	0
Strongly disagree	3	9
Total	32	100

Qualitative data from the survey questionnaire provided further insight into the knowledge college professionals acquired during the training on the benefits for students enrolling in 15 credits per semester. The two main benefits college professionals emphasized during training were academic and financial benefits.

Thirty participants (88%) answered the open-ended survey question asking what the benefits were of taking 15 credits per semester. There were 58 phrases to code. In their responses, participants showed they gained knowledge of financial and academic benefits for students when taking 15 credits per semester. Participants addressed in responses all points I presented during the training.

Table 5 shows the most frequently identified benefits for students taking 15 credits were finishing their degree in 2 years and its cost effectiveness. Of all benefits in taking 15 credits per semester, 59% of participants indicated academic benefits, and 38% indicated financial benefits. All students' academic and financial benefits communicated at the training were mentioned,

except for “taking 15 credits benefits every student no matter socioeconomic status, race, or ethnicity.” This point was not mentioned in response to the open-ended question on the knowledge acquired on benefits. Still, it was cited in another question’s response as one of the messages at the training that resonated with them.

Table 5

What Do College Professionals Believe the Benefits Are of Taking 15 Credits per Semester?

Category 1	Category 2	Category 3
Student academic benefits on taking 15 credits (34)	Student financial benefits on taking 15 credits (22)	Institution benefits on taking 15 credits (2)
Student finishes in 2 years (16)	15 credits per semester program is more cost effective (10)	The college has a higher completion rate (2)
Student has a higher GPA (8)	Student enters the workforce earlier, earning wages sooner (5)	
15 credits per semester creates an efficient path toward graduation (6)	Student starts saving for retirement sooner (4)	
Student has better grades (2)	Student improves long-term earnings (3)	
Student is more likely to persist (1)		
Student has as an early momentum (1)		

Note. The frequency of categories and themes college professionals gave are in parentheses.

To What Extent Did the Campaign Get the 15 to Finish Messages Across to Students?

The campaign aimed to get the 15 to Finish messages across in late spring and summer to first-time, full-time students seeking a degree at the institution. Students saw and received the messages in various ways. The campaign offered messages through flyers, posters, presentations, the college’s website, and during advising sessions. Messages were also delivered through social media. The office of advisement provided folders containing a flyer on the benefits of taking 15

credits per semester to high school students who were bussed to the college's main campus to attend group advising and course registration. Social media messages of benefits of taking 15 credits per semester were posted on Facebook and Instagram nine times between May 28 and August 11, 2021.

Results showed messages on Instagram reached 239 to 454 Instagram accounts and had six to 24 likes each day messages were posted. Messages on Facebook reached 402 to 844 Facebook accounts and had two to 17 likes each day they were posted. It is impossible to know who accessed the messages on social media and, therefore, how effective they were for first-time, full-time students to enroll in 15 credits during the fall semester.

The college's portal offered a 15 to Finish slider during June, July, and August 2021. The slider was 1 of 5 slides that appeared when opening the portal and stayed on the screen for 5 seconds before moving to the next slide. After five slides, it looped back to the first slide. The slider's headline stated, "Save money and finish your 2-year degree on time." When clicking on the slider, the viewer was brought to the 15 to Finish website. The website included a 2-minute video on the 15 to Finish benefits CCA created and data on the main reasons to take 15 credits per semester. Results showed 495 page views on the website from June to August, with users spending an average of 3 minutes on the site. The results cannot determine how many of the page views were seen by first-time, full-time students.

The advisement center offered new students presentations of 15 to Finish messages during on-campus and virtual group advisements in the summer. The presentation at the NSO in August also provided a slide explaining the five main reasons to take 15 credits per semester. A final way students received messages from the college was through posters posted at the two

campuses. Fifty posters each displayed one of the five main reasons to take 15 credits per semester.

A total of 267 students participated in the NSO on August 18, 25, and 26, 2021, and seven students participated in focus groups or an interview on September 22, 25, and 28, 2021. There were 145 students who attended the NSO at the suburban campus, 17 at the urban campus, and 105 at the online event. I offered a 5-minute presentation at each of the three NSO, which focused on academic and financial benefits of taking 15 credits per semester. One hundred fourteen students completed the electronic survey, yielding a 43% response rate from students who attended the three NSO. The in-person NSO at the suburban campus had 87 students (60%) who completed the survey, the in-person NSO at the urban campus had nine students (53%) return the survey, and the remote NSO had 18 students (17%) fill out the survey. The following results offer data to determine the extent the campaign got the 15 to Finish messages across to students. Data demonstrate where students saw and received messages. The survey questions asked students if they would consider adding another course to their course load by visiting an advisor, if they would consider adding one or more courses during the summer session, and whether they understood the benefits of enrolling each semester in 15 credits. The students who participated in the NSO survey were not all first-time, full-time students. However, the messages need to be heard by all incoming students so they may be informed of the academic and financial consequences of not enrolling in 15 credits.

The Number of Credits Students Registered for in the Fall 2021 Semester

The frequency distribution (see Table 6) shows 90% of the students in attendance at the NSO were full-time students. Of those students, half were enrolled in 15 credits or more.

Table 6*The Number of Credits Students Registered for in Fall 2021*

Credits	<i>n</i>	%
Less than 12 credits	11	9.7
12–14 credits	51	44.7
15 credits or more	52	45.6
Total	114	100

Seeing and Receiving Campaign Messages During Late Spring and Summer

Results indicated 35% of students at NSO saw and received 15 to Finish campaign messages, but 23% of students neither saw nor received campaign messages. The frequency distribution (see Table 7) shows most students saw the 15 to Finish campaign messages on the college website, followed by students receiving 15 to Finish messages from advisors. Two of the students in the focus group and the one student I interviewed received messages on 15 to Finish from advisors, and four of them saw messages on posters throughout the campus.

Table 7*Did Students See and Hear 15 to Finish Campaign Messages?*

Campaign message	“Yes”		“No”	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Seen on social media	39	34.2	75	65.8
Seen on college website	66	57.4	49	42.6
Seen on campus flyers and/or posters	50	44.6	62	55.4
Received from advisors	51	45.1	62	54.9

Planning on Talking to an Advisor After New Student Orientation to Add Another Course for the Fall Semester

A significant number of students (60%) planned on or were considering visiting an advisor to enroll in an extra course after NSO (see Table 8).

Table 8*Student Planning on Visiting Advisor to Add Another Course*

Response	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	17	14.9
Maybe	52	45.6
No	45	39.5
Total	114	100

Planning on Taking Summer Courses

During the presentation, students were made aware of the numerous possibilities to reach 30 credits in a year for on-time graduation. One of the options was to register full time with 12 credits each semester and then add summer classes. The frequency distribution in Table 9 shows a quarter of students planned to enroll in summer classes and a quarter did not. Half of the students had not decided but were considering taking summer classes.

Table 9*Planning on Taking Summer Courses*

Response	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	29	25.45
Maybe	56	49.10
No	29	25.45
Total	114	100

Understanding Taking 15 College Credits Per Semester Is Needed to Graduate in 2 Years

Table 10 indicates a great majority of students (83%) understood the campaign messages that 15 credits per semester are needed to graduate on time.

Table 10*Knowledge of the Semester Credit Number Needed to Graduate on Time*

Number of credits	<i>n</i>	%
9 credits	2	1.85
12 credits	7	6.48
15 credits	90	83.33
18 credits	9	8.33
Total	108	100

Students saw and heard the messages. However, to find out which messages students were able to recall on the benefits of taking 15 credits per semester, 97 participants answered the open-ended question in the NSO survey. Results provided 121 responses to code. I put all responses that involved academic benefits of taking 15 credits per semester into Category 1 and responses related to financial benefits of taking 15 credits per semester into Category 2 (see Table 11). I then grouped responses into common reasons why students should take 15 credits. Table 11 shows students were most likely to recall academic benefits (81 responses), but many students also commented on financial benefits (40 responses). Graduating on time was the most frequent response.

Table 11

What Were the Messages That Got Across to Students at NSO Presentations of the Benefits of Taking 15 Credits per Semester?

Category 1	Category 2
Academic benefits for students taking 15 credits per semester (81)	Financial benefits for students taking 15 credits per semester (40)
Graduate on time (65)	Save money (33)
Increase the probability of reaching graduation (8)	Earn good wages faster (5)
Earn higher grade point average (8)	Earn retirement savings faster (2)

Note. Frequency in number of categories and themes given by the students are in parentheses.

What 15 to Finish Messages Resonated the Most With College Professionals and Students?

College professionals responded to an open-ended survey question on which 15 to Finish messages they heard during the training resonated the most with them. I conducted focus groups and an interview to find out which messages students received through social media, heard from advisors, or saw around campus and on the website resonated with them.

College Professionals

There were 33 college professionals who answered the survey's open-ended question. Of the 33 respondents, two left the question blank. Twenty-nine participants wrote messages I had offered during the training. They provided 37 messages that resonated with them (see Table 12). One participant stated nothing resonated from the training. College professionals pointed out having a higher GPA when taking 15 credits resonated with them the most; students started to earn wages sooner, and therefore, were able to save for retirement sooner. The participants also found the information of expressing benefits on taking 15 credits to students at the training resonated with them.

The survey question additionally asked the college professionals why those messages resonated with them. There were two main reasons the messages at the training resonated with participants. One reason was they were unaware of the benefits of taking 15 credits per semester. Some participant quotes reflecting this lack of awareness included:

- “I was really surprised to hear students who took just three credits more in their 1st semester were that much more likely to receive a degree.”
- “The statistics about having a higher GPA. I thought that many students would have a lower GPA if they took more classes in a semester.”

Table 12

What 15 to Finish Messages Resonated the Most With College Professionals?

Category 1	Category 2	Category 3
Messages about student academic benefits (13)	Messages about student financial benefits (15)	Messages about data presented (9)
Higher GPA (8)	Earn wages faster (6)	Ways to express the benefits to the students (4)
Finish in 2 years (2)	Save for retirement sooner (5)	Unaware of the importance of taking 15 credits per semester (1)
Evidence-based data showing taking 15 credits increases graduation rates (2)	Improve long-term earnings (3)	Advisor's responsibility to explain full time versus on time (1)
Tend to be more likely to receive a degree (1)	The amount of money lost by not taking 30 credits a year (1)	Evidence-based data showing taking 15 credits per semester works, no matter academic preparedness, socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity (1)
		Nothing (1)
		Data is not reflecting the real student obstacles (1)

Note. Frequency of categories and themes given by the college professionals are in parentheses.

- “I found it fascinating that the students who carry 15 credits actually tend to have a higher GPA.
- “That taking more credits resulted in greater success. It’s counter-intuitive.”

The other reason college professionals stated was the data I presented at the training surprised them. One respondent wrote, “I have a better understanding of why 15 credits are important. I was unaware of the studies until today.”

These reactions are consistent with reactions reported at other community colleges that have implemented a 15 to Finish campaign. One additional participant expressed how the message of students doing better no matter their socioeconomic status, academic preparedness, race, or ethnicity resonated with them.

Students

There were 253 students the college's registrar retrieved who were 1st-year students enrolled in 15 credits or more as of September 7, 2021, for the fall semester. The office of student affairs sent these students an invitation to participate in a focus group at the end of September. The purpose of focus groups was to obtain students' perspectives on the effectiveness of the launch of the 15 to Finish campaign. Eleven students answered the email to be part of a focus group on September 22, 25, or 28. Two students signed up to participate in the first focus group, and four participated in the second focus group. Originally, three students had signed up for the third focus group. However, only one student showed up, and the delivery for data collection became an interview. In total, seven students participated in focus groups or an interview.

To answer the evaluation question on what messages resonated with students, I asked, "What messages of the 15 to Finish campaign did you see or hear on campus that you believe are important for every student to know?" (see Table 13). All students talked about the importance of finishing on time and transferring as soon as possible. When asked why, three students shared taking 15 credits would allow them to transfer and finish a 4-year degree on time. The other four also believed it was essential to either transfer on time or get to a good job quicker. Students stated, "graduating on time is important so you can get the job you want faster," and "to stay on track when transferring to a 4-year institution, you need to finish on time at the community college." None of the students who attended the focus groups were on the attendance list of NSO. Therefore, none had heard the message in a presentation. One of the students also added one of the messages he saw that had resonated with him was students get a job faster by finishing on time.

Table 13

What 15 to Finish Messages Resonated the Most With Students?

Timing (7)	Their future (8)	Savings (1)
On-time graduation (7)	Transfer to finish a college degree in 4 years (4)	Financially beneficial by saving money (1)
	Transfer in 2 years (3)	
	Get in the job market faster (1)	

Note. Frequency in number of categories and themes students gave are in parentheses.

To What Extent Did College Professionals Encourage Students to Register for 15 Credits?

In the survey, 88% of college professionals indicated they strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement they were now more likely to encourage students to take 15 credits per semester (see Table 14). To determine if advisors encouraged students to take 15 credits, students answered a “yes” or “no” question if they received messages from their advisors in a survey during NSO. Forty-five percent of the student respondents indicated their advisor encouraged them to take 15 credits (see Table 7). To obtain more in-depth data, focus groups and an interview were conducted.

Table 14

College Professionals Response if They Were More Likely to Encourage Students to Take 15 Credits After Participating in the Training

Response	<i>n</i>	%
Strongly agree	18	56.3
Somewhat agree	10	31.3
Neither agree nor disagree	0	0.
Disagree	1	3
Strongly disagree	3	9.4
Total	32	100

Three students participating in a focus group stated they saw a college advisor before starting their 1st year at the college, and four did not. The students who did not receive advisement from college professionals received advice from someone outside the college about taking 15 credits for the fall semester. A family member encouraged two of these students to enroll in 15 credits, and either a high school counselor or mentor encouraged the two other students. The three students who met with a college advisor stated the advisor had encouraged them to register for 15 credits—although, they came in planning to take 15 credits. These advisors had posters and flyers on the benefits in their office. They told students who wanted to transfer to a 4-year institution taking 15 credits or more would allow them to graduate on time and keep them on track when they transferred to finish in 4 years at the 4-year institution. One of the students who saw an advisor also mentioned his high school friends motivated him to take 15 credits, as they were at 4-year institutions taking 15 credits their 1st semester. During the discussion, a student expressed advisors should send messages to students via email or text to encourage them to take 15 credits. Another student stated advisors needed to send messages through email so “students would be aware of taking 15 credits, as it is beneficial.”

To What Extent Did the 15 to Finish Campaign Impact Students’ Enrollment Behavior, and How Did Students’ Enrollment Behavior Vary by Demographics?

Implementation of a 15 to Finish campaign positively impacted student enrollment behavior at the institution. Table 15 summarizes enrollment data obtained from the college’s office of institutional research. The data include only first-time, degree-seeking students. In seeking evidence the 15 to Finish program implementation impacted student enrollment behavior, I made several comparisons between the Fall 2021 semester and the previous two fall semesters.

Table 15*First-Time, Full-Time, Degree-Seeking Students*

Semester	First-time degree seekers	1–11 credits		12+ credits		15+ credits	
	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Fall 2019	1,580	422	26.7	1,158	73.3	280	17.7
Fall 2020	1,085	295	27.2	790	72.8	269	24.8
Fall 2021	992	279	28.1	713	71.9	269	27.1

Note. The office of institutional research provided the table.

To investigate the findings on enrollment data, I used a *z* test to evaluate the program's impact on first-time, full-time students enrolling in 15 credits. The *z* test allowed me to compare the proportion of students enrolled in 15 credits or more during Fall 2019 and 2020, before the 15 to Finish program began (i.e., the control group), to the proportion enrolled in 15 credits or more in Fall 2021, after the 15 to Finish program was implemented (i.e., the treatment group).

A *z* test for a proportion is calculated as follows:

$$z = \frac{(\hat{p}_1 - \hat{p}_2) - 0}{\sqrt{\hat{p}(1 - \hat{p})\left(\frac{1}{n_1} + \frac{1}{n_2}\right)}}$$

where the variables are defined:

n_1 = sample size of control

\hat{p}_1 = proportion of control registered for 15

n_2 = sample size of experimental

\hat{p}_2 = proportion of experimental registered for 15

\hat{p} = proportion of all students combined registered for 15

$1 - \hat{p}_1$ = proportion of all students combined not registered for 15

The first comparison considered the proportion of students enrolled in 15 credits or more in Fall 2019 and 2020 to those enrolled in 15 credits or more in Fall 2021. In Fall 2019 and 2020 combined, 549 of 2,665 students registered for 15 credits or more (20.6%). The Fall 2021 semester had 269 of 992 students take 15 credits or more (27.1%). The z test comparing these two groups yielded a z value of -4.20 ($p < 0.00001$). This z value is a highly significant result indicating during the 15 to Finish initiative, students registered for 15 credits at a much higher rate.

In a further analysis, I considered only full-time, degree-seeking students. Because part-time students are not trying to graduate in 2 years, a more important cohort to compare is those with intent to finish in 2 years. For the 2019 and 2020 cohorts combined, 1,948 students were enrolled full time. Of those, 549 registered for 15 credits or more (28.2%). For the 2021 cohort, 269 of 713 (37.7%) registered for 15 credits or more. The z test for this comparison yielded $z = -4.73$ ($p < 0.00001$). Again, this result shows a big difference between the cohorts, with the Fall 2021 students registering for 15 credits at a higher rate than those in the Fall 2019 and 2020 cohorts.

The 2020 academic year was unusual at the college, as all classes were 100% online due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. Registration patterns of students under these circumstances might confound any analysis. Therefore, I performed a second round of analyses for Fall 2019 and Fall 2021 only. The 2019 and 2021 terms were more similar in terms of instructional modality. These results were even more striking. For degree-seeking students, the proportion of students in Fall 2019 with 15 credits or more was 17.7% versus 27.1% for the Fall 2021 cohort. This analysis generated a z value of -5.66 ($p < 0.0000001$). For full-time students only, the proportion of students in 2019 with 15 credits or more was 24.2% versus 37.7% for the 2021

cohort, with a z value of -6.25 ($p < 0.000000001$). The pattern is clear: students registered for 15 credits or more at a much higher rate in Fall 2021 than in Fall 2019 or in Fall 2019 and Fall 2020 combined.

When investigating how students' enrollment behavior varied by demographics, I could not apply a z test to the overall proportions because the variable "unknown" for race and ethnicity was too high in Fall 2021. During Fall 2021, 39.4% of students did not reveal their race or ethnicity versus only 0.4% in Fall 2019 (see Table 16).

Table 16

Race and Ethnicity: First-Time, Degree-Seeking Students Enrolled in 15+ Credits

Racial or ethnic group	Fall 2019		Fall 2020		Fall 2021	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Hispanic	51	18.2	37	13.8	36	13.4
Black and African American	53	18.9	30	11.2	22	8.2
Asian	17	6.1	10	3.7	16	5.9
American Indian and Native Alaskan	2	0.7	1	0.4	1	0.4
White	145	51.8	128	47.6	77	28.6
Two or More Race	6	2.1	12	4.5	10	3.7
Unknown	1	0.4	44	16.4	106	39.4
Nonresident Alien	5	1.8	6	2.2	0	0.0
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0	0.0	1	0.4	1	0.4
Total	280	100	269	100	269	100

Note. The Office of Institutional Research provided the table.

The Office of Institutional Research was, however, able to provide the percentage of students who enrolled in 15 or more credits in ethnicity and racial categories for Fall 2019–Fall 2021. Table 17 includes the percentage of Hispanic, Black, and White students in each cohort and the percentage of students in each race and ethnic group who enrolled in 15 or more credits. Looking at the percentages of the most common races and ethnicities at the institution, all percentages for students taking 15 credits increased.

Table 17*First-Time, Degree-Seeking Students by Race and Ethnicity*

Race or ethnic group	Fall 2019 first-time, degree-seeking students		Fall 2020 first-time, degree-seeking students		Fall 2021 first-time, degree-seeking students	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Hispanic	398	25.19	197	18.20	141	14.20
15+ credits	51	12.81	37	18.78	36	25.53
Black	342	21.64	141	13	99	10
15+ credits	53	15.50	30	21.28	22	22.22
Asian	81	5.13	48	4.40	41	4.10
15+ credits	17	20.99	10	20.83	16	39.02
Am Ind Native	10	0.63	4	0.40	1	0.10
15+ credits	2	20	1	25	1	100
Pac Nat Hawaiian	2	0.13	2	0.20	2	0.20
15+ credits	0	0	1	50	1	50
White	616	38.99	363	33.50	234	23.60
15+ credits	145	23.54	128	35.26	77	32.91
Two+ races	56	3.54	39	3.60	19	1.90
15+ credits	6	10.71	12	30.77	10	52.63
Unknown	22	1.39	253	23.30	426	42.90
15+ credits	1	4.55	44	17.39	106	24.88
Nonres/Alien	53	3.35	38	3.50	29	2.90
15+ credits	5	9.43	6	15.79	0	0
Total	1,580	100	1085	100	992	100
15+ credits	280	17.72	269	24.79	269	27.12

Note. The Office of Institutional Research provided the table.

To discover if the increase in percentage of students taking 15 credits for each race and ethnicity category was statistically significant, I performed a *z* test for the Hispanic, Black, and White student populations. Due to 2020 being an abnormal year with the COVID-19 global pandemic and the 2019 fall semester being closer to 2021 in the mode of delivery available to

students, I performed a test comparing the Hispanic, Black, and White students from Fall 2019 and Fall 2021 only. For all first-time, degree-seeking Black students, the proportion of students in Fall 2019 with 15 credits or more was 15.5% versus 22.22% for the Fall 2021 cohort group. This test generated a z value of -1.57 ($p = 0.117$). When looking at all degree-seeking Hispanic students, the proportion of students in Fall 2019 with 15 credits or more was 12.81% versus 25.53% for the Fall 2021 cohort. This test generated a z value of -3.53 ($p < 0.001$). For all degree-seeking White students, the proportion of students in Fall 2019 with 15 credits or more was 25.54% versus 32.91% for the Fall 2021 cohort. This test generated a z value of -2.78 ($p < 0.006$).

For Hispanic and White students, there was a highly significant difference in enrollment in 15 or more credits in 2021 versus 2019. For Black students, the 7% increase was not statistically significant. The sample size was much smaller relative to the other two groups, which impacted the result. It is impossible to know whether the unreported race and ethnicity numbers (42.9%) in the 2021 cohort impacted this result.

I completed an analysis to see whether there was a difference in the proportion of students getting Pell Grant funding who were registered for 15 credits or more. Table 18 indicates in the 2019 cohort of 280 students with 15 credits or more, 128 received Pell funding (45.7%). In 2021, 111 of 269 students (41.3%) received such funding. This analysis yielded a z value of only 1.05 ($p < 0.30$). This result indicated no statistically significant difference between registration of 15 credits or more before and after the 15 to Finish campaign.

Table 18*Pell Grant Status of Students Enrolled in 15+ Credits*

Funding status	Fall 2019		Fall 2020		Fall 2021	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Received Pell funding	128	45.7	105	39	111	41.3
Not a Pell recipient	152	54.3	164	61	158	58.7
Total	280	100	269	100	269	100

Note. The Office of Institutional Research provided the table.

I performed another analysis considering full-time Pell-funded students in 2019 and 2021. The proportion of Pell-funded students enrolled in 15 credits or more in Fall 2019 compared to those enrolled in 15 credits or more in Fall 2021 showed statistical significance. For all full-time, Pell-funded students, the proportion of students with 15 credits or more in 2019 was 20% versus 32.3% in 2021 (see Table 19). The z value was -4.29 ($p < 0.00001$).

Table 19*Pell First-Time, Full-Time, Degree-Seeking Students*

Semester	First-time, degree-seeking students	12+ credits, received Pell		15+ credits, received Pell	
	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Fall 2019	1,158	639	55	128	20
Fall 2020	790	377	48	105	27.8
Fall 2021	713	343	48	111	32.3

Note. The office of institutional research provided the table.

Limitations

The 15 to Finish program evaluation findings must be seen in light of certain limitations that might impact its results. As a case study, there is the external threat the program evaluation results from this institution might not be generalizable and transferable to others. I conducted the program evaluation at one community college where first-time, 1st-year, incoming students are

not required to meet with an advisor to start their 1st semester and are not required to attend the NSO. NSOs happen right before students start classes and students have already enrolled in courses. The primary limitation to the generalization of evaluation results is the low number of students who participated in the focus groups, the remote NSO survey, and the urban campus NSO survey.

A potential self-selection bias with the student population participating in the focus groups and survey may be a threat to internal validity, affecting the evaluation's formative outcome. Students who voluntarily participated in focus groups and the one interviewee were all students who had on-time graduation or transferring on their minds from the moment they entered the institution and therefore do not provide a sample of the average student population attending this college. The students who voluntarily completed the survey after the NSO presentations may not have been representative of the student population at the institution either. The meager attendance of only nine students at the urban campus, which serves many of the underserved student population, does not provide a complete picture of the student population at this campus.

A significant external factor that has a possible threat to the internal validity of the program's implementation is the COVID-19 global pandemic because there were fewer students enrolled at the institution. Enrollment for Fall 2021 decreased 6% from Fall 2020 and 23% from Fall 2019. This resulted in fewer students attending NSO sessions than before the pandemic. When comparing the control group with the treatment group that received the intervention and enrolled in 15 credits during Fall 2021, the pandemic might have significantly impacted students enrolling in 15 credits.

The pandemic also could have impacted the effectiveness of the virtual training to college professionals and the remote NSO. Only 10% of the college professionals showed themselves on the screen, but others did not use their cameras. Data collected during the online NSO were much lower than during in-person NSO, as the college used a webinar mode without a chat box to post the survey link to students, which limited accessibility of the survey, as it was challenging to provide the survey link in near real time. Only 17% of students in the remote NSO participated in the survey, compared to 60% of students at the suburban campus. Finally, the inferential statistics analysis of ethnicity and race in the enrollment data had an internal threat to the validity that makes it impossible to know if the increase of students concealing their race or ethnicity impacted results.

Conclusion

I evaluated the implementation of the 15 to Finish campaign program at a community college in the Northeast by measuring the effectiveness of informing college professionals who advise first-time and other college students on the benefits of taking 15 credits per semester to graduate on time. The evaluation also focused on measuring the impact of student enrollment during the campaign. Findings validate the program's short-term outcomes provided in the logic model. I accomplished the formative outcomes through obtaining leadership support and campus-wide collaboration for the program, offering training using evidence-based data to shift mindsets of college professionals, and delivering clear messages via numerous channels to students to change their enrollment behavior. The implementation evaluation outcome provided enrollment data after the 1st semester of the 15 to Finish campaign. Student enrollment behavior after the intervention had significant positive results. Findings from the program evaluation

support data on implementation of a 15 to Finish campaign found in the literature review of Chapter 2 and conversations with practitioners around the country.

Leadership Support and Collaboration

To implement campaign activities, support from college leadership and collaboration among several departments on campus were essential to strive for its success in leading the quest for change in student enrollment behavior. Collaboration on implementing the 15 to Finish campaign started in March 2021. With the vice president's guidance, the college established an implementation task force of academic and student affairs leaders, and departments of advising, admissions, and communications and marketing. The task force and the advising department offered pathways and ideas to reach students with messages. The office of admissions allotted time for 15 to Finish presentations at NSOs. The communications and marketing department assured tools to provide messages were created and that messages were published. The office of institutional research provided in-house data I used at the training for college professionals. Materials presented to college professionals and students via numerous channels to implement change were crucial to the campaign. They included evidence-based data materials in PowerPoints, handouts, posters, flyers, the college's website, and social media.

Leadership support and collaboration among departments that provided time and materials added to a successful campaign with minimal capital. Although the institution decided not to use already free source material from CCA, which would have made the program less expensive, the cost analysis demonstrated the campaign was a good investment for the college economically. With nine more students increasing their course load from 12 credits to 15 during Fall 2021, the college recovered campaign implementation expenses. When students enroll in more credits per semester, the college benefits from more tuition revenue. The goal of the 15 to

Finish program is to increase rates for students completing in a timely manner. The college benefits by having more students complete their degrees as it receives more state funding to aid its mission.

Mindset of College Professionals

The formative outcome evaluation findings from the college professionals' surveys showed the training accomplished what I intended. The logic model indicated the short-term formative outcomes from training sessions to professional stakeholders would lead to increased knowledge on the benefits of taking 15 credits per semester for on-time completion. I informed 53 college professionals of academic and financial benefits for students they advised. Survey respondents acknowledged the training helped provide information on the importance of students taking 15 credits per semester and they were more likely to encourage students to take 15 credits after the training. The percentage increase in students taking 15 credits during Fall 2021 is an indicator that offering evidence-based data during training is the beginning of a shift in the mindset of college professionals. These findings add to the importance of providing training to college professionals.

Findings are in accordance with outcomes reported by many college practitioners with whom I had conversations or who spoke at national conferences on the significance of offering training to advisors at their institutions using evidence-based data on the benefits of taking 15 credits per semester. Indiana higher education institutions and Bishop State Community College in Alabama offered professional development to all advisors, providing evidence-based data to them (CCA, 2016a; C. Scott, personal communication, September 21, 2020). The training resulted in advisors understanding the benefits taking 15 credits per semester offered students and discussing completion goals with each student before starting the 1st semester. Bishop State

Community College (BSCC) offered multiple training sessions for all college professionals before starting a 15 to Finish campaign. Several years into the campaign, being told to take 15 credits per semester has become the norm at BSCC when students converse with advisors.

Responses of advisors who participated in this evaluation as to why particular messages resonated with them offered important information pointing to the importance of evidence-based data. Their responses are comparable to what other institutions encountered after they provided training. Prior to training, advisors at the Indiana University system were highly skeptical about the 15 to Finish campaign. When they received training and saw evidence-based data, they were surprised and had similar reactions as the college professionals in this program evaluation who were not aware of several points made in the data I presented. Advisors at Indiana University system have shifted their mindset and encourage students to take 15 credits per semester (CCA, 2016a).

Students' Enrollment Behavior

Short-term formative outcomes were visible in the findings from student surveys. A presentation offered at NSO, and messages delivered through flyers, posters, and media tools, led to improved student awareness of numerous benefits. Students became aware (a) there is a difference between full time and on time, (b) they will spend less money on education, (c) taking 15 credits the 1st semester can increase their GPA, and (d) there are consequences when taking 12 credits versus 15. The findings provided evidence I achieved the learning outcomes for the presentation, as students were able to recall academic and financial benefits of taking 15 credits per semester.

Numerous institutions have provided data on the success of a 15 to Finish campaign when they reach students with messages through presentations, posters, brochures, videos, social

media, and websites. The University of Hawaii System, which pioneered the 15 to Finish campaign, has tracked enrollment and graduation rates over the last 10 years, demonstrating increased student enrollment and graduation due to their 15 to Finish campaign messaging (CCA, 2017). The University System of Georgia, Sacramento State University, and Bishop State Community College took advantage of the open-resource material CCA provides to offer 15 to Finish campaign messages through different pathways (CCA, 2016b; J. Dragna, personal communication, September 16, 2020; C. Scott, personal communication, September 21, 2020).

Findings in this evaluation confirm students tend to follow the suggestions advisors give. The focus group students and the interviewee followed their advisors' recommendations. Nia Haydel, the vice president at CCA for alliance engagement and institutional transformation, mentioned in a CCA convening, when she was an advisor at a college, students liked receiving directions from advisors and generally followed the path advisors suggested (CCA, 2016c). A community college president whose institution had the lowest graduation rate (6.8%) of community colleges in the state in 2013 stated when advisors began encouraging students to take 15 credits and made it the norm, the graduation rate increased to 33% in 2019 (M. McMenamin, personal communication, August 30, 2020).

As community college students often become "anchored" to the number of credits advisors tell them to enroll in and repeat the same enrollment behavior, the findings are inconclusive to reveal any anchoring effect. The campaign will need to be visible for several more semesters to see a change in students' behavior. Additional research is required to explore students' behavior in repeating the same credit enrollment of 15 credits each semester. Institutions that implemented a 15 to Finish campaign conducted the campaign for numerous semesters. They have seen a change in advisement and a behavioral change in the number of

credits students consider to be the norm as full time, which is 15 credits (CCA, 2017; J. McCoy, personal communication, February 11, 2020; C. Scott, personal communication, September 21, 2020).

The enrollment data analysis showed a significant increase in students taking 15 credits or more after the intervention compared to enrollment data prior to the COVID-19 global pandemic. There was a 13.5% surge in students increasing their full-time status from 12 credits to 15 credits or more compared to Fall 2019, which equated to 36 full-time students. The cost of implementing the program was equal to having nine students planning to increase their course load from 12 to 15 credits. The college recuperated the 15 to Finish campaign cost and increased its tuition revenue. The return on investment was 329%.

When looking through an equitable lens, data I received from the office of institutional research did not reveal significant results in enrollment behavior for Pell-funded full-time students taking 15 credits per semester. When I compared full-time students in 2019 and 2021 who took 15 credits or more, there was a statistical significance. However, the 343 students receiving Pell funding at this institution received enough funding to cover 15 credits per semester and still have money remaining for other expenses. Only 111 of these 343 students registered for 15 or more credits. The campaign must target this student population to make them aware of the benefits of taking 15 credits per semester to increase their credit load from 12 to 15 credits per semester for on-time graduation. Research had made clear taking 15 credits benefits every student no matter their socioeconomic status, race, or ethnicity (Attewell et al., 2012; CCA, 2016a).

I could not use the disaggregated data for race and ethnicity to make a statistical analysis of student enrollment behavior due to the overwhelming group of students who did not reveal

their race or ethnicity. When dividing the cohorts of first-time, degree-seeking students by race and ethnicity and looking at the percentages in each race and ethnicity, enrollment behavior showed an increase of students taking 15 or more credits, with this difference being statistically significant for Hispanic and White students. The percentage increase implied the messaging effect of the campaign was equitable across various racial groups, but an equity gap still existed.

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Chapter 5

Recommendations and Resources

This chapter presents a toolkit to college practitioners who want to implement a 15 to Finish campaign at their institution. The chapter comprises a set of recommendations derived from program evaluation findings, offers resources helpful to implementing the campaign, and provides recommendations for future program evaluations.

The Problem of Practice

Numerous community college students assume they will graduate on time in 2 years when they attend full time. Many students are unaware they need to take 15 credits per semester, or 30 credits a year, to graduate on time. Only 5% of community college students graduate in 2 years (Complete College America [CCA], 2021). On-time graduation rates are even bleaker for low-income and racially and ethnically minoritized students, who represent a majority of the community college student population. Three significant institutional obstacles preventing students from graduating on time are: (a) inadequate information offered on positive effects of academic momentum, (b) insufficient academic guidance, and (c) ineffective financial aid programs to get students to the finish line on time. These obstacles prevent students from graduating on time and delay transferring or obtaining a well-paying job, resulting in missed opportunity costs, including a loss of retirement savings (Jones, 2015). Therefore, the institution must make students aware of the benefits of taking 15 credits each semester and college professionals must empower students to make decisions that allow them to graduate on time.

Program Description

I implemented a 15 to Finish communication campaign, which is a campaign at higher education institutions that increases awareness of academic and financial benefits of taking 15

credits per semester, at a northeast community college. I conducted an internal program evaluation to assess the impact of the 15 to Finish campaign implementation. First, I conducted training sessions for college professionals advising incoming 1st-year students to provide evidence-based data on academic and financial benefits of taking 15 credits per semester. Then, college professionals advised students and the institution offered messages encouraging them to enroll in 15 credits per semester to receive a degree in the least amount of time with the lowest cost.

Key Findings

I successfully conducted the program evaluation research of a 15 to Finish campaign by measuring the effectiveness of informing college professionals who advise students, including first-time college students on the benefits of taking 15 credits per semester. College professionals acknowledged the training session they received on the importance and benefits of students taking 15 credits each semester was helpful, and they were more likely to encourage students to take 15 credits in a semester. College professionals indicated all the academic and financial benefits presented at the training were important. Numerous benefits resonated with them, as prior to the training they had been unaware of certain benefits and were surprised by the data I presented.

Findings revealed students accessed the campaign messages on the 15 to Finish benefits through social media, posters, flyers, the college's website, and advisors. Advisors encouraged students to register for 15 credits, and students were aware of the importance of taking 15 credits per semester to graduate on time. Students also considered "graduating on time" the message that resonated the most with them. Enrollment data indicated implementing a 15 to Finish campaign

for Fall 2021 offered significant results compared to Fall 2019, as more students enrolled in 15 or more credits during Fall 2021.

The implementation of the 15 to Finish campaign provided the institution with economic benefits, as students enrolling in 15 credits, rather than 12, brought in more college revenue. By having nine students planning on enrolling in 12 credits and adding three more credits to their schedule during Fall 2021, the campaign's expenses were covered. The college gained in tuition revenue, as more than nine students added three more credits to their 12 credits in Fall 2021 versus Fall 2019. The college benefitted from the potential of increasing on-time student graduation rates. According to research, students gain economic benefits, as they save money in the cost of degree acquisition by taking 15 credits per semester (Belfield & Jenkins, 2014).

Disaggregated data on student demographics I received from the office of institutional research provided information on students' race, ethnicity, Pell Grant eligibility and enrollment behavior for Fall 2019, 2020, and 2021. An analytical test focused on each race and ethnic group separately. The test showed that all groups of students saw and heard the 15 to Finish messages. The percentage of students taking 15 credits or more in each race and ethnic group increased versus Fall 2019, although these increases were only statistically significant for Hispanic and White students. The analytical test I conducted for Black students did not show any significant results, and data for Pell-funded students showed only 111 of the 343 registered for 15 credits or more. There is more work to be done to get the 15 to Finish messages across to all students to continue increasing the percentage of students taking 15 credits per semester and to persuade Black and Pell-funded students in particular on the benefits of taking 15 credits.

Program Recommendations

There are several recommendations on implementing a 15 to Finish campaign as conducted at a northeast community college. These recommendations align with the first four stages of Kotter's (2012) 8-stage change process. Kotter's first four stages are (a) establishing a sense of urgency, (b) creating the guiding coalition, (c) developing a vision and strategy, and (d) communicating the change vision. Recommendations for the 15 to Finish program implementation relate to those stages, and I have organized them by the following five themes: (a) obtain support from institutional leaders, (b) create a task force of champions for the implementation, (c) develop close contact with the communications and marketing department, (d) engage in continuous communication with the advisement office, and (e) show visibility on all campuses.

Obtain Support From Institutional Leaders

Kotter (2012) mentioned change is only effective when high-quality leadership drives it. It is, therefore, vital to have senior administration entirely on board during the entire process. Campus leaders are supporters and enablers to make the campaign visible on campus. I recommend contacting the college president, senior administrators, deans, and directors at all campuses of the institution and establishing a sense of urgency to change student credit enrollment behavior by implementing a 15 to Finish communications campaign. The administrators are the college professionals who control the campus resources needed to promote the campaign.

Create a Task Force of Champions for the Implementation

When a person is a grassroots leader, someone who does not have a position of authority at the college, it is critical to create a network and support system to bring forward change and

therefore gain buy-in from as many college professionals as feasible (McClellan et al., 2016). Kotter (2012) alluded to this stage as creating the guiding coalition wherein a person forms a group with other college professionals who can work together in leading change.

I created an implementation task force of administrators who were enthusiastic about the campaign on campus and could assist in disseminating the 15 to Finish messages. I also made sure I had a diverse group of individuals from the urban and suburban campuses. The implementation task force was instrumental in advocating for the program on both campuses. These were individuals who helped communicate the change the task force envisioned for student enrollment behavior. This stage in Kotter's (2012) change process refers to "using every vehicle possible to constantly communicate the new vision and strategies" (p. 23). The two academic deans and the director of advisement supported the college professionals' three professional development training sessions by offering their monthly or weekly meeting timeslots. Although data from institutions around the country are significant to share, I recommend other college professionals contact the college's office of institutional research for enrollment data that include disaggregated data from their institution. At the end of the training, I shared a guide (see Appendix C) with the college professionals I created with the assistance from CCA resources, and CCA commonly asked questions from college professionals to consult when encouraging students to take 15 credits per semester. I was invited by other task force members to present the purpose of the campaign at their monthly meetings and gave a 1-hour workshop on the 15 to finish benefits during a monthly teaching and learning event. Additional invitations to present broadened the number of college professionals who were given information on benefits for students to take 15 credits per semester.

Develop Close Contact With the Communications and Marketing Department

The next step was to get the communications and marketing professionals on campus committed to the campaign and understand the vision. Although they did not use most of the free, open-source materials available on the CCA website, the materials from CCA provided communications professionals with models used to create the college's materials that fit the college's branding (see Appendices B and C). Practitioners implementing a 15 to Finish campaign must be open to suggestions from communications and marketing professionals because their job is to promote the institution's brand and provide materials for other institutional campaigns. The 15 to Finish campaign must integrate into the institution's overall communications and marketing strategy.

College practitioners who wish to implement a 15 to Finish campaign could discuss the messages they want to get across to students with the director of communications and marketing. Working together on a timeline for when messaging via the website, posters, flyers, and social media need to happen is critical. The communications and marketing department are part of the team that helps you create the vision in the change effort (Kotter, 2012). Weekly communication through email or Zoom with the communication department will keep everyone informed and on task.

Engage in Continuous Communication With the Advisement Office

Ongoing communication with the director of advisement is another crucial element that allows the campaign to stay on target. A valuable addition to reaching as many new students as possible with the campaign messages were the advisement professionals' suggestions to reach students. They added 15 to Finish flyers on the benefits of taking 15 credits per semester into a folder the high school students received when they visited the school for advisement (see

Appendix C). Advisement professionals also incorporated a slide of the reasons to take 15 credits in their online group advisement sessions during late spring and summer.

Show Visibility on All Campuses

The leader of an implementation program must reach all campuses at their institution with campaign messages to communicate the change vision (Kotter, 2012). In addition, providing electronic media messaging and hanging posters at every campus is essential to make the messages visible to all students (see Appendix D). The institution provided students with a new student orientation at the suburban campus, the urban campus, and remotely. I highly recommend attending and participating in all the new student orientations by providing a slide presentation on the benefits of 15 to Finish. Here, you can directly communicate to the incoming students the advantages of taking 15 credits per semester with the campaign messages.

These recommendations on implementing a 15 to Finish campaign correspond with conversations among practitioners and administrators presented in Chapter 2, who provided insight into key factors impacting a successful 15 to Finish campaign implementation. Practitioners and administrators recommended seeking internal stakeholders' commitment, working closely with departments to provide professional development to change college professionals' mindsets, and creating clear messages to be visible to all students.

Resources for Practitioners

The following four resources provided in the appendices will assist community college practitioners in implementing a 15 to Finish campaign at their institution. First included in the resources is a checklist roadmap to implement the campaign (see Appendix E). Secondly, a resource guide given to all college professionals who advise students offers valuable information on the academic and financial benefits. The resource guide provides answers to commonly asked

questions from college professionals (see Appendix C). The third resource is the flyer high school students received in their folder when they visited the college campus to talk to advisors (see Appendix D). Finally, an example of one of the posters hung around campus shows one of the main reasons students should enroll in 15 credits per semester (see Appendix F).

I am also providing a blog and several infographics. Appendix G addresses the problem of practice, geared toward practitioners, and Appendix H is an infographic tool to make students aware of the importance of taking 15 credits per semester. I am supplying an infographic that highlights factors for launching a successful 15 to Finish campaign as an intervention to the problem of practice (see Appendix I). A visual presents recommendations for practitioners who would like to implement a 15 to Finish campaign at their institution (see Appendix J). Finally, I summarized the program evaluation results in Appendix K with an infographic that visually demonstrates the success of the 15 to Finish campaign I implemented at the community college.

Recommendations for Future Program Evaluators

The findings of this program evaluation I conducted at a community college in the Northeast have several important implications for future practitioners. First, the surveys I conducted during the program evaluation shed light on the knowledge of taking 15 credits during the campaign's implementation, offering academic and financial benefits. However, I did not ask students about barriers preventing them from taking 15 credits per semester after receiving the campaign messages. I did not look at why some students still enrolled in 12 credits after the campaign. Using a nonexperimental design, a survey questionnaire during the fall semester to 1st-semester full-time students taking 12 credits can offer insight on what keeps students from enrolling in 15 credits. Focus groups with students who participated at the new student orientation can be instrumental in receiving enriched data on why students decided not to take 15

credits during that semester. A focus group with just Pell-funded and Black students enrolled in 12 credits might also provide information as to why they do not change their course load to 15 credits. The administration should thoughtfully examine barriers perceived by all students to address students' concerns and alter or enhance campaign messages as necessary.

Another future evaluation could focus on summer enrollment trends of students taking 12 credits a semester after exposure to future campaign messages. The student survey questionnaire in the evaluation focused on if students planned on taking summer classes. The frequency distribution in Table 10 shows 25% of the students planned to enroll in summer classes, and 50% were considering it. The enrollment of 30 credits per year could be discussed by looking at results from a statistical analysis to see if the 15 to Finish messages impact students taking extra credits over the summer to graduate on time. For this analysis, a quasi-experimental design is needed for evaluation and enrollment data from the office of institutional research.

Finally, reaching students with messages through social media was the least successful path. Two future evaluation recommendations might offer insight into improving messaging to students. The first one is evaluating the success of texting and emailing students directly with messages. Students mentioned during a focus group they would have liked receiving texts or emails, as they did not check the college's social media or website. A second recommendation for future evaluation is the persuasion of students using testimonials of peers who took 15 credits and graduated. The Center of Applied Behavioral Science in MDRC developed a "SIMPLER" framework it uses for MDRC higher education projects to design or improve student outreach with materials using behavioral science (MDRC, 2018). The S in SIMPLER stands for social influence. Peers persuade students to behave a certain way. An example the Center of Applied Behavioral Science gave for improving materials to persuade students was to offer testimonials

from students who already took 15 credits successfully, as students tend to follow what other students think. A postcard with a testimony of a student, citing one of the advantages of taking 15 credits with their name and the year they graduated, is a behavioral intervention tool MDRC has effectively used. According to Alemañy from MDRC (2018), “Testimonials do aim to harness the social influence effect” (14:41). Future materials for the 15 to Finish campaign could be adding personalized testimonials to the college’s website and flyers for incoming students. To evaluate both recommendations, a nonexperimental design may be used. An evaluation of the success of reaching students through emails or text messaging with 15 to Finish messages might give an insight into whether these are better tools for reaching students. Sending postcards to students with testimonials from peers who graduated and took 15 credits each semester and placing these testimonials on the college’s website might be an effective way to convince students of the 15 to Finish benefits. Student surveys and focus groups could address the two evaluations’ questions.

The following five evaluation questions are recommended for future program evaluations:

- What do students consider are the college’s structural barriers preventing them from taking 15 credits in a semester?
- What are full-time Pell-funded students, and Black students’ impediments to taking 15 credits?
- To what extent do students consider taking summer courses to graduate on time?
- To what extent do texts and emails with the 15 to Finish messages reach students?
- To what extent do testimonials from students who have taken 15 credits and graduated influence current students?

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Appendix A: Logic Model

Resources	Activities	Outputs	Short-term Formative Outcomes	Long-term Summative Outcomes	Impact
<p><i>To implement the program and accomplish the activities, I needed</i></p> <p>Implementation Task Force: Dean of academic affairs Dean of math science & health careers Dean of liberal arts and professional studies Dean of student affairs Director of advisement Director of communications Program director Student support services director</p> <p>Planning personnel: Copy Center worker Orientation staff member Student worker Vice president of academic and student affairs Web specialist Research analyst</p> <p>Professional stakeholders: Full-time and part-time academic advisors Department chairpersons and academic program</p>	<p><i>To address the problem of practice, I needed the following actions/activities</i></p> <p>Planning: Hold monthly meetings of Implementation Task Force Create presentations with evidence-based and college data Collect resources for professional stakeholders' training with PowerPoint, a visual document, and one-page hand-out Collect tailored messages for students Copy flyers and posters Post flyers and posters on campus</p>	<p><i>What evidence of service delivery exists?</i></p> <p>Planning: Minutes of the Implementation Task Force meetings Number of training sessions for professional stakeholders Number of different messages given to web specialist Number of flyers posted Number of posters posted</p> <p>Professional stakeholders delivery: Number of professional stakeholders</p>	<p><i>If accomplished, these activities lead to the following immediate or short-term outcomes</i></p> <p>Increased college professionals' knowledge on the benefits of taking 15 credits per semester for on-time completion Increased number of college professionals advising 15 credits to finish Increased number of students taking 15 credits Improved students' awareness of what full-time equaling on-time means Improved student awareness they</p>	<p><i>If accomplished, these activities lead to the following changes in several years</i></p> <p>Increased percentage of students enrolling in 15 credits per semester Increased percentage of students graduating on time Developed a cultural shift: 15 credits per semester becomes the norm to be full time Narrowed achievement gaps</p>	<p><i>If accomplished, these activities lead to the following changes in 5 to 10 years</i></p> <p>Increased percentage of students going full time taking 15 credits per semester Increased graduation rates at the college (number of county residents' postsecondary credentials contributing to the completion goals the state set) Closed achievement gaps Decreased student debt Increased social and economic</p>

Resources	Activities	Outputs	Short-term Formative Outcomes	Long-term Summative Outcomes	Impact
<p>coordinators</p> <p>Student stakeholders: First-semester, full-time students</p> <p>Materials and documents: Evidence-based material of the intervention The college student data graduation rates for full-time students PowerPoint, an electronic visual document, and handouts Messaging materials (posters, infographics, digital ads, and video)</p> <p>Space: Video conference link task force Video conference link meetings with VP, orientation staff, communication director, and research analyst</p>	<p>Professional stakeholders delivery: Offer a 30-minute presentation with PowerPoint for professional stakeholders followed by Q&A</p> <p>Student stakeholders delivery: Post and send tailored messages for students via media tools Provide a PowerPoint presentation to incoming 1st-year students at new student orientations</p>	<p>receiving training</p> <p>Student stakeholders delivery: Number of clicks on the 15 to Finish campaign video posted on the college website and likes on social media Number of students attending the orientation session</p>	<p>will spend less money on education</p> <p>Improved student awareness of increase in GPA when taking 15 credits</p> <p>Improved student awareness on the consequences of not taking 15 credits to graduate on time</p>		<p>mobility Black, Hispanic, and low-income students</p>

Appendix B: Focus Group Moderator's Guide With Protocol

<i>Components of Moderator Guide</i>	
<i>Introduction: Welcome, explanation, guidelines, recording, transition to begin</i>	<p>Introduction/Conversation to the Group: Welcome: “Welcome everyone, thank you for taking the time to join in our discussion today.”</p> <p>Purpose Statement: “The purpose of this focus group is to obtain your perspective on the effectiveness in the launch of 15 to finish campaign at Camden County College.”</p> <p>Moderator Introductions: “My name is X. My job is to facilitate your discussion, record your responses, and keep time to make sure that all of the topics are thoroughly covered.”</p> <p>Group Guidelines: Address the group:</p> <p>“If you have a cell phone near you, I would appreciate it if you put it on silent mode. Thank you. As moderator, I will not talk most of the time, but I will be taking notes.</p> <p>Please be open and honest about your attitudes, opinions, and experiences as I want to hear it all. There are no wrong answers; feel free to comment if you have a different thought, belief, or experience than others. I’m interested in hearing from all of you. I want to make sure that everyone participates. I want to hear from everyone. Only one person should speak at a time. Discussion and disagreement are encouraged. There is no need to reach a consensus.</p> <p>As was stated in the consent form you signed, I will be recording the conversation for data analyses to the researcher’s Zoom cloud after all participants have introduced themselves. The recording will help capture the input you are offering, and I don’t want to miss any of your comments.</p> <p>Only the researcher will have access to the recording, and the recording will be used only for data analyses.</p> <p>I want you to be aware that only group results will be reported, and no individuals will be identified by name in the report. Your comments are confidential. The researcher may use some direct quotations to emphasize a particular point you might have stated.</p> <p>I ask that you keep all information shared during this conversation confidential. If there are no questions or concerns, let’s begin!”</p>
Introduction of participants	<p>Participants will introduce themselves and state where they are from. (Change their name to a number)</p> <p>After this, the recording will start.</p>
<i>Warm-up question</i>	<p>1. How many of you came to the college originally planning to take 12 credits? (just a count of hands)</p>

<p><i>Topic and questions for discussion</i> <i>(Probes to use: Would you explain further, can you give an example, tell us more, is there anything else, please describe what you mean. I don't understand.)</i></p>	<p>2. Why are you taking 15 credits (or more)? (use probes)</p> <p>3. Where did you hear about the advantages of taking 15 credits each semester? Who spoke to you about this? (use probes)</p> <p>4. What messages of the 15 to Finish campaign did you see or hear on campus that you believe are important for every student to know? (Can you explain the importance of that message)</p>
<p><i>Wrap-up question and closing</i></p>	<p>5. What is one word that describes what it is like to take 15 credits in a semester so far?</p> <p>Moderator gives a summary of what was stated by the students.</p> <p>Is there anything that I missed?</p> <p>(There might be some more input in case a point was missed. When everyone is silent, the moderator will end the conversation.)</p> <p>Well, that concludes our group meeting today. Thank you for participating. (stop the recording)</p> <p>I will be putting an Amazon gift card code in each individual chat box for your time. When you retrieve it, you may leave the Zoom meeting.</p> <p>Have a great rest of the day/ evening.</p>

Note. Adapted from *Using Focus Groups to Listen, Learn, and Lead in Higher Education* by M.

J. E. Danner, W. Pickering, & T. M. Paredes, 2018. Copyright 2018 by Stylus.

Appendix C: Resource Guide for College Professionals

RESOURCES FOR THE 15 TO FINISH CAMPAIGN

THE ACADEMIC AND FINANCIAL BENEFITS

Full time does not equal on time

Twelve credits per semester is considered full time by financial aid standards. However, "full time" does not mean students will finish their 2-year degree "on time". There are numerous ways to be full time and finish on time:

EXAMPLES

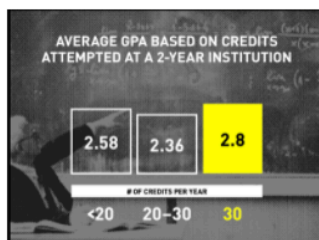
Fall	Spring	Summer	On-Time
15	15	0	= 30
12	12	6	= 30
15	12	3	= 30
12	15	3	= 30

However you split it up, it just has to equal 30.

ACADEMIC BENEFITS

Students who take 15 credits per semester tend to get a higher GPA

Studies show that community college students who start with 15 credits in their 1st semester have a higher grade point average, stay in college, and complete their degree.



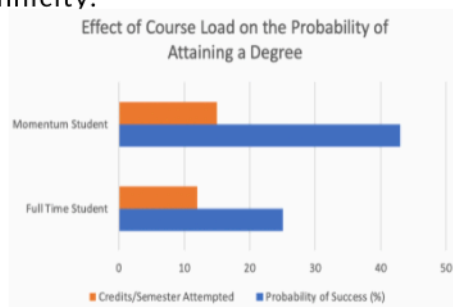
(Attewell & Monaghan, 2016; Belfield et al., 2016; Belfield et al., 2019; Huntington & Gill, 2018; Szafran, 2001).

RESOURCES FOR THE 15 TO FINISH CAMPAIGN

ACADEMIC BENEFITS

Students who take 15 credits are more likely to graduate

Studies show that community college students who start college with 15 credits per semester are more likely to graduate than those who take lesser credits per semester, no matter their academic preparedness, socioeconomic status, race or ethnicity.



This graph shows that students who took 15 credits in their first semester increased the probability of receiving their degree by 18% versus those who took 12 credits their first semester.

(A study done at 13 community colleges in Tennessee by the Community College Research Center. Belfield et al., 2016)

Taking the right 15 credits

Taking 15 credits in a semester is about taking the right 15 credits. Students will be told to visit their advisor who can help them with an academic plan to complete at least 30 credits per year that will count toward their degree program. This way they do not spend extra money on courses they do not need and can finish in the least amount of time.

RESOURCES FOR THE 15 TO FINISH CAMPAIGN

FINANCIAL BENEFITS

Taking 15 credits per semester saves students money

Another year in college costs students 1000s of dollars. Time is money. This impacts students' cost due to the rising tuition rate and missed opportunity costs associated with the loss of wages and retirement savings.

COST OF EACH ADDITIONAL YEAR	
\$15,933	in cost of attendance*
+ \$35,000	in lost wages
\$50,933	total for each student seeking associate degree

*Includes tuition and fees, book and supplies, room and board, transportation and other expenses (Jones, *The Game Changer*, 2015).

Delaying graduation one year costs over \$100,000 in a life time.

According to a study by Complete College America, students delaying graduation miss out on \$150,000 for each additional year in college over their lifetime. This is due to tuition costs, and lost opportunity costs of wages and retirement savings.



RESOURCES FOR THE 15 TO FINISH CAMPAIGN

COMMON QUESTIONS FROM COLLEGE PROFESSIONALS

NEW RULES: POLICIES TO MEET ATTAINMENT GOALS AND CLOSE EQUITY GAPS (CCA, 2017).

HOW DO I RESPOND IF A STUDENT DOES NOT THINK THAT TAKING 15 CREDITS IS REASONABLE?

- Let students know that there are multiple options for reaching 30 credits a year, including winter sessions, summer sessions, and mini sessions.
- If a student must drop below on-time credits for a short time period, help them develop a plan to make up lost credits in future semesters or sessions.

MY STUDENTS WORK AND HAVE COMPLICATED LIVES. HOW DO I MAKE THE CASE?

- Incorporate "full-time versus on-time" language into advising conversations.
- Emphasize that the cost of an extra year in college includes lost salary and retirement savings, additional loan debt, etc.
- Make them aware that the longer they take to graduate, the more life gets in the way. The best way to graduate is to do it in the least amount of time.

Remember that underrepresented student populations enter college with less cultural capital and knowledge of what it takes to succeed. Sharing the credit hour requirements for on-time completion is critical to closing achievement gaps.

RESOURCES FOR THE 15 TO FINISH CAMPAIGN

ARE YOU STATING THAT ALL STUDENTS SHOULD TAKE 15 CREDITS?

- No, but we need to make sure that we are not delaying their graduation because we did not make them aware of the consequences of not taking 15 credits.

AREN'T STUDENTS GRADES GOING TO SUFFER IF THEY TAKE THAT MANY CREDITS?

- The truth is speeding up, not slowing down, gets better results. Students who take 15 credits per semester get better grades and are less likely to drop or fail their courses.

WHAT ABOUT SINGLE WORKING PARENTS AND OTHER STUDENTS WITH COMPLICATED LIVES?

- They are the least likely to be able to afford the \$150,000 price tag for delayed graduation that results from additional tuition, lost wages, and foregone retirement. These students may benefit from taking courses in the summer.

WHAT ABOUT THE FACT THAT TAKING 15 CREDITS COSTS MORE THAN TAKING 12 CREDITS?

- Students should weigh the short-term and long-term costs. Fifteen credits may cost up to \$1,000 more per semester, but that is far less than half of the \$150,000 for the additional semester needed to graduate when being full-time taking 12 credits each semester.

RESOURCES FOR THE 15 TO FINISH CAMPAIGN

RESOURCES

- Attewell, P., & Monaghan, D. (2016). How many credits should an undergraduate take? *Research in Higher Education*, 57(6), 682–713. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-015-9401-z>
- Belfield, C., Jenkins, D., & Lahr, H. (2016). *Momentum: The academic and economic value of a 15-credit first- semester course load for college students in Tennessee*. Community College Research Center. <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/momentum-15-credit-course-load.pdf>
- Complete College America. (2017). *New rules: Policies to meet attainment goals and close equity gaps*. <https://completecollege.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/New-Rules-2.0.pdf>
- Complete College America. (2021). *15 to finish. Stay on track*. <https://completecollege.org/strategy/15-to-finish/>
- Jones, S. (2015). The game changers: Strategies to boost college completion and close attainment gaps. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 47(2), 24–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2015.1018085>
- Waiwaiiole, E., & Elston, D. (2017). One question: Can you attend full-time, one time? *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 49(6), 23–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2017.1398998>

Complete College America offers open-source materials on 15 to Finish
<https://completecollege.org>

Appendix D: Student Flyer

#15 to FINISH

REASONS TO TAKE 15 CREDITS PER SEMESTER

- ① You need 15 college credits per semester or 30 per year to graduate in two years with an associate degree
- ② An extra year in college can cost you thousands of dollars by delaying opportunity wages and retirement savings
- ③ Taking 15 college credits per semester or 30 per year saves you money
- ④ Taking 15 college credits per semester or 30 per year increases your chances of reaching graduation
- ⑤ Students who take 15 college credits per semester tend to get a higher GPA

**SEE YOUR ADVISOR TO STAY ON TRACK AND GET
YOUR DEGREE IN THE LEAST AMOUNT OF TIME.**

WE ARE WHAT'S
NEXT



Appendix E: Checklist for a 15 to Finish Campaign Implementation

Checklist for a 15 to Finish Campaign Implementation

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| MARCH | <input type="checkbox"/> Contact institutional research office for enrollment data
<input type="checkbox"/> Present evidence-based data to senior administrators (SA)
<input type="checkbox"/> Invite college professionals to be on the implementation team
<input type="checkbox"/> Create a PowerPoint to present to the implementation team |
| APRIL | <input type="checkbox"/> Meet with SA and implementation team to present 15 to Finish
<input type="checkbox"/> Meet with communications and marketing to discuss the campaign
<input type="checkbox"/> Present evidence-based data at college meetings |
| MAY | <input type="checkbox"/> Meet with the implementation team
<input type="checkbox"/> Offer training to chairpersons and program coordinators
<input type="checkbox"/> Offer training to advisors

<input type="checkbox"/> Meet with web specialist for the website and social media
<input type="checkbox"/> Meet with communications & marketing to create flyers and posters
<input type="checkbox"/> Present the campaign to student affairs offices
<input type="checkbox"/> Provide advising flyers for students and posters for offices
<input type="checkbox"/> Hang posters around campus |
| JUNE | <input type="checkbox"/> Contact new student orientation (NSO) office for NSO dates
<input type="checkbox"/> Monthly meeting with communications and marketing office
<input type="checkbox"/> Meeting with the implementation team |



#15 to FINISH

Implementation of a 15 to Finish Campaign Checklist

- | | | |
|------------------|--------------------------|---|
| JULY | <input type="checkbox"/> | Meeting with communications and marketing office |
| AUGUST | <input type="checkbox"/> | Present at all new student orientations |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> | Meet with communication and marketing department |
| SEPTEMBER | <input type="checkbox"/> | Meet with the implementation team |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> | Request analytics of website and social media |
| NOVEMBER | <input type="checkbox"/> | Receive fall enrollment data from institutional research office |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> | Meet with the implementation team to discuss results |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> | Meet with the senior administrators to discuss results |
| DECEMBER | <input type="checkbox"/> | Provide results of data to the college |



#15 to FINISH

Appendix F: A 15 to Finish Poster Sample



Appendix G: Problem of Practice Infographic

IS TAKING 12 CREDITS REALLY FULL-TIME?



LET'S DO THE MATH

$$12+12+12+12 \neq 60$$

YOU WILL NOT GRADUATE ON TIME

FOR AN ASSOCIATE
DEGREE YOU NEED 60
CREDITS TO GRADUATE
IN TWO YEARS



TIME EQUALS MONEY

THE LONGER YOU STAY...



TUITION COST
INCREASES



LOST OPPORTUNITY
WAGES FROM
A GOOD
PAYING JOB



LOSS IN
RETIREMENT
SAVINGS



YOU PAY MORE

TAKING 12 CREDITS
PER SEMESTER VERSUS
15 TO GRADUATE
ON TIME IS 20%
MORE EXPENSIVE*

15
CREDITS



20%↓

12
CREDITS



*source: <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/momentum-15-credit-course-load.pdf>

Appendix H: Blog on the Problem of Practice

IS FULL-TIME THE SAME AS ON-TIME?

By Martine Howard

January 2021

Why 15 and not 12?

Only 5% of all community college students complete an associate degree in 2 years, and only 14% graduate in 3 years. To finish a community college degree on time, you must complete 15 college credits per semester or add summer or winter classes to equal 30 per year.



Thirty-five percent of community college students enroll full time. Many students who enroll full time only register for 12 credits per semester. They are not aware 15 credits are needed to complete a degree on time. According to a report from Complete College America, 11% of students at community colleges are on-time students taking 30 credits a year, and over

30% of community college students are full-time students taking 24 credits. Consequently, those taking 12 credits per semester do not graduate in 2 years. They only need one more course per semester to become on-time students.

To receive full financial aid, you must be enrolled in 12 credits per semester. The number 12 is taken by most institutions as the default number of credits to be a full-time student. This 12-credit mindset does not benefit students.

Research shows those students enrolling full time at a 2-year institution are more involved [than part-time students] in their studies and therefore stay in school, graduate, and transfer to 4-year colleges. A study done with Tennessee students showed taking more college credits in the 1st semester of the academic year had a positive impact on success. Students who take 15 or more credits in the 1st semester were over 6% more likely to receive a degree than those who were full time taking only 12 credits. Time is money, and the longer students are in school, the more life can get in their way.

The Myth of a Light Load

Back in the 1970s and 1980s, developmental psychologists believed it was best for students to take fewer courses at the start of college to be sure they could handle their classes. Researchers in the last decade disagree. They found students who take more courses in a semester are more likely to succeed and stay in college, no matter their academic preparation, race, gender, or socioeconomic status.



On college campuses around the country, college professionals who advise students are often unaware of the benefits of enrolling in 15 credits per semester. An honors program advisor stated they advise full-time students to take 12 credits per semester because they believe taking fewer credits results in a better GPA, which is important for scholarships and can make it more likely students will be accepted at the 4-year institutions of their choice.



In addition to advisors often suggesting a lighter class load to students who are enrolled in rigorous coursework, they also often make this recommendation to returning students who have not been in a classroom for a while. They believe it is best to ease the student back into the learning environment. Many advisors believe taking 15 credits is too much for the student to handle. This is not beneficial to student success.

Students are More Successful with Heavier Loads

Students who start college by taking 15 credits the 1st semester do better than those who take 12 credits the 1st semester. They are more successful and are more likely to return from one semester to another. These students also tend to graduate and transfer to 4-year institutions.

More Likely to Graduate

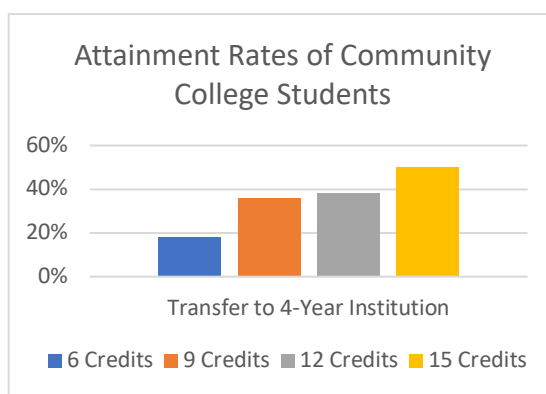
Research has shown students who start off with taking 15 credits are more likely to complete their college degree, no matter their academic readiness or socioeconomic status. According to results from a large study at all community colleges in Hawaii, students who took 15 credits in the 1st semester were more successful in their coursework and stayed in college as compared to their peers taking fewer credits.



Better for Transfer?

In 2010, President Obama addressed the country and challenged community colleges to be a crucial pathway to a bachelor's degree. This challenge put the lens on 2-year colleges to increase students' moving on to 4-year institutions.

An interesting study done in Texas showed attending community college full time over part time is a predictor for successfully transferring to a 4-year institution. The following chart indicates taking more credits during the 1st semester increases students' likelihood of transferring to a 4-year institution.



Crank It to 15

With all the recent studies proving enrolling in fewer than 15 credits negatively affects community college students' success and lowers graduation and transfer rates, it is important for community colleges to change how they think about the number of credits to enroll students in during the 1st year at the college. Institutions need to “crank it to 15,” as there is no time to waste!

Appendix I: Intervention Infographic

INCREASING ON-TIME COMPLETION RATES WITH A "15 TO FINISH" CAMPAIGN

*Informing Students on the Academic and Financial Benefits of
On-Time Completion in Taking 15 Credits Each Semester*



Appendix J: Program Recommendations Infographic



Appendix K: Key Findings From Program Evaluation Infographic

