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Policy Brief Series

7

College Access and
Success Are About
More Than Academics

**How Supports That Build
Non-Academic Knowledge
and Skills Improve
College Readiness and
Promote Attainment**

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About College Success Arizona

College Success Arizona is working to significantly increase the postsecondary attainment rate of students in Arizona, particularly for those who otherwise would not be able to attend or graduate. By doing so, we believe that we will improve the quality of life not just for those individuals and their families but also for the state as a whole.

Acknowledgments

Dr. Richard Daniel directs College Success Arizona's research and policy activities, as well as development of College Success Arizona's ongoing series of publications on issues that affect college access and attainment.

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The statewide attainment goal set by Achieve60AZ—to ensure 60 percent of Arizonans ages 25-64 hold a college certificate or degree by 2030—has galvanized advocates, funders, student-serving organizations, business and industry leaders, and policymakers. Increasingly, these entities are committing their support to help ensure that more students in Arizona have the opportunity to go to college and graduate with a credential that will position them for success in the workforce. To that end, [Gov. Douglas Ducey's 2020 State of the State address](#) highlighted the importance of the Achieve60AZ goal and policies that advance progress toward it.

Policy changes that support efforts to equitably increase college attainment must coincide with work on the ground to increase opportunities for individual students to develop the knowledge and non-academic skills they need to be ready for college. Some of the most significant barriers that stand between Arizona students and success in college are not a matter of academic readiness or aptitude. Instead, our work with students throughout the state indicates that many of them are hampered by solve-able problems, such as limited access to information about college options, how to pay for college, learning how to be a college student, and the social and emotional challenges of college-going.

It is no secret that some students have certain advantages when it comes to college readiness and college success. Students who are white, come from middle- and upper-income families, and have college-educated parents—as well as those who live in communities and attend schools with strong college-going cultures—are more likely to enroll in and graduate from college than are their peers who do not have these advantages. Some of the advantage is money and academic preparation. But a good part of it, while perhaps less tangible, is in the form of non-academic supports and resources, whether originating at home or in school, that inform students about college and prepare them for success.

Students equipped with knowledge about college options, financial aid, the culture and expectations of college, and potential career paths, for example—and those who have gained non-academic skills (such as self-management, social and emotional competencies, communication, and identity formation) have significant advantages getting into, persisting in, and successfully completing college. By contrast, students from backgrounds underrepresented in higher education in Arizona—including students from rural communities, students from low-income families, first generation college students, or students of color—are more likely to face information gaps that confound and deter them from gaining access to the non-academic supports essential to college readiness and success.

It's not enough to call for an increase in attainment levels to advance Arizona's economy. To get there, and be accountable to our statewide goal, we need to expand our collective understanding of how to expand college readiness and access. And, just as importantly, we must provide the informational, social, emotional, and other non-academic supports students need to be ready for college and to succeed once they get there.

Rich Nickel
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Increase College Attainment by Supporting Comprehensive College Readiness

The term “college readiness” has long been used by educators, researchers, advocates, and the public as a proxy for gauging how well our K-12 school systems prepare young people for future success. Achieve60AZ, Arizona’s leading advocate for reaching a statewide attainment goal, recognizes the important link between college readiness and college attainment in the first of its 10 pillars and strategies for reaching 60 percent attainment by 2030.

“Mentoring has been important to me because it allows me to speak to someone who knows the process of going through school.”

—Adalia, College Success Arizona student

College readiness is most often framed in terms of academics. This is especially common among policymakers, who place a premium on student content knowledge and specific academic skills. Thus, measures of academic achievement and academic standards have become the main touchstones for policymakers concerned with improving college readiness. Research indicates, however, that college readiness extends well beyond academics to encompass numerous other non-academic factors that affect students’ decisions to apply to and enroll in college, and whether or not they equipped to persist to graduation.¹

Jobs for the Future and the Educational Policy Improvement Center have shown that knowledge about college—“how to plan and pay for it, how to choose an appropriate school and degree program, and how to navigate the complex bureaucracies of higher education”—is a key component of college readiness.^{2,3} Likewise, non-academic (also referred to as non-cognitive), social, and emotional skills are essential to making the transition from high school to college successfully.⁴ To this point, Julie Sweitzer, Director of the College Readiness Consortium at the University of Minnesota, notes that “A student who may be academically ready but has not developed all of the social-emotional skills is not college ready.”⁵



The Arizona Department of Education's standard for college and career readiness—intended to guide educators and schools in their efforts to prepare students for success after high school—frames readiness broadly, invoking an unspecified set of knowledge and aptitudes that enable students to pass introductory courses. According to the standard:

“Students are considered college and career ready when they have the knowledge, skills, academic preparation, and behaviors needed to enroll and succeed in introductory college credit-bearing courses within an associate or baccalaureate degree program without the need for remediation. These same attributes are needed for entry and success in postsecondary workforce education or directly into a job that offers gainful employment and career advancement.”⁶

“A student who may be academically ready but has not developed all of the social-emotional skills is not college ready.”

The vagueness of this standard is exacerbated by the fact that our state does not have a specific statute through which it can enforce accountability, in terms of measurable outcomes, with regard to student progress toward comprehensive college and career readiness. The Education and Career Action Plan (ECAP) rule, approved by the Arizona Department of Education in 2008, requires that schools document their ECAP implementation and ensure that every student has an up-to-date ECAP, but does not stipulate that schools are accountable for student progress with respect to their individual plan.⁷

What Are Non-Academic Supports and Resources for College Readiness and Success?

Non-academic supports focus on helping students develop the knowledge and personal skills and behaviors that they need to succeed academically, understand their college options and the challenges that college presents, and successfully navigate those challenges. Importantly, supports that help students develop social and emotional competencies—including adaptability, perseverance, self-regulation, and many others—are crucial to college success.



How Schools Can Structure Supports Designed to Increase College Readiness

The College and Career Readiness and Success Center provides a framework for schools to provide both the academic and non-academic resources, pathways, and supports that students need to develop the knowledge and skills necessary for them to be college and career ready. Broadly, this framework encompasses:

Academic Organization

- ▶ Rigorous curriculum, instruction, and assessment
- ▶ Multiple pathways to postsecondary opportunities
- ▶ Work- and context-based learning experiences
- ▶ Opportunities to make cross-disciplinary connections

Student Supports

- ▶ Individualized learning strategies for all students to foster and accelerate each learner's progress toward college and career readiness
- ▶ Targeted and intensive interventions to meet academic standards or develop employability skills
- ▶ Wraparound services, such as afterschool mentoring and tutoring, that cater to the needs of each student

Enrichment and Preparation

- ▶ College and career exploration opportunities
- ▶ Guidance and support in setting goals for college pathways
- ▶ Guidance on postsecondary transitions⁸

Ensure All Students Receive Non-Academic Supports That Increase College Access

It is clear that in addition to closing academic achievement gaps in our state, enhancing the availability and quality of non-academic supports and resources for students in Arizona—which play a significant role in shaping college readiness, college-going, and college success—is key to increasing attainment.

For all students, going to college entails assuming a consequential set of risks that, beyond the clear financial gamble, are “deeply personal, raising difficult questions about identity, belonging, purpose, and more.”⁹ Even considering the possibility of college forces students to ask themselves, and formulate an answer, whether or not they believe they belong in college and can succeed there if they choose to go.

Some students have already developed this sense of their identity, as future college students, long before it comes time to begin the application process and, later, to enroll and matriculate. They have the information about college, an understanding of what will be expected of them in college, and the support they need to persist and succeed.



COLLEGE SUCCESS ARIZONA STUDENT VOICES: **Cristina***

“Coming from a lower income family and neighborhood, college is something that many inner-city schools push towards higher performing students, leaving others more discouraged and feeling left out. Mentorship in these communities was hard to find, even more so when attempting to find mentorship from individuals who shared similar struggles.”

Cristina graduated from Arizona State University with a bachelor’s degree in accounting in 2018. She is a first-generation American and the first in her family to attend college. Cristina grew up in a low-income area and—by completing the FAFSA—qualified for a federal Pell Grant that enabled her to attend ASU. Since she was the first in her family to attend college, Cristina and her family struggled to complete the form. Once Cristina finally figured out how to complete it and was admitted into ASU, a whole new set of barriers were waiting for her. “Apart from struggling to understand the college application process, learning to adapt to this new environment alone was overwhelming at times. Having a mentor allowed me to share my goals and aspirations with someone who looks like me and shares similar past experiences. Having someone who constantly encourages you and allows you to share ideas is something a young college student needs. I always felt stronger and more motivated after speaking with my mentor who always reminded me of all that I’m capable of.”

**All student names in this brief have been changed to protect their privacy.*

AzCAN College Access Standards

For college readiness and success, the importance of social and emotional and other non-academic knowledge and competencies is reflected in the Arizona College Access Network (AzCAN) College Access Standards. These standards, which are promoted by the Arizona Department of Education but not official state policy, “outline the factors critical to students’ postsecondary success and provide a guide for professionals along the PreK-16 continuum to prepare all students to be college and career ready.”¹⁰

Notably, of the seven standards, five are focused on social and emotional factors, college knowledge, and other non-academic factors.

Standard 1: Students build awareness and build aspirations about postsecondary options, including college and careers.

Standard 2: Students recognize the roles of social, emotional, and cultural factors that affect their postsecondary planning and transition.

Standard 3: Students build a rigorous academic foundation and develop academic behaviors essential to preparing for postsecondary pathways.

Standard 4: Students develop a comprehensive support system that contributes to their academic success.

Standard 5: Students acquire the college knowledge and skills necessary to successfully transition into postsecondary education pathways.

Standard 6: Students understand the fundamentals of financial literacy and financial planning for postsecondary education.

Standard 7: Students enroll, persist, and successfully complete a postsecondary education program of study.¹¹



But, for many other students, the prospect and realities of college-going are not nearly so obvious as the next logical steps. They may not know what their college options are, or have a firm understanding of what the college experience will entail. This is often especially true for students from families without a history of college-going, and students who come from communities and attend schools where college-going is not the norm. Learning about college and learning to self-identify as a potentially successful college student can represent significant challenges. These challenges are often magnified by factors such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, geography, and many others.

Finding ways to shrink the gaps in social and emotional and other forms of non-academic readiness for college should be considered a shared priority for state and institutional policymakers at the K-12 and postsecondary levels, as well as for college access and success organizations.

Some students have already developed a sense of their identity as future college students long before it comes time to begin the application process and, later, to enroll and matriculate. But, for many other students the prospect and realities of college-going are not nearly so obvious as the next logical steps.

As College Success Arizona has previously explained, students and families in our state would greatly benefit from expanded access to clear, reliable information about college options and how these options—whether they are certificate, associate, or bachelor’s degree programs—align with credential requirements for different careers. Students and families also need timely information about what their college options realistically cost and how to pay for them. Such information is essential to college access and college readiness because it enables students to make informed decisions about their post-high school future and, more importantly, to make concrete plans about which higher education programs and institutions will most closely match their aspirations.



COLLEGE SUCCESS ARIZONA STUDENT VOICES: **Marisol**

“Outside of academic support, mentoring has been so important to me because not only do I learn knowledge and skills from my mentor, but I also receive the personal support that I believe is necessary to be successful. Mentoring is so significant for me because I get to ask questions one-on-one, have a listening ear, and have a great role model in front of me helping me throughout this journey.”

Marisol is in the process of completing her undergraduate degree at Arizona State University, Tempe. As a first-generation college student from a rural Arizona border town, the transition from high school to college was a significant change, both with respect to her education and the social and emotional challenges of moving to Tempe. “Not only did I transition from high school into college, I transitioned from a small border town to a big urban city and from living at home with my family to living in a new place without my family. In my first year of college, I struggled a lot with being homesick and on top of that, I also had a rough time trying to figure out what career I wanted to choose. I am so grateful to have a great support system including the CSA program to help me be successful in my academic and professional life, especially as a first generation student. The CSA program has greatly helped me gain knowledge, awareness, and skills to prepare me to stay on top of my studies.”

Prioritizing Non-Academic Preparation and Support for Middle and High School Students

The University of Minnesota College Readiness Consortium partners with educators, schools, and districts throughout Minnesota to “increase the number and diversity of Minnesota students who graduate from high school with the knowledge, skills and habits for success in higher education.”¹² One of the consortium’s signature initiatives, Ramp Up to Readiness™, is a college and career readiness curriculum designed for students in grades 6-12 and organized around five pillars, four of which focus on non-academic readiness factors.

Academic Readiness: The ability to succeed in first-year, credit bearing courses at a technical college, community college, four-year college or university, the military, or an apprenticeship.

Admissions Readiness: The ability to meet admissions requirements at a range of postsecondary institutions.

Career Readiness: The ability to identify careers that match personal, financial, and other goals and an understanding of the skills, credentials, and experiences required to succeed in those careers.

Financial Readiness: The ability to cover the cost of the first term of study at a postsecondary institution through savings, loans, and financial aid.

Social and Emotional Readiness: The ability to set educational goals, make and monitor progress toward them, and create relationships with peers and adults that support academic success.¹³



Colleges Can Increase Success Rates by Expanding Non-Academic Supports

The need to learn about college and develop the skills for success in college doesn't end once students matriculate. The responsibility for ensuring students have access to the non-academic supports that enable them to make the transition from high school to college, and then to succeed while in college, is shared by K-12 and higher education institutions alike. As a recent report from Jobs For the Future persuasively argues, while "high schools have a responsibility to position young people so that they can make a successful transition, and colleges have a responsibility to ensure that the campus climate is welcoming to young people who are still very much in the process of developing important noncognitive factors."¹⁴

It is important to acknowledge that colleges and universities have varying levels of institutional resources to draw on and serve distinct populations of students. This means that the types of non-academic supports they provide will necessarily be differentiated in accordance with available resources and student needs. As a matter for policymakers, determining the resources that institutions need in order to provide meaningful and sustainable supports that enable their students is paramount.

COLLEGE SUCCESS ARIZONA STUDENT VOICES: **Mateo**

"We looked at the whole different world of the business major. Just being able to explain how I felt was a whole new world. She listened and understood what I was feeling. She had felt the same way. She said go for it and to go out of my comfort zone. [My adviser] reminded me to work hard, but also give myself a break and recognize hard work, and my own successes. There were things I didn't know were worthy to be proud of celebrating."

Mateo is a marketing major at the University of Arizona, Eller College of Management who has navigated a complex journey to where he is today. A DACA recipient and the first in his family to go to college, Mateo began his postsecondary studies at Pima Community College, where he had to work throughout college to pay bills and save for tuition costs since DACA recipients do not receive Pell Grants or any financial aid. He became a U.S. citizen towards the end of his sophomore year in college, just in time to transfer to the University of Arizona and receive a full Pell Grant. But it was not an easy transition. Whereas the transition going from a predominantly Latino high school to Pima Community College was easy enough due to the support system he had and the fact that the community college was very diverse. Mateo's transition to university from community college was difficult. It was bigger, less diverse, and he entered it all as a junior, not a freshman like everyone else that felt new to the school. The success services he received through College Success Arizona and his relationship with his mentor helped him navigate this transition and build the necessary social and emotional skills, including decision-making, mental awareness, and how to balance work and life.



Increasingly, higher education institutions in Arizona and across the country are investing considerable resources in support programs and services that seek to facilitate smooth transitions for incoming students, increase student engagement, and help more students navigate their college experience with greater confidence. Examples include summer bridge programs, peer-to-peer coaching, first-year student resource centers, and personal development and exploratory courses specifically for first-year college students, all of which serve to help first-year students make the transition from high school to college and build the non-academic knowledge and skills conducive to success. Other programs and services provide targeted supports for specific student populations—for example, students from low-income families, students with disabilities, and students who are the first in their families to go to college—in order to address their unique needs and the particular challenges they face in navigating the college experience.

Notably, the value of such investments should not be imagined primarily in terms of retention strategies. Rather, intentionally supporting and developing students' social and emotional competencies, and other non-academic skills they need to be successful in college, should be seen as a fundamental component of a quality college education. According to researchers at Jobs for the Future, robust non-academic supports are at once essential for “colleges to create environments and processes that are accessible to all, not simply those who enter the institution with the ‘right’ combination of noncognitive factors,” but also to enable all students “to develop the skills and aptitudes that will help graduates succeed in an ever-changing world.”¹⁵

Social and Emotional Competencies Linked to College Success

In its 2017 report *Supporting Students' College Success: The Role of Assessment of Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Competencies*, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine identified eight competencies linked to success in college that higher education institutions can seek to support and cultivate.

- 1. A sense of belonging:** Student's sense that he or she belongs at a college, fits in well, and is socially integrated.
- 2. A growth mindset:** Student's belief that his or her own intelligence is not a fixed entity but a malleable quality that can grow and improve.
- 3. Utility goals and values:** Personal goals and values that a student perceives to be directly linked to the achievement of a future, desired end.
- 4. Behaviors related to conscientiousness:** Behaviors related to self-control, hard work, persistence, and achievement orientation.
- 5. Academic self-efficacy:** Student's belief that he or she can succeed in academic tasks.
- 6. Intrinsic goals and interest:** Personal goals that a student experiences as rewarding in and of themselves, linked to strong interest.
- 7. Prosocial goals and values:** Desire to promote the well-being or development of other people or of domains that transcend the self.
- 8. Positive future self:** Positive image or personal narrative constructed by a student to represent what kind of person he or she will be in the future.¹⁶



Leverage the Power of Social and Emotional Supports and Mentorship

College Success Arizona has long recognized the power of providing non-academic supports to college students—especially students from backgrounds underrepresented in higher education—that enable them to gain the requisite knowledge about college, engage with the college community, and develop key social and emotional skills as they make the transition from high school to college and as they progress toward college graduation.

Our Success Services focus on three areas: career, academic, and life. We see these as mutually reinforcing. Our work with students is oriented toward ensuring that they know how to navigate their institution and its cultural expectations and challenges, and to help them access the information and resources they need to progress. By providing students with structured support, mentorship, and a framework for understanding what success in college requires, our Success Services program focuses on enabling students to develop essential non-academic skills and behaviors, their identity as a college student, and gain a sense of empowerment that they belong and are capable of succeeding in college. The support services we provide—and which we consider essential to student success in college—include:

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|--|---|--|
| ▶ New Student Orientation | ▶ E-Communications and E-Mentoring | ▶ Academic Growth Plans |
| ▶ Dedicated College Success Adviser | ▶ FAFSA and Financial Aid Guidance | ▶ Academic and Enrollment Advising |
| ▶ In-Person Mentoring Sessions | ▶ Peer Networking | ▶ Schedule, Transfer, and Graduation Analysis |
| | | ▶ Ongoing Career Counseling |
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Taken together, these services represent a strong framework for higher education institutions and other organizations that support postsecondary students to design their own Success Services programs that prioritize non-academic knowledge and competencies.

Building on the lessons learned from successful programs, designed to strengthen students' non-academic knowledge and skills—such as College Success Arizona's Success Services, outlined above—and finding ways to expand access to these and similar programs will be vital to increasing college persistence and attainment statewide.

Likewise, ensuring that schools and districts throughout Arizona have the resources and capacity to provide robust, consistent opportunities for all students to develop the social, emotional, and other non-academic competencies that contribute to college readiness should be considered essential to our state's ongoing efforts to increase college access and attainment.



COLLEGE SUCCESS ARIZONA STUDENT VOICES: **Adalia**

“Having my advisor ask and genuinely listen to how I was feeling was a lot of help. Feeling like there was someone willing to listen was very important and the advice provided also helped give me a different perspective on some issues. My CSA mentor has helped me establish goals and keep track of how I am doing. It helps because I have something I am working towards and they are things that I have to do by myself which also helps me be more independent.”

Adalia is a sophomore nursing student at Grand Canyon University. As the first in her family to go to college, she has benefitted from unwavering familial support but has relied on mentoring support services to learn about the college-going process, how to build the non-academic skills she needs to thrive, and to navigate the social and emotional challenges of college. As Adalia describes it, access to the mentoring College Success Arizona provides has been a key to her success. “Mentoring has been important to me because it allows me to speak to someone who knows the process of going through school. Being able to talk to someone who is more able to understand helps me not feel overwhelmed.”

Our Impact

73%

**GRADUATION
RATE**

Students supported by College Success Arizona graduate at a rate nearly twice the state average.

90%

**FRESHMAN
RETENTION RATE**

Students supported by College Success Arizona return for their second year of college at higher than average rates compared to the general student population at many Arizona colleges and universities.

70%

**FIRST-GENERATION
COLLEGE STUDENTS**

The majority of students supported by College Success Arizona are the first in their families to go to college.



Recommendations

In support of the statewide effort to increase college access and attainment, and to build a college-going culture in communities throughout the state, Arizona has the opportunity to significantly improve the non-academic resources and supports available to K-12 and college students alike. In so doing, we will comprehensively strengthen the entire educational system, ensuring more students are prepared to go to college and have the support they need to succeed and graduate with a certificate or a degree that will enable them to be competitive in Arizona's workforce.

- 1. Non-academic knowledge and competencies can be explicitly described and prioritized in a revised set of state standards for college and career readiness.** Specifically identifying and codifying the non-academic knowledge and skills that students need to be college-ready, apply to and enroll in college, and succeed in their program of study is a key step toward ensuring equitable provision of relevant resources and supports.
- 2. Arizona can establish an enforceable college and career readiness statute that holds schools accountable for ensuring the students are comprehensively prepared for college and a career.** Without a mechanism for accountability, and corresponding increases to school resources, our state's college and career readiness standards and policies cannot realize their true potential. The creation of a statute that holds schools responsible for student progress with respect to their individual ECAP, and provides aligned funding, would be an important step toward strengthening college and career readiness in our state.
- 3. The state can develop a single, comprehensive, and publicly available resource for information about college-going patterns in Arizona.** At present, Arizona lacks a single, publicly-accessible resource for comprehensive data on statewide college-going and attainment patterns. Efforts to increase college access and attainment in Arizona are slowed by the incomplete picture of what college-going looks like in our state available to the advocacy organizations, the philanthropic community, policymakers, and the public. Such a resource would help to accelerate improvements to policy and practice that would enable Arizona to more effectively address the barriers to college access at the local and regional levels, as well as statewide, and provide the targeted supports that students need for success.
- 4. Higher education institutions can expand access to non-academic advising and ongoing mentorship for undergraduate students,** with a particular focus on supporting students who are from populations underrepresented in higher education. Advising and mentorship services and programs that prioritize knowledge and competency-building, and that are sustained throughout a student's college career, can strengthen academic performance, and support persistence and completion.



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