



MARYLAND HIGHER EDUCATION COMMISSION

Statewide Near Completer Incentive Plan and Communication Campaign

#9499

*A report prepared in response to the
College and Career Readiness and
College Completion Act of 2013*

December 2013

Introduction

The College and Career Readiness and College Completion Act of 2013 (The Readiness and Completion Act) requires that the Maryland Higher Education Commission (MHEC) “*develop and implement a plan that would provide an incentive to 1) a near completer to re-enroll and earn a degree; 2) a college to identify and graduate near completers;*” and that “*the incentive shall use all available resources, including endowment institutional funds, private sector funds, and state funds.*” The statute states that MHEC, “*in collaboration with institutions of higher education, shall create a statewide communication campaign to identify near completers in the state and encourage near completers to re-enroll in an institution of higher education to earn a degree.*” MHEC respectfully submits the following narrative in fulfillment of its charge to provide the Maryland General Assembly with a report on these statutory requirements. Refer to Appendix 1 for a full copy of the near completer related statutory language.

MHEC asked members of the Segment Advisory Council to identify institution representatives to serve on a work group to assist with the development of this report. The work group reviewed relevant literature including near completer programs in other states, and information about the State’s One Step Away State Grant Program (OSA), a new competitive grant supporting near completion efforts at four-year institutions. The work group “met” via conference call and email to discuss the issues, formulate a plan, and provide editorial review of the draft report. The final draft was reviewed by the Secretary of Higher Education, Dr. Danette G. Howard resulting in the final report presented here.

The report narrative includes two sections: 1) Campus Readiness - Student Re-Engagement: Institution and Student Incentives, and 2) Near Completer Communication Campaign. Discussion includes establishment of a near completer contact at MHEC as well as one at each institution, necessary resources for program execution, components of a communication campaign, and an implementation timeline. Acknowledgement for the contributions of work group members and appendices with supporting information are included at the end of the report narrative.

Campus Readiness - Student Re-Engagement: Institution and Student Incentives

Near completers, defined as students, in good academic standing, who have dropped out after having earned 75% or more of the credits needed for either an associate’s (45 or more credits) or bachelor degree (90 or more credits), have not received much attention from higher education until recent years. These students have unique and often complicated reasons for leaving college within striking distance of a degree award. Institutions must be prepared to support each student’s unique situation and needs in order to re-engage, re-enroll and graduate them. Furthermore, institutions may need incentives to recruit these students back to college, and students may need incentives to return.

MHEC has a successful track record in using competitive grant programs to encourage institutions to engage and invest in new and innovative strategies to meet educational challenges. The OSA provides this incentive for the State's near completion initiative. This new grant program provides seed monies that support both institution and student incentives to re-engage, re-enroll and graduate near completers. OSA supports evidence-based strategies such as establishing a "concierge" or near completer counselor, developing individual student degree completion plans, providing prior learning credits, enhancing or redesigning degree programs to allow near completers to use the credits they have accumulated, supporting faculty and staff development regarding near completion, and implementing direct student financial supports.

Institution Incentives

MHEC, in consultation with Maryland's Complete College America Advisory Council and the Segment Advisory Council, developed the OSA competitive grant program to provide incentives for institutions to identify, re-enroll, and graduate near completers. Given limited funding for the new program, and the availability of funds from another source for community college reverse transfer initiatives, eligibility was restricted to four-year institutions. Institutions may use the OSA grant funds to support the evidence-based strategies identified in the above paragraph. Grant awardees are required to provide institutional matching funds with the goal of creating sustainable near completer programs over time. MHEC provides consulting support as needed and will convene project directors at least once a year to foster development of a learning community of near completer project directors. FY 2012 and FY 2013 funds (\$500,000 total) were combined in the first funding round. Ten institutions applied, but only eight could be awarded. A new Request for Proposal will be issued in January 2014 (FY 2014 appropriation); four or five new awards are anticipated.

Results are promising – after only nine months, the eight participating institutions reported that 30 degrees were awarded and an additional 292 students had re-enrolled. This represents over 17% of the total successful student contacts made. For more information and to view project abstracts see:

<http://www.mhec.state.md.us/Grants/CCM/OneStepAway.asp>.

Student Incentives

States that have engaged in near completer marketing research report that these students drop out for two primary reasons, time and money. Near completers are typically adult learners (24 years or older). They may be full-time employees and/or have family obligations that impact their time available for educational pursuits and funds available for college. Financial aid options are often limited for adult learners, particularly part-time learners, who may have income earnings above need-based aid thresholds. The OSA grant supports institutional actions and financial supports to address these student concerns.

Institutions are working to address near completer time constraints in various ways. They may be delivering courses online, in compressed weekend formats, or during

evening hours that accommodate near completer work schedules. Flexible degree programs, improving transfer credit review and application, and identifying more course equivalents (e.g. offering credit for courses outside the program of study that have similar knowledge and competency outcomes) assist near completers to expeditiously accumulate the final credits for degree award. Some institutions are working to develop generalist degrees to help near completers apply more credits earned across an array of disciplines.

Financial aid is also an important student incentive. For many near completers this may take the form of less conventional tuition support. It might include debt forgiveness for fines, payment of graduation or other related fees, and/or textbook vouchers or discounts. A small scholarship of no more than \$1,000 a year can provide sufficient incentive for some near-completers to re-enroll. Institutions receiving OSA funds may use all or a portion of their grant funds to provide campus-based financial supports for their near completers. In addition, the University System of Maryland is administering foundation funds for a one-time near completer scholarship program for its member institutions. Data will be collected to analyze the relationship of financial aid to near completer retention and graduation.

Incentive Resources

The OSA annual appropriation is \$250,000; the project has been funded since FY 2012. It is recommended that appropriations for OSA be increased so that grant funding opportunities can be extended to community colleges as well as four-year institutions. In addition, it is recommended that the OSA grant program receive continued appropriations through at least FY 2017 to allow more institutions to participate and to ensure sufficient time to build sustainable near completer programs. Institutional match will be an ongoing requirement.

Given the importance of student financial aid geared to the unique needs of near completers, the OSA will continue to support flexible campus-based financial aid options for this population. Institutions are also encouraged to provide support through their foundations, as part of the matching requirement, and may over time develop specific foundation funding streams for these students.

Employers may provide another source of financial support for near completers. Many near completers are employed, and may be employed at companies that provide education benefits such as tuition reimbursement. A near completer communication campaign (discussed below) should extend to the employer community to encourage employers and the near completers who work for them to support degree completion. MHEC should work with the Governor's Workforce Investment Board and others to determine how to engage employers in supporting the State's near completion efforts.

Near Completer Communication Campaign

The Readiness and Completion Act states that the near completer communication campaign shall: 1) use a variety of marketing media including billboards, brochures, and electronic resources; 2) provide a centralized contact point for near completers to get information about and assistance with re-enrolling; and 3) make readily available contact information for each public institution of higher education in the state. The work group examined near completer and adult learner marketing efforts in other states, Georgia, Minnesota, and Texas in particular, to learn more about outreach to this population. This review provided a springboard to discuss what a statewide communication campaign might look like in Maryland. The group discussed the organization of the campaign, the types of media to consider, and the resources needed to conduct it. The web addresses for the programs included in the work group's literature review are located in Appendix 3.

While each of the outreach programs studied was different and tailored to the needs of the particular state, they shared some common features. Each campaign was broadly conceived and administered by the higher education board or system. Each state had a designated leadership team and worked with participating institutions via regular meetings to establish and implement its marketing campaign and near completer/adult learner initiative. States contracted with external vendors to conduct market research, develop a brand (name/logo), and create marketing messages based on research results. Multiple media outlets were used. States worked with web developers to establish a near completer website with linkages to individual institution sites. Not surprisingly, communication strategies included a mix of low- to high-cost options, and various delivery methods (electronic, print, radio, and television). While full budget information was not made available, Minnesota received an \$800,000 Lumina Foundation grant to augment State funds for their project. Georgia indicated that at least \$750,000 was spent on annual marketing efforts (exclusive of design costs).

After completing the literature review, the work group discussed the elements of Maryland's near completer campaign. These include establishing a statewide central contact, establishing an institution central contact, publicizing contact information, resources for a communication campaign, and a detailed look at communication campaign components and potential costs. A discussion of each of these items follows.

Establishing Near Completer Contacts

MHEC will establish a central point of contact, and a supporting implementation team to lead the statewide near completer initiative and communication campaign. While this person has not yet been designated, preparations are currently underway to identify this staff member. Presently, the Secretary of Higher Education is providing support for near completer policy implementation; the Assistant Secretary coordinates completion efforts; and the Director of Outreach and Grants Management is the program manager for the One Step Away incentive grant program. Authorization is being sought to convert two grant-funded contractual outreach positions to regular positions and

establish new funding to sustain outreach. These resources will ensure ongoing outreach and will be used to include more focus on near completers and adult learners in addition to traditional age learners.

Institutions participating in the OSA grant have already designated a central contact (project director) for near completion. MHEC will work with all public institutions regardless of OSA participation to identify a near completer contact. Independent institutions will be encouraged to participate on a voluntary basis, and in fact, some independent institutions are already participating in near completion efforts. The designated MHEC near completer contact will periodically convene the institutional representatives to discuss near completer communication, outreach, and program implementation issues.

Once the MHEC and institutional contacts are identified, contact information will be made available on the MHEC website and on a revamped MdGo4It! website. Institutions will be encouraged to set up a section or full page on near completion on their websites. These dedicated pages should provide institutional contact information and link with the statewide pages administered by MHEC.

Communication Campaign Budget and Resources

As described in the Department of Legislative Services fiscal note accompanying Senate Bill 740, which was enacted as the College and Career Readiness and College Completion Act of 2013, additional resources are required to support a statewide near completer incentive plan and communication campaign. This funding would need to be ongoing for the foreseeable future to establish sustainable near completion efforts to incentivize institution and student participation, and raise public awareness to create a college completion culture in Maryland. Amounts were proposed as follows: \$750,000 per annum for a marketing campaign to include marketing research in year one, design work, media production, and implementation costs; \$1,000,000 in an incentive fund to include increased funding for the One Step Away State Grant Program and other supporting initiatives such as statewide convenings, educational conference, and/or webinars; and funds to support the conversion of two-grant funded contractual outreach positions to regular positions. Refer to the table below.

Near Completer Budget Proposed in FY 2013 DLS Analysis

	FY 2015	FY 2016	FY 2017
2 Contractual Grant Funded Positions Conversion to 2 Regular Positions*	\$120,000	\$123,600	\$127,308
Communication Campaign	\$750,000	\$750,000	\$750,000
Incentive (to include OSA)	\$1,000,000	\$1,000,000	\$1,000,000

*3% increase each year

MHEC will continue to pursue external grant awards to support a near completer communication campaign. Federal funding opportunities for state agencies are

monitored as well. Institutional matching funds will be required of all grantees. As indicated earlier, the USM Foundation has provided one year of financial aid support for near completers at member institutions.

Communication Campaign Development – Market Research and Timing

The near completer incentive plan and communication campaign work group supports an evidence-based communication approach; therefore, it is recommended that MHEC, once funds are available, issue a Request for Proposal to secure the services of a marketing firm to conduct statewide marketing research that will inform near completer outreach efforts. Research should identify effective messaging media, develop a brand name and logo (graphic) for use by MHEC and all participating institutions, and propose a series of two to five research based messages suitable for electronic media (e.g. website, social media, email), print media (e.g. billboards, posters for public transportation stations, bus panels, brochures, flyers), radio, and television. The cost for market research varies dramatically dependent upon the scope of the work and vendor. For example, 200 phone surveys may range from \$5,000 - \$15,000 dependent upon the length of survey. A 90 minute focus group may cost \$6,000 per group. Personal interviews may cost \$325 per person. Additional costs are incurred for data analysis and reporting. A minimum of \$70,000 is recommended for research. Design work for logo, print media, and radio and video messaging is expected to cost \$25,000 to \$35,000. These costs do not include the actual purchase of space or air time for implementation of the campaign.

Institutions will continue to manage direct outreach and communications to individual students. They will need to develop their own delivery methods and personalized messages to re-engage, re-enroll and graduate their near completers. These communications would include any statewide branding for the near completer campaign (logo and tagline). Funding from OSA may be used to help to support institutional outreach efforts.

The timing of the communication campaign must be coordinated with the institutions' near completer contacts. Institutions need to be ready for near completer queries, degree audit requests, re-admission, and student support requirements in advance of a major statewide communication campaign. This will ensure a smooth re-entry for these students and enhance retention and completion. The communications should also be timed such that they precede a typical semester enrollment period and correspond with institution near completer "recruitment" timelines. For example, to achieve fall semester enrollments, a late spring and summer communication blitz should be implemented. Late fall would be an appropriate time to launch a second wave of communications for spring semester enrollments. Institutions can engage in more personalized outreach to near completers within this same time frame.

Communication Media

Several communication media were investigated for possible inclusion in a Maryland near completer communication campaign. Information about associated costs were examined. Each medium is discussed.

Websites & Internet

Institutions should develop a web page or information within a page on their institution website and link to the appropriate MHEC administered pages (MHEC website and on the revamped MdGo4It! website). This work can most likely be developed and implemented using existing resources.

Many newspapers and websites allow for online promotions and messaging. MHEC should investigate opportunities for low cost Internet communications on sites likely to be visited by the target population.

Social Media

MHEC has a growing Facebook and Twitter following. A strategic plan for outreach posts and tweets to include near completion is currently in development. This provides a no cost communication option. In addition, MHEC will experiment with low cost Facebook advertising targeting Maryland Facebook users between the ages 24 – 40, the age range of the near-completers identified in the most recent OSA project reports. According to recent research by Socialfresh.com, a social media education and training company, the average cost per click is \$.80. A program supporting 100-500 clicks per week would range \$80 - \$400 a week.

Print Communications

MHEC has had success with both billboard and poster advertising in high traffic areas, metro and train stations, and buses for other outreach initiatives. Based on market research results, messages will be selected for use in each of these areas. Detailed pricing lists have been obtained for the advertising/communication outlets mentioned here. Costs vary widely and are dependent upon length of posting and location. Estimated costs for 50 station posters and bus panels for one year are \$170,000. Recent billboard advertising supporting the airing of the MHEC sponsored, "You Can Afford College" television program on Maryland Public Television cost \$11,500 for two weeks in fourteen locations.

Information brochures may also be developed. These might be made available at job fairs, college fairs, through selected employers, or as part of any direct mail campaign. As a price comparison, MHEC expended approximately \$48,000 to produce 400,000 financial aid brochures (4 designs, folded glossy cardstock \$.12 average per copy, excluding Spanish translation costs).

News Stories (newspapers, online media outlets, television, news/talk radio)

MHEC will work with institutions and media outlets to provide near completer program information and human-interest stories about near completer students. This would be a

no cost option that could help raise awareness of support for near completers. Institutions would also be encouraged to pursue opportunities for news coverage with various contacts. This type of publicity is unpredictable and would not represent an ongoing communication. Nonetheless, it could help to raise public awareness of near completion and influence near completers to investigate how to complete their degree. Existing resources would be used at no additional cost.

Radio (traditional AM/FM, broadband, Pandora)

Radio is an effective means of reaching a broad audience because it can permeate hard to reach rural areas as well as urban areas. Many commuters listen to the radio during their drives to and from work. Employees frequently listen to radio at work. Radio stations can be identified for messaging based on the demographics of their listening audiences. MHEC estimates that the cost of developing radio messages will range from \$1,200 - \$3,000 per message, depending on the length of message and number of different messages. Six months of typical airplay costs about \$120,000. In addition, MHEC would seek to have stations broadcast public service messages (PSA), for which there is no charge. However, PSAs are not typically broadcast during prime listening hours so would not have the reach of paid communications.

Television

Like radio, television can be an effective means of reaching a broad audience, especially when communications are broadcast at peak viewing times for the target audience (e.g. morning news, evening and late night news). MHEC will investigate opportunities for PSAs where the only cost will be development of the message (approximately \$2,500). If funds permit, communications might also air as paid advertising. It is estimated that 10 airings would cost around \$10,000.

In conclusion, a multi-prong communication campaign is recommended. The campaign needs to be coordinated with participating institutions and the timing of messaging is important. A highly visible, statewide near completer campaign should only be implemented after institutions are prepared to receive near completers and only those institutions participating in near completion should be spotlighted in a communication campaign. Marketing research will provide guidance in developing the message and in determining the most effective media outlets for that message.

Proposed Timeline for Implementation of a Near Completer Incentive Plan and Communication Campaign

A proposed timeline for implementation of a near completer incentive plan and communication campaign is located in the table on page 10. The proposed timeline incorporates considerations regarding institutional readiness, campaign preparation to include research, graphic design, and message development, and timing of the media releases to coincide with anticipated enrollment dates.

**Statewide Near Completer Incentive Plan and Communication Campaign
December 2013 – December 2015**

Month/Year	Activity	Key Personnel
December 2013	Present Statewide Near Completer Incentive Plan and Communication Campaign Report to Legislature	MHEC
January – March 2014	Issue FY 2014 One Step Away (OSA) State Grant Program RFP. Award funds (\$250,000 – four to five awards expected).	MHEC Outreach & Grants
January – April 2014	Discuss Near Completer Incentive Plan and Communication Campaign with the Governor's Office, Department of Budget and Management, and Legislature	Secretary of Higher Education
July 2014	Appropriations for FY 2015 in place	MHEC Finance
July – August 2014	Develop RFP for market research, graphic and messaging design	MHEC Outreach & Grants
July 2014 – September 2014	Designate existing or new staff member as MHEC Near Completer Coordinator	Secretary of Higher Education
August – October 2014	Issue and award market research, graphic and messaging design RFP (contingent upon funding availability)	MHEC Near Completer Coordinator/ Outreach & Grants
October 2014 – March 2015	Contracted marketing firm conducts research, develops logo & tagline, & creates marketing messages for billboard, social media, and other media outlets.	MHEC Near Completer Coordinator
Present – March 2015	Participating institutions develop individual action plans to implement near completion initiatives (e.g. train faculty and staff, examine policies eliminating and/or establishing institutional policies that support near completers, identify near completer profile for their institution).	Institution Leadership/ Near Completer Contact Person
October 2014 – January 2015	Issue FY 2015 One Step Away State Grant Program Request for Proposals and award funds	MHEC Outreach & Grants
May 2015 – August 2015	Implement first wave of statewide near completer marketing campaign two weeks in spring, two weeks in early summer, two weeks in late summer based on marketing research and in coordination with institutions' near completer efforts.	MHEC Near Completer Coordinator

Month/Year	Activity	Key Personnel
October –December 2015	Implement second wave of Marketing Campaign – billboards, social media, and other media outlets (dependent upon budget).	Designated MHEC Near Completer Coordinator
Continuous	Collect impressions, clicks, views, and other measures of communication visibility and impact. Collect data on near completer enrollments, retention, degrees awarded, financial aid and other related information.	MHEC Near Completer Coordinator, MHEC Outreach & Grants Staff, Institution Near Completer Contact Person (OSA Project Directors)

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Appendix 1: College and Career Readiness and College Completion Act of 2013 Excerpt of Statute Pertaining to Near Completer Communication Campaign (11-209).

A) IN THIS SECTION, "NEAR COMPLETER" MEANS AN INDIVIDUAL WHO HAS COMPLETED SOME COLLEGE CREDITS BUT DOES NOT HAVE A COLLEGE DEGREE AND IS NO LONGER ATTENDING AN INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION.

(B) THE COMMISSION, IN COLLABORATION WITH INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SHALL CREATE A STATEWIDE COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGN TO IDENTIFY NEAR COMPLETERS IN THE STATE AND TO ENCOURAGE NEAR COMPLETERS TO RE-ENROLL IN AN INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION TO EARN A DEGREE.

(C) THE COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGN SHALL:

(1) MAKE USE OF A VARIETY OF MARKETING MEDIA, INCLUDING BILLBOARDS, BROCHURES, AND ELECTRONIC RESOURCES;

(2) PROVIDE A CENTRALIZED CONTACT POINT FOR NEAR COMPLETERS TO GET INFORMATION ABOUT AND ASSISTANCE WITH RE-ENROLLING; AND

(3) MAKE READILY AVAILABLE CONTACT INFORMATION FOR EACH PUBLIC INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE STATE; AND

(4) FOCUS ON NEAR COMPLETERS WHO:

(I) EARNED A MINIMUM GRADE POINT AVERAGE OF 2.0 ON A SCALE OF 4.0 WHILE IN COLLEGE; AND

(II) EARNED AT LEAST 45 CREDIT HOURS IF THE INDIVIDUAL ATTENDED A COMMUNITY COLLEGE; OR

(III) EARNED AT LEAST 90 CREDIT HOURS IF THE INDIVIDUAL ATTENDED A SENIOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION.

(D) (1) THE COMMISSION SHALL DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT A PLAN THAT WOULD PROVIDE AN INCENTIVE TO:

(I) A NEAR COMPLETER TO RE-ENROLL AND EARN A DEGREE; AND

(II) A COLLEGE TO IDENTIFY AND GRADUATE NEAR COMPLETERS.

(2) THE INCENTIVE PLAN SHALL USE ALL AVAILABLE RESOURCES, INCLUDING ENDOWMENT INSTITUTIONAL FUNDS, PRIVATE SECTOR FUNDS, AND STATE FUNDS.

(E) THE COMMISSION AND INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION MAY IMPLEMENT OTHER NEAR COMPLETER INITIATIVES IN ADDITION TO THE CAMPAIGN AND INCENTIVE PLAN REQUIRED UNDER THIS SECTION.

(F) BY DECEMBER 1, 2013, THE COMMISSION SHALL SUBMIT A REPORT, IN ACCORDANCE WITH § 2-1246 OF THE STATE GOVERNMENT ARTICLE, TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON THE DETAILS OF THE STATEWIDE COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGN AND THE INCENTIVE PLAN, INCLUDING THE EXPECTED TIMELINE FOR IMPLEMENTATION.

Appendix 2: Near Completer and Adult Learning Communication Campaigns Resources

Adult College Completion Network

Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE).

<http://adultcollegecompletion.org/>

GOAL –Georgia Opportunities for Adult Learner

University System of Georgia

www.georgiaonline.org/adultlearner

Graduate Minnesota/GradMN

Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU)

www.graduateminnnesota.org

GRADTX

Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board

<http://gradtx.org/>

Non Traditional No More

Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE)

<http://www.wiche.edu/ntnm>

Project Win-Win

Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP).

<http://www.ihep.org/projectwin-win.cfm>

