



Larry Hogan
Governor

Boyd K. Rutherford
Lt. Governor

Andrew R. Smarick
Chair

James D. Fielder, Jr., Ph. D.
Secretary

January 25, 2021

The Honorable Bill Ferguson
President
Senate of Maryland
H-107 State House
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

The Honorable Adrienne A. Jones
Speaker
Maryland House of Delegates
H-101 State House
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

**Re: Report on Near Completer Campaign and
Match Program
MSAR #11586**

Dear President Ferguson and Speaker Jones:

Section 11–209 of the Education Article of the Annotated Code of Maryland requires a near completer communication campaign to identify near completers in the State and to encourage near completers to re-enroll in an institution of higher education to finish a degree. By December 1, 2019, and every December 1 through 2025, the Commission shall submit a report to the General Assembly on the details of the statewide communication campaign and the match program, including implementation of the campaign and match program and a detailed account of the expenditures under the grant program.

Similar to the first year, the Maryland Higher Education Commission (MHEC) requested all institutions to identify students who were no longer enrolled and who met the definition of a “Near Completer” so MHEC could conduct a targeted outreach campaign during the 2020-2021 academic year (see attached memo). Two institutions explicitly chose not to participate in this statewide campaign and 15 institutions noted in their response that they already have a near completer-type program, campaign, or outreach in place. This year, we received contact information for 953 Near Completers from 4 institutions.

As noted in our report last year, on July 1, 2019, MHEC launched the Match Program on a devoted webpage, which utilizes Maryland’s existing Academic Program Inventory (API). Using the website, a Near Completer can match their original major with Maryland institutions that currently offer the same or similar majors. Near Completters can identify both 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities by searching for academic programs by areas of interest (i.e., major) or by searching for academic programs by institution and degree level. Once a program of study has been identified, a Near Completer is encouraged to contact the relevant universities and colleges that match with the major they are interested in and inquire about re-enrollment. MHEC emailed over 10,000 near-completer students’ information regarding the match program, the academic program inventory, and the scholarship (see attached sample email). MHEC will continue this email outreach with the newly identified near-completers.

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MHEC has continued the statewide communication campaign that began July 1, 2018 and has entered into a second year of a three-year Interagency Agreement (IA) with Maryland Public Television (MPT) to oversee media buys and implementation of those purchases over the 2020-2021 academic year. A breakdown of expenditures is provided below:

- Brochures*: Most high school students are studying remotely, not in the individual buildings, so MHEC produced the updated brochures and made them available online for all to download at their convenience.
- Billboards*: movable billboards costing a fraction of traditional billboards = \$15,000.
- Digital Media: \$10,000.
- Television: \$78,000 (advertising buys spread out over 6 months by the four television stations).
- Radio*: I Heart radio which uses stations across the state – again targeting Baltimore and Annapolis audiences = \$15,000.
- Social Media*: create and facilitate in-house utilizing social media boosts = \$2,000.
- Podcast: in-house (no cost associated).
- Promotional items: \$5,000.¹

The campaign continues to emphasize that “Life Happens” and targets students that may not have completed their program of study due to financial circumstances, family responsibilities, health, or other reasons. MHEC is using a variety of specific campaign messages, including:

- Get ready... Get set... Go back to college! Did you start a degree, but dropped out for whatever reason and now are ready to go back and finish it? If so, The Maryland Higher Education Commission has money to help you achieve your goal. To learn more about the Near Completer Grant go to [MHEC.maryland.gov](https://www.mhec.maryland.gov)
- Get ready... Get set... Go toward your Goal- Learn more about getting money to finish your college education with funding from the Near Completer Grant at [MHEC.maryland.gov](https://www.mhec.maryland.gov)
- Don't let money be the reason you miss out on a college degree! (Sound of referee's whistle and “It's Good”) If you are One Step Away from Achieving **your** Goal, go to [MHEC.maryland.gov](https://www.mhec.maryland.gov) to learn more about the Near Completer Grant which will
- help you pay to go back to college and finish your degree!
- Did you start your college degree, but for some reason never finished it? Well, the Maryland Higher Education Commission wants to give you money that could help you finish what you started. To learn more about the Near Completer Grant go to [MHEC.maryland.gov](https://www.mhec.maryland.gov)

*MHEC intended to use **\$20,000 to contract companies for both the billboard totaling \$15,000 and for promotional items, totaling \$5,000.** However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was no audience for the billboard (mandates to telework) nor were there any events to give away the promotional items. That money was returned to the state since neither option were the proper campaign tool during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, MHEC's goal was to utilize both movie theaters and transit to promote the Near Completer Grant in its second year, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, that targeted audience was not available in either potential campaign.

- Experience the thrill of being handed your college degree, after giving up that dream years ago. It's not too late! The Maryland Higher Education's Near Completer Grant has money to help you finish what you started. To learn more, go to MHEC.maryland.gov and click on Near Completer.

Additionally, MHEC has developed specific messaging to target reasons to complete their degree:

- Did you start your college degree, but due to family obligations never finished it? Well, the Maryland Higher Education Commission wants to give you money that could help you finish what you started. To learn more about the Near Completer Grant go to MHEC.maryland.gov
- Did you start your college degree, but due to health issues never finished it? Well, the Maryland Higher Education Commission wants to give you money that could help you finish what you started. To learn more about the Near Completer Grant go to MHEC.maryland.gov
- Did you start your college degree, but were just too young to really appreciate the value of a college education? Well, the Maryland Higher Education Commission wants to give you money that could help you finish what you started. To learn more about the Near Completer Grant go to MHEC.maryland.gov
- Want to move up in your job, but need to finish that degree to be considered for a promotion? Well, the Maryland Higher Education Commission wants to give you money that could help you finish what you started. To learn more about the Near Completer Grant go to MHEC.maryland.gov

Several performance measures will be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the statewide communication campaign, including:

- Online analytics will be utilized to measure the effectiveness of each vendor.
- A Near Completer information and match webpage is on the MHEC website.
- Existing benchmarks exist for the Scholarship and Grants page to facilitate any increase in traffic to those pages.
- For social media we will continue to use protocols currently in place. Data will also be collected directly from the vendor throughout the campaign, where appropriate.

MHEC will continue to collaborate with the institutions in Maryland to support near-completer students. If you have any questions regarding this report, please feel free to contact Mr. Lee Towers, Director of Legislative Affairs, at lee.towers@maryland.gov.

Sincerely,



Dr. James D. Fielder
Secretary