

10. Other Counseling and Mentoring Support

In addition to the lack of financial counseling, there is a very damaging lack of adequate academic and career counselling support in the community colleges and public universities where CLP has worked. This severely handicaps students from the time they begin college until they leave. Students very seldom have access to expert advice or assistance on any of the tough decisions they face including –

- **Academic advising and guidance**, including counselling on developing an educational plan geared toward degree/certificate completion, transfer, and/or career preparation as well as advice on academic skills and disciplines, study skills, time management, student success, accessing mentoring and peer networks, and helping students cope and manage everyday pressures of work, family, and school,
- **Crisis counselling** with personal issues, health and mental health, food and shelter crises,
- **Job placement help** including help finding internships and part-time jobs which are linked to preparing them careers in their field of interest,
- **Financial planning** including help projecting their financial needs, their likely income and expenses, and how to maximize their chances for graduating; and coaching as they face financial difficulties and crises. *(See Chapter 9 for a discussion of financial literacy, counseling and training.)*

Some private colleges provide many of these services but – after decades of budget cuts – public community colleges and universities seldom can provide adequate services, and their student retention and graduation rates undoubtedly suffer as a result. Research studies point to student support services as playing a major role in promoting successful outcomes. They also stress the importance of early intervention and proactive counselling and advising.

Occasionally, a private foundation or government agency funds a “model” program to meet these needs, and they show measurable success. However, they very seldom receive continuing funding or are replicated at scale at other institutions. A current example is the foundation-supported pilot program of “student navigators” linked to the Detroit Promise Program and similar programs offering free tuition and services to low-income students which is described in the Appendix.

Westchester Community College in New York and Skyline College in San Bruno, California, had great success in recent pilot project providing “intrusive advising” staff who help students enroll in the right courses and stay on track. They also helped students with extra costs for books and transit. This resulted in a **doubling** of their graduation rates.

Early results from a recent MDRC study of the Detroit Promise program suggest that **“well-designed, well-implemented student support services in College Promise programs can enhance students’ experience, improve their semester-to-semester persistence in college and potentially increase the percentage of them who graduate,”** [*\(See Appendix for details on this program\)*](#)

Integrating Counselling and Student Support with Financial Aid:

One extraordinary foundation success story is the decades-old **Bonner Program** which is mentioned in the previous chapter. It started with a pilot program at Berea College in Kentucky and has expanded to 65 colleges and universities. Both Mr. and Mrs. Bonner grew up in very poor families, he in Detroit and she in Appalachia, and both nevertheless were able to complete college thanks to scholarship help. While they had no children of their own, they were acutely aware of the opportunities which college education opens up for poor kids, and they decided to give generously to expanding the availability of financial aid.

The Bonners also were church-goers with a strong commitment to community service. Their student support program at Berea and elsewhere combines financial help with a community service requirement. Their foundation gradually expanded the program to 10 other colleges in Appalachia and a dozen other institutions, including Historically Black Colleges. Remarkably **they endowed these institutions** with sufficient capital to create permanent programs with sufficient continuing income to provide a “full ride” to a cohort of 5, 10, 20 or 40 low-income students each year.

The students come together frequently and develop common bonds as Bonner Scholars, have regular access to mentoring and counselling, and devotes 8-10 hours a week to a community service job, usually financed through the Federal Community Service Work Study program (each Bonner college pledges to provide

at least 7% of its Work Study funds to Bonner Scholars.) The “Bonners” graduate debt-free.

A recent evaluation of the Bonner program documented how “being in the Bonner Program improves students’ retention, persistence and graduation rates.... Students seek courses that improve their understanding of community issues and can improve their effectiveness in applying learning to real-world issues. A majority of (Bonner) students are now completing higher level capacity-building projects, including as academic capstones. Many are taking on research, program development, social action and other problem solving.”