

 THE RESEARCH AGENDA

Improving Educational Outcomes for Minority Male Community College Students

By Bryan Bell, John “JJ” Evans, and Heather Taynor

Eleven North Carolina community colleges took part in the Minority Male Success Initiative (MMSI), a study designed to improve minority male student outcomes. MMSI had two main components — success coaching and a technology-based retention solution from Watermark called “Student Success & Engagement.” These two components, what we refer to as “technology-enabled success coaching,” paired the individual attention of success coaches with the insights provided through automated student success and engagement tools. Designed as a longitudinal cohort study, the study compared course completion and persistence rates of minority males in participating cohorts in contrast to cohorts observed historically. Results suggest that the use of dedicated success coaches and a technology-based retention solution improves the course completion and persistence rates of minority male students, especially at those institutions that maintained consistent coaches for each student and were highly engaged with the software. These results have important implications for how all colleges can improve minority males in participating cohorts in contrast to cohorts observed historically.

Community colleges play a vital role in increasing access to postsecondary education in the United States, educating approximately 7.4 million students in 2020-2021 (NCES 2021). They were designed to be accessible

to all, with minimal or no entrance requirements, and are the most affordable of higher education institutions in the United States. Community colleges typically enroll a much more diverse student population

than four-year colleges, with Black and Latino students comprising 38 percent of two-year college enrollment, versus 30 percent of four-year college enrollment (NCES 2021). Students who attend community colleges typically have lower levels of academic preparation, are first-generation college-goers, and/or are working (Yuen 2020), and thus need more academic and social support than their four-year college peers.

Due in part to the academic struggles their students bring to campus, college completion rates at community colleges are lower than at four-year colleges. For instance, the 150 percent completion rate at community colleges is 36.4 percent for two-year institutions, compared to 64.5 percent at four-year institutions (NCES 2022). This percentage is even smaller for students traditionally underserved in higher education, such as minority male students. Despite serving this disadvantaged population, community colleges tend to be under-resourced compared to four-year institutions (Community College Research Center 2022). Community colleges only receive \$8,700 in revenue per full-time-equivalent student compared to four-year public colleges at \$17,500 (Yuen 2020). They must do more with less to improve the outcomes of students at their schools.

Several studies suggest that success coaching can improve student outcomes, where students are assigned an advisor or coach who provides intensive advising that is more proactive than reactive (Bettinger and Baker 2014; Evans, *et al.* 2020; Price, Valentine, and Leader 2021; Scrivener and Weiss 2009). For instance, in a randomized control trial, Watermark partnered with ten community colleges within the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) to administer the *First in the World* (FITW) grant project (Price, Valentine, and Leader 2021). This federally-funded study examined the effects of proactive, individualized success coaching on student outcomes when using Watermark's Student Success & Engagement (SS&E) software (formerly known as Aviso Retention). This study found a marked improvement in student outcomes. In particular, Watermark and NCCCS found one group especially benefited from this type of hands-on support: minority male students. Seeing this success, NCCCS wanted to scale up the benefits of FITW

to other campuses, specifically targeting minority male students whose credential attainment rates are lower than the state average (myFutureNC 2021). NCCCS also wanted to ensure any new intervention was economical for its resource-limited campuses. NCCCS partnered again with Watermark to institute the Minority Male Success Initiative (MMSI), analyzing the impact of technology-enabled success coaching on this vulnerable population on participating campuses. The results from this MMSI study find that minority male course completion and persistence rates increase with the help of technology-enabled success coaching, pointing to potential implications for how community colleges can improve minority male student outcomes.

Minority Male Success Initiative

The Minority Male Success Initiative (MMSI) was conceived as a way to scale up the lessons learned from Price, *et al.* (2021) and the FITW program in a way more amenable to the limited financial and personnel resources that many community colleges face (Chen 2022; Monaghan, Kolbe, and Goldrick-Rab 2018), but that still maintained the most effective parts of the former study. It was also designed to test whether the results of FITW were applicable in other settings. The purpose of MMSI was to address and increase the persistence and course completion rates of minority male students in the participating community colleges. Through proactive success coaching facilitated by an early alert and advising system, the goal of MMSI was to provide integrated and targeted supports and interventions when it could be most effective, thus reducing achievement gaps between minority male students and the rest of the student population.

Technology-enabled success coaching paired the individual attention of success coaches with the insights provided through automated student success and engagement tools. Eleven NCCCS community colleges¹

¹ Alamance Community College, Carteret Community College, James Sprunt Community College, Lenoir Community College, Montgomery Community College, Nash Community College, Piedmont Community College, Roanoke-Chowan Community College, Robeson Community College, Sampson Community College, Western Piedmont Community College

agreed to be a part of the study, implementing both the technology provided by Watermark and hiring and training success coaches to support minority male students.

Student Success & Engagement Software

Technology is one way that institutions can help provide extra support without depleting their budgets. With automated student success and engagement tools, staff and faculty can easily prioritize which students have the greatest support needs, engage in direct two-way communication, schedule one-on-one meetings, and enable early alerts that provide opportunities for proactive intervention with students. These prioritizations can make student success teams more agile and focused in their efforts. Instead of hiring multiple additional team members, institutions can use existing teams to their fullest potential at a fraction of the cost.

Watermark's Student Success & Engagement software was implemented at each of the eleven campuses heading into the Spring 2020 academic session. This data-driven software generated automated alerts for all students for grades, attendance, registration, and other student behaviors, making these alerts available to all faculty, staff, and students. Faculty and staff could also praise students who were excelling, raise an alert, send and receive messages to students, assign tasks, and close automatic alerts to signal that a situation has been addressed. In addition, faculty and staff could prioritize more personalized outreach across the many students they were responsible for by using the risk levels assigned to each student using predictive analytics. This software was available for all students during the study, so that all faculty and staff at the college could generate alerts or respond to alerts by reaching out to students.

Technology-Enabled Success Coaching

Students in the MMSI program benefited from SS&E as well as from success coaches who utilized SS&E to prioritize student support. Success coaches in the MMSI study provided proactive outreach to their assigned students during the first week of class and at other key points

throughout the term. Their outreach was prioritized based on risk using predictive analytics and enhanced by the data-driven automated alerts they received from the SS&E software for grades, attendance, registration, and other relevant student behavior, following up if there was a concern for their assigned students. Success coaches leveraged SS&E to connect students with campus resources and services through intentional interventions and programming between students and the campus community.

Research Design

Sample

After identifying the eleven community colleges that would participate in the study, the MMSI project was set up by defining cohorts of postsecondary, minority male students at each of the participating community colleges. Students were identified as "minority" if they reported being one or more of the following racial/ethnic groups on their college intake forms: Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Black, or Hawaii/Pacific Islander. Students could be full-time or part-time, new or returning. "New" was defined as not having attempted prior postsecondary curriculum credit at that institution; returning was defined as all other students.

Students were then separated into "historical" and "study" cohorts to compare the effects of the intervention. Historical cohorts are cohorts of students represented in the study *prior* to the implementation of the MMSI project on campus (Fall 2016-Fall 2019). Study cohorts are cohorts of students who joined the study *after* the MMSI project began (Spring 2020-Spring 2022).

A success coach was assigned to each student in the study cohort to conduct proactive outreach throughout the term by utilizing support technology and predictive analytics. These cohorts were tracked through a longitudinal cohort analysis over three years, and their outcomes were compared to students in the historical cohorts. The initial study cohort in year one received technology-enabled success coaching for three years. After the initial study cohort was identified, new students who enrolled in the participating colleges in years

TABLE 1 ▶ Sample Size

Cohort Description	New Students			Returning Students		
	Historical	Study	Total	Historical	Study	Total
Students	2,205	1,211	3,416	3,098	2,763	5,861
Student Registrations	2,205	1,211	3,416	6,689	5,652	12,341
Enrollment Status						
Full Time	937	457	1,394	2,665	2,104	4,769
Part Time	1,268	754	2,022	4,024	3,548	7,572

two and three of the study were also assigned success coaches and were included in short-term analyses.

Implementing the program in eleven separate colleges allowed researchers to expand the dataset beyond one school thus pooling the data for analysis. This larger number helps reduce the variability in outcomes that may exist at each of the institutions, increasing the chances of being able to determine if there were any statistically significant changes in student outcomes due to implementation of the project. This provided a large sample of 3,416 new minority males and returning minority males in the study cohort, and 5,861 in the historical cohort. It also improved the ability to investigate implementation across a diversity of colleges and students. In addition, from a research perspective, the idea of multiple campuses coming together for a common cause and, in turn, sharing data for research that can be pooled together leads to more reliable and trusted conclusions and can provide strong insights for system offices across the nation. That, in turn, can lead toward strategic support within their respective state systems. Table 1 shows the number of students in the study, broken down by new versus returning, historical versus study cohort, program pathway, and enrollment status.

Methods

Two outcomes were the focus of this analysis. Course completion was defined as the successful completion of a course with a satisfactory grade (A, B, C, or Passing/Satisfactory) for any course a student was registered for. Persistence is measured for all new and returning students and is determined by identifying which students

within each cohort attempted coursework in a session within six months following the cohort end date or have completed their degree requirements for graduation. A quantitative data analysis was performed and includes descriptive statistics demonstrating the observed outcome measures for multiple student populations.

Key Findings

The purpose of the Minority Male Success Initiative was to increase course completion and term-to-term persistence among minority male students in the participating community colleges. By almost every measure, minority male students who were assigned a success coach and received technology-enabled success coaching had higher student success outcomes than the students in the historical terms' pre-intervention.

Overall Outcomes

Table 2 (on page 37) shows the overall course completion and persistence rates among new and returning students in the historical and study cohorts, while Table 3 (on page 37) shows the same outcomes broken down by enrollment status. With the exception of one outcome (four-term persistence), minority male students in the study cohort performed similarly or better than their historical counterparts on course completion and persistence. This article will focus on course completion first.

According to the results, both new and returning students greatly benefitted from success coaching, with online course completion seeing some of the biggest boosts. There was an increase in online course completion for new and returning students as well as full-time

TABLE 2 ► Change in Outcomes by Student Classification, Study Cohorts versus Historical Cohorts

Outcome	New Students (%)			Returning Students (%)		
	Historical	Study	Relative Rate Change	Historical	Study	Relative Rate Change
Course Completion	70	70	0.0	76	78	2.6
Course Completion (Online)	61	67	9.8	70	76	8.6
Persistence (1 Term)	74	74	0.0	81	82	1.2
Persistence (2 Term)	52	57	9.6	69	71	2.9
Persistence (3 Term)	45	48	6.7	64	67	4.7
Persistence (4 Term)	32	31	-3.0	56	57	1.8

TABLE 3 ► Change in Outcomes by Enrollment Status, Study Cohorts versus Historical Cohorts

Outcome	Full-Time (%)			Part-Time (%)		
	Historical	Study	Relative Rate Change	Historical	Study	Relative Rate Change
Course Completion	85	88	3.5	64	66	3.1
Course Completion (Online)	80	87	8.8	56	63	12.5
Persistence (1 Term)	91	92	1.1	71	74	4.2
Persistence (2 Term)	79	83	5.1	56	60	7.1
Persistence (3 Term)	74	80	8.1	49	55	12.3
Persistence (4 Term)	66	70	6.1	40	43	7.5

and part-time students. There is a 9.8 percent relative rate change in online course completion for new students and an 8.6 percent rate increase for returning students. Also observed is an 8.8 percent relative rate change for full-time students and a 12.5 percent increase for part-time students. Full-time students saw the biggest increase in non-online course completion, increasing from an 85 percent completion rate to 88 percent.

Students' term-to-term persistence also increased over the study compared to historical cohorts, and this benefit increased the longer they stayed enrolled. For instance, new and returning study cohort students persisted to the first term at about the same rate as historical cohorts, but persistence to the second term increased from 52 percent to 57 percent for new students, and 69 percent to 71 percent for returning students. Fourth-term persistence for new students does not continue in a positive direction, but it does for returning students

(increasing persistence from 56 percent to 57 percent over historical cohorts). As seen in Table 3, among full- and part-time students, regardless of which term, study cohorts persisted at a greater rate than the historical cohorts, with third-term persistence seeing the highest growth (a rate increase of 8.8 percent and 12.5 percent respectively for full- and part-time students).

Thus overall, minority male students in the study cohorts—over the height of COVID-19—outperformed those in historical cohorts with the help of technology-enabled success coaching. However, these benefits varied depending on three main factors: 1) whether a student was at risk to drop out or fail a course as predicted by SS&E; 2) whether the student was assigned the same coach throughout the study; and 3) how much the college engaged with the software. Below, the researchers discuss how these factors contributed to varying outcomes.

TABLE 4 ► **Relative Rate Change in Outcomes by Variables, Study Cohorts versus Historical Cohorts**

Outcome	Medium & High Risk (%)	Change in Coach (%)	Consistent Coach (%)	Lower Engaging (%)	Higher Engaging (%)
Course Completion	5.6	2.4	10.1	5.1	4.8
Course Completion (online)	5.7	3.2	10.9	12.5	7.4
Persistence (1 Term)	10.2	-5.9	1.4	0.0	2.4
Persistence (2 Term)	35.3	-7.0	8.8	14.7	10.5
Persistence (3 Term)	47.0	-12.0	10.5	7.9	18.3
Persistence (4 Term)	35.3	n/a	n/a	-14.0	23.9

Risk Predictions

SS&E generated risk predictions to allow success coaches to prioritize students most in need. Utilizing machine learning methods and data from each of the institutions, historical student characteristics and behaviors were analyzed to determine their collective correlation to successful student outcomes. Understanding these relationships allowed the software to in turn assign each student a predicted risk probability for both course completion and persistence. Each student was then categorized into low-, medium-, and high-risk measures on these two outcomes by relationally prioritizing the student with respect to their predicted risk probability. Success coaches could use this information to start a conversation with a student about potential barriers to success, work with faculty to identify potential solutions, and recommend tutoring services or other supports.

Table 4 shows the relative rate change for each of the outcomes for each of the factors studied. The first column presents the relative rate change in the six outcomes for medium- and high-risk students in the study cohorts versus medium- and high-risk students in the historical cohorts. Medium- and high-risk study cohort students saw an impressive 5.6 percent increase in overall course completion, and a 5.7 percent increase in online course completion. Similar to the overall outcomes but at a more impressive rate, persistence among the medium- and high-risk students in the study cohort increased from 10.2 percent for the first term, to an astounding 35.3 percent for the second and fourth terms, and 47 percent for the third term compared to

their historical counterparts. Medium- and high-risk minority male students are some of the most vulnerable in higher education, so knowing they can improve so rapidly with the help of technology-enabled success coaching suggests this is a relatively cost-effective policy lever to improve their educational outcomes.

Consistent Coaching

When attempting to scale up a program to multiple institutions, it can mean differences in how the program is implemented. Indeed, researchers saw some differences in how the eleven colleges implemented the program (in addition to larger societal impacts, such as COVID-19, which is discussed below). There were two main ways in which differences in implementation led to differences in student outcomes.

First, how schools hired, trained, and assigned success coaches differed by each institution. One way researchers could measure the impact of these differences was to compare students who had the same success coach throughout the study period versus those whose success coach changed one or more times. Researchers found that students who received support from the same coach saw much better results than those who met with different coaches. For instance, while students whose coaches changed during the study period still did see a relative rate change in course completion of 2.4 percent, that increase was 10.1 percent among students who had the same coach the whole time. This validates prior research, which has found community college students prefer to work with the same person for their enrollment needs (Kasper, Walleiser, and Waters 2020).

Consistency in the assignment of a success coach also influenced persistence outcomes. As seen in Table 4, two-term persistence increased at a rate of 8.8 percent for students who had the same success coach throughout the study, while a 7.0 percent decrease in rate was observed for those whose success coach changed in the study. These results suggest establishing a consistent mentoring relationship with students amplifies the effectiveness of technology-enabled success coaching.

SS&E Engagement

A second way researchers measured how the MMSI program was implemented at each institution was to rank each institution on the individual engagements included as a part of SS&E. These included the number of times staff at the institution raised an alert, staff and students sent and read messages, staff assigned tasks, addressed and closed staff and auto alerts, and how long it took to close those alerts. Researchers calculated the per-student rate of each of these “key engagements,” and then relationally ranked each institution. These ranks were averaged across all of the key engagements, leading to an overall rank average. Five institutions were labeled as “high engaging” if they were in the top five of the eleven institutions, while the other six were labeled as “low engaging.”

Institutional engagement had a variable effect on student performance. As shown in Table 4 (on page 38), students in the study cohorts at both “lower-engaging” and “higher-engaging” institutions saw relative rate changes for both types of course completion, with a slightly bigger improvement for students at the lower-engaging institutions. However, when researchers focused on long-term outcomes such as persistence to the third and fourth terms, students at the higher-engaging institutions saw much bigger relative rate changes, such as 18.3 percent versus 7.9 percent for third-term persistence, and a 23.9 percent increase versus a 14 percent *decrease* for students at higher- and lower-engaging institutions, respectively. These later terms were during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic fatigue and suggest that students who attended higher-engaging institutions benefited greatly from the

greater outreach of these institutions at a time when they needed it most.

Challenges

Administering the MMSI project presented some obstacles for the participating institutions. Campuses experienced onboarding difficulty and resistance to change. Some staff and faculty reported challenges in learning a new system, feeling overwhelmed during the pandemic, and struggling with establishing new processes. Recognizing these hurdles, Watermark and NCCCS worked together closely, providing detailed training sessions and collaboration with institution staff and faculty to ensure the success of the project. Each participating campus remained committed to the mission of MMSI throughout the project due to this teamwork.

The COVID-19 pandemic began during the Spring 2020 semester, fundamentally shifting the way classes were taught. In-person lecturing switched to online video classes nearly overnight, which left the colleges scrambling to continue to provide a quality education amid a public health and economic crisis. Most instructors taught courses online for the first time, while advisors and success coaches had to quickly adapt to support students struggling with the academic and mental health obstacles thrown their way.

COVID-19 impacted each of the participating colleges in various ways, which in turn may have affected the final MMSI results. Even amid this difficult time, colleges still offered support to students. In fact, some colleges saw an increase in the use of campus resources and enrollment despite these historically difficult times. Some colleges adapted by offering virtual coaching calls, or helping students create flexible schedules.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

With education playing such a vital role in the upward mobility of students, colleges and universities must deploy every tool at their disposal to coach their students through graduation. Research suggests that institutions that create personalized connections with their students through success coaching improve student

outcomes (Bettinger and Baker 2014; Evans, *et al.* 2020; Price, Valentine, and Leader 2021; Scrivener and Weiss 2009). Technology-enabled success coaching—pairing success coaches in the Minority Male Success Initiative with early alert software such as Watermark’s Student Success & Engagement—made these connections more attainable at scale through accessible two-way messaging, scheduling, and easy integrations with campuses’ existing LMS and SIS solutions.

All students attending the eleven participating institutions received access to the SS&E software, but minority male students were also paired with an individual success coach, dedicated to proactively serving these students, seeking out resources, and working with faculty and other departments on campus to ensure student success. MMSI study cohort participants were more likely to complete a course, more likely to complete an online course, and more likely to persist or graduate in later terms than their pre-intervention historical cohort counterparts. Results varied by institution, with institutions maintaining consistent coaches for students and highly engaging with the SS&E platform seeing greater improvements in student success. In addition, those students most at risk of dropping out or failing a course responded even greater to the intervention than those less at risk, showcasing the vital role the MMSI program played in supporting the most vulnerable population at these community colleges. These positive impacts for minority male students were even greater than for minority male students in the First in the World (FITW) study (Price, Valentine, and Leader 2021), which perhaps makes sense as the MMSI was designed specifically for minority male students. A potential implication of this MMSI study could be that interventions specifically designed for minority male students could improve those student outcomes even more than interventions aimed at a general audience. The MMSI project illustrates the impact on student success and retention when institutions strategically align

people, processes, and technology with the goal of improving outcomes for vulnerable student populations.

Conclusion

The Minority Male Success Initiative (MMSI) was designed to take the insights learned from prior research regarding the potential positive impacts of technology-enabled success coaching and to apply them to a broader group of colleges. Researchers sought to determine if technology-enabled success coaching could increase the persistence and course completion rates of minority male students at the eleven North Carolina community colleges in the study. They found that pairing success coaches with early alert software did improve the persistence and course completion rates of minority male students in the study, compared to minority male students prior to the study. Colleges that maintained consistent coaches for each student and engaged with the software more actively than others saw greater returns, suggesting how colleges implement technology-enabled success coaching has an important impact on eventual findings.

This study extends the understanding of the role of success coaches and early alert software, adding to prior research on the positive potential of these student supports (Bettinger and Baker 2014; Evans, *et al.* 2020; Price, Valentine, and Leader 2021; Scrivener and Weiss 2009). It also adds to the literature by focusing on institutional supports that improve the outcomes of minority male students who traditionally trail behind their classmates in student outcomes.

While the results from this study suggest an important lever that colleges can pull to improve minority male student outcomes, it is limited by its focus on a few public community colleges in one state. Future research should extend the study to different types of colleges (such as four-year colleges and universities, private institutions and for-profit institutions) across the United States to ensure the results are replicable.

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Bryan Bell, previously the Head of Data Science at Watermark Insights. He applied

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John "JJ" Evans, Ph.D., currently serves as the Associate Director of Student Life for the North Carolina Community College System. In his role, his work centers around issues of diversity, equity,

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Heather Taynor currently serves as the Vice President for Customer Experience at Watermark and has been with Aviso Retention—now Watermark Student Success & Engagement—

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