



Community Colleges Work to Keep Low-Income Students in School

Students who are struggling financially are being encouraged to apply for public aid.

By [JOANNE JACOBS](#)

February 17, 2012

Julio Cohen came with his father to the Single Stop office at [Miami Dade College](#). Laid off as a construction surveyor—the boss kept the guys with degrees—he had decided to study architectural design. But he was thinking of giving up on college to help his father, who was struggling to care for a disabled wife.

Maria Rubio's unemployment ran out. The foreclosure papers came in the mail. She couldn't afford medications for bipolar disorder, so she cut each pill in half. She decided to drop out of Miami Dade's healthcare administration program. "You're on the dean's list," a financial aid counselor said. "Wash your face, get some coffee, and be back here in half an hour. You need Single Stop."

About to "purge" a student from the class roll, a professor first called Single Stop. Could someone call the student's cell phone to ask why she had stopped attending?

Community colleges in five states have partnered with [Single Stop USA](#), a nonprofit that helps low-income students and their families apply for public aid, as well as legal and financial counseling and free tax preparation. Every year, \$65 billion in benefits go unclaimed, the group estimates.

Single Stop staffers are usually located on campus in the financial aid or student services office. Using the Benefits Enrollment Network (BEN), a technology platform, they can verify a student's eligibility for 40 federal, state, and local benefits in 15 minutes.

Most [community college dropouts](#) say they left for financial reasons, a [Public Agenda survey](#) finds. Single Stop hopes to help students stay in school, earn a degree, and become self-sufficient.

"Initial data shows that students who receive Single Stop services are more likely to stay in school," according to the organization, which is working with the [Association of Community College Trustees](#).

Cohen and his father qualified for food stamps, energy assistance, Medicaid, and disability for his mother. A financial counselor helped them draw up a budget. A coordinator keeps in touch with the family. "If it weren't for Single Stop, I wouldn't be in college anymore," Cohen says.

Single Stop connected Rubio with Legal Aid. "You won't believe how accommodating the bank is when you have a lawyer," Rubio says. Free tax preparation produced a refund. She and her father now get food stamps. And a counselor's call got her six months of free medication, now extended for another year. Rubio will earn an associate degree in April, then go for a bachelor's. Median pay for a healthcare administrator is \$110,000, she says.

As for the missing student, program director Barbara Pryor found out she had become homeless. Pryor helped her collect a tax refund and use it to rent an apartment. No longer homeless, the student is doing well in classes.

In its first year, from 2010 to 2011, Single Stop helped Miami Dade students collect nearly \$6 million in benefits, about \$1,800 per student.

Nearly half of Miami Dade students live below the federal poverty line, and two thirds are considered low-income. "Everybody's scratching to get by," says Theodore Levitt, director of college communications. "If you can lift some of the financial pressure, students can focus on their classes."

When student volunteers spread the word about Single Stop's services, they wear a button that says, "Groceries or Graduation?"

Graduation rates are very low for part-time students, concludes a recent study, "Time is the Enemy." Only 7.8 percent of part-timers earn a two-year degree in four years.

Sandra Frederic was thinking of taking fewer classes to save money, but a work-study job at Single Stop and food stamps for her mother have kept Frederic on track to earn an associate degree in sports medicine.

"Single Stop is becoming the game changer for graduation," says Pryor.

The idea is catching on. Last week, the American Association of Community Colleges and the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) launched Benefits Access for College Completion, a three-year, \$4.84 million initiative at six community colleges.

Colleges will develop their own models, such as training financial aid and student services counselors to help students apply for aid and incorporating benefit access assistance in orientation. "We hope the colleges will move beyond needing grants ... but instead will build it into their way of doing business," says Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield, senior policy analyst for CLASP.

Joanne Jacobs writes Community College Spotlight for The Hechinger Report, an independent nonprofit education news site. Jacobs also blogs about K-12 education and is the author of *Our School: The Inspiring Story of Two Teachers, One Big Idea and the Charter School That Beat the Odds*.