

The Case for Expanding Navigators in Mississippi to Support Adult Learners

Fatimah Sabir needed a second chance. After dropping out of school, she became a single mother with three small children. Working at a local auto supplies store, she was barely making above the Mississippi minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour “with no opportunity to do more or do better.” She knew she needed to improve her education so she could better support her family. Fatimah enrolled in the Mississippi Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (MIBEST) welding program at Mississippi Delta Community College (MDCC) in May 2017. There, she received support from a student navigator who believed in her, supported her, and helped her build her skills to succeed. Fatimah received academic assistance and other supportive services such as welding boots and supplies, gas cards, and child care assistance. And she received lots of encouragement from the Navigator, who even came to her home to support her when family, work, and school responsibilities felt overwhelming.



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The From Programs to Systems series highlights community college programs and innovations that were initially funded through the U.S. Department of Labor's TAACCCT program but sustained beyond the life of the grant and scaled for greater reach, through changes to systems within colleges, between colleges and partnering organizations, and across colleges within a state.¹ By systems, we are referring to practices, policies, and processes within and between organizations.

Fatimah earned her high school equivalency credential and the National Career Readiness Certificate Silver Level in August 2017 while enrolled in welding courses at MDCC. In May 2018, she earned her Welding Career Certificate, along with other industry-recognized certifications. Doubling her earnings, Fatimah is now employed as a welder earning \$16.05 an

hour at SAF-HOLLAND, a leading global commercial vehicle supplier. She notes the impact MIBEST has had on her life: “I have been welding since I graduated. Recently, I was able to move to a better neighborhood and put my girls in a school with a better environment. None of this would be possible without the MIBEST program training me for the job I have now!”²

What Are Navigators?

Navigators are non-academic advisors who support students during every step of their postsecondary education, from filling out their applications to completing their courses of study and transitioning to the labor market. In Mississippi, navigators provide or connect students to educational supports (e.g., career counseling, financial aid application assistance, tutoring, and employability “soft skills” training), social-emotional development supports (e.g., motivational assistance, mentoring, time management, and interpersonal skills building), barrier removal supports (e.g., assistance with transportation, child care, housing, college financial costs, books, testing fees, food, health care, and mental health care), and career placement assistance (e.g., accessing work-based learning opportunities, resume building, job search assistance, and interview preparation).³

Navigators are particularly important to community college students, many of whom are first-generation college goers. These students may be unsure of the steps they should take or may not understand how to access resources they need because they lack “college know-how.”⁴

In addition to being unfamiliar with the way postsecondary education works, community college students often face financial difficulties and juggle family and other responsibilities and challenges along with school. Without non-academic supports like navigators, the extracurricular barriers they face can hinder their ability to stay in school and complete their credentials. This is particularly true for low-income students and students of color.⁵

In short, the role of a navigator is to be a single point of contact who can help students figure out what they need to do to persevere and complete their postsecondary education.⁶

Fatimah is one of over 1,400 students who have enrolled thus far in MIBEST, a workforce and economic development initiative that moves low-skilled, non-credentialed individuals from the economic sidelines into careers with family-sustaining wages. At the heart of MIBEST is the student navigator. These non-academic advisors play a critical role in helping students in MIBEST programs overcome barriers to completion and achieve educational and employment success.

The value of deploying navigators to support lower-skilled adults in MIBEST is an important lesson learned from the engagement of Mississippi community colleges in the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) initiative. Navigators, coaches, and other non-academic advisors were an important element of many TAACCCT-funded programs. And while the value of these non-academic positions has been documented in other programs as well, they can also be difficult positions to

sustain, not only in TAACCCT but also in many other projects, because they are often grant-funded and lack dedicated funding streams.⁷

This case study illustrates how several Mississippi community colleges embraced the navigator role through a TAACCCT-funded project. It then discusses how the non-academic supports provided by navigators were scaled across all community colleges, and further expanded to a broader group of adult education students, extending the reach of navigators to many more low-skilled adults in the state.

This profile outlines the steps taken in Mississippi to scale and sustain non-academic advising roles and services, which include:

- 1** Identifying low-skilled adults as an important population to address state workforce needs
- 2** Utilizing varied funding streams to expand needed student supports
- 3** Aligning with the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act plan

Guiding Principles for Scaling Transformative Change

The efforts of Mississippi's community college system to sustain and scale the role of non-academic advisors in community college programs aligns with several of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership's (OCCRL) eight Guiding Principles for Scaling Transformative Change. Highlighted throughout this document are examples of how Mississippi stakeholders have utilized the these guiding principles which include:

- Adoption and adaptation
- Dissemination
- Evidence
- Leadership
- Networks
- Spread and endurance
- Storytelling
- Technology

The purpose of the guiding principles is to help community colleges sustain and scale change initiatives, whether those initiatives occur within the college itself or become regional or statewide undertakings.

The OCCRL developed the Guiding Principles for Scaling Transformative Change as part of the Transformative Change Initiative, which also produced a number of strategy briefs highlighting the work of TAACCCT consortia. Tools and briefs related to the guiding principles are available on the OCCRL website: <http://occrl.illinois.edu/tci/principles>.



IDENTIFYING LOW-SKILLED ADULTS AS AN IMPORTANT POPULATION TO ADDRESS STATE WORKFORCE NEEDS

Like many states, Mississippi has a strong need for a middle-skilled workforce—individuals with more than a high school credential but less than a four-year degree. Yet the state has a large population of low-skilled adults who lack these skills. Students who have graduated from high school but have low basic skills as well as those without a high school credential—nearly 400,000 individuals or 17 percent of the state’s population in 2017⁸—came to be seen by the colleges in Mississippi as an untapped resource that just needed the right training and wraparound supports to succeed.

The TAACCCT initiative provided an opportunity to address workforce needs in the state by building capacity to better serve these low-skilled adults. Together with several Louisiana colleges, the Mississippi Community College Board (MCCB) and five colleges in Mississippi applied for TAACCCT consortia funding as the Retraining the Gulf Coast through Information Technology Pathways Consortium (the Consortium). The Consortium adopted five strategies to accelerate credential attainment for their target population, including the

Integrated Basic Education Skills and Training (I-BEST) model developed by the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. I-BEST contextualizes and integrates basic skills instruction with technical training through co-teaching. Importantly, with their students’ significant barriers to completion in mind, the Consortium partners also built the role of navigator into their program design. As they implemented their grant, each of the five community colleges in Mississippi—Copiah-Lincoln Community College, Meridian Community College, Mississippi Delta Community College, Northeast Mississippi Community College, and Pearl River Community College—hired a navigator to help all students persist and complete their programs of study. The model proved effective. While the evaluation did not isolate and test the impact of the student navigator separately, it showed very positive outcomes for participants. The evaluation of the Consortium programs found that 26 percent of participants, including those without a high school credential, attained credentials, a significantly higher rate than a comparison group of students (18

percent) who had declared the same major before the TAACCCT program.⁹ These evaluation results, combined with staff observations and other studies showing the

efficacy of the navigator role, convinced the Mississippi colleges that the navigators should be sustained and scaled after the grant.¹⁰

Guiding Principle for Adoption and Adaptation:

“Scaling of transformative change will occur when adoption and adaptation honor and influence the cultures of the settings involved.”

As part of the TAACCCT grant initiative, staff in the participating Mississippi community colleges received technical assistance on adapting non-academic advising services and capacity building support for navigators once hired. The Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges provided assistance on how to embed support services within integrated pathways. JFF helped navigators utilize labor market information to support career counseling. The National Council for Workforce Education provided assistance on how navigators can help students benefit from prior learning assessments. The National College Transition Network helped each college develop student support services toolkits to help them customize the resources they offer to students, as well as the internal and external services available in their colleges and communities.

See <https://occrl.illinois.edu/docs/librariesprovider4/tci/guiding-principles/dissemination.pdf?> for more information



UTILIZING VARIED FUNDING STREAMS TO EXPAND NEEDED STUDENT SUPPORTS

Based on the experience of the five Mississippi TAACCCT colleges, MCCB prioritized the navigator position in other funding pursuits, and sought to scale navigators to all of the state's 15 community colleges. In January 2014, with funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, MCCB, in collaboration with the community colleges, began planning a statewide integrated pathway initiative that came to be known as the MIBEST program. They drew on the experiences of Washington I-BEST and I-BEST models in several other states, and those of the five community colleges involved in the TAACCCT initiative, especially as it relates to student support and the role of the navigator. "Our students want to succeed, but they need support," says Nikitna Barnes, who served as the Consortium project coordinator at MCCB and is now the MIBEST program manager. "We learned a lot during TAACCCT about how to help them do that."

"Our students want to succeed, but they need support. We learned a lot during TAACCCT about how to help them do that."

- Nikitna Barnes

former MCCB TAACCCT project coordinator
and MIBEST program manager

Guiding Principle for Dissemination

"Scaling of transformative change will occur when dissemination is led by individuals with deep knowledge of their settings."

To help the entire community college system learn from the five TAACCCT colleges, MIBEST hosted statewide and regional implementation summits in which representatives from these colleges shared, among other strategies, their approaches to providing non-academic advising through the navigators and how they offered student support services. TAACCCT colleges also displayed the student support services toolkits they developed as examples that could be used by the other colleges seeking to develop these resource manuals.

See <https://occr.illinois.edu/docs/libraryprovider4/tci/coverpage.pdf> for more information

When implementation of MIBEST began in fall 2015, with a \$6 million grant from the Kellogg Foundation and a \$4.5 million grant from the state's Workforce Enhancement Training Fund, navigators were the only full-time staff that the MIBEST team at MCCB required colleges to hire.¹¹ Total navigators increased from 5 at the 5 TAACCCT grant colleges, to 22 navigators at 15 colleges statewide (see Table 1 for details). Each college employed at least one student navigator to support students without a high school diploma and high school graduates with low basic skills. Some of the larger colleges hired more than one student navigator to serve MIBEST students across their multiple campuses.

An additional pool of funds became available through institutional and state policy changes that allowed MIBEST students to enter Career Technical Education (CTE) programs of study without a high school credential. This change allowed colleges to receive state

full-time equivalent (FTE) reimbursement for these students. The MIBEST team at MCCB also worked to garner additional funding to address student needs. For example, MIBEST collaborated with the Women's Foundation of Mississippi to distribute a \$100,000 grant to seven of the smallest and most rural community colleges. Targeted to female students, these funds could be used flexibly to address any barriers faced by these students. In addition, the grant emphasized career counseling to guide and support female students in nontraditional occupational pathways, which were more likely to yield credentials leading to higher-paying jobs for these women. "We knew we needed to put in place an infrastructure to support the success of our students, given the many barriers they face," said Kenneth Wheatley, MIBEST program director. "We use a combination of funding, capacity building, policy, and practice changes to ensure that our student navigators are fully equipped for their role."

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—Kenneth Wheatley MIBEST program director

Guiding Principle for Networks:

“Scaling of transformative change will occur when individuals engage in networks to gain access to expertise, professional development, and other vital resources.”

In addition to ensuring that each MIBEST program had at least one student navigator at the outset, MIBEST builds the capacities of its navigators collectively as a learning community. Navigators participate in a six-week introductory course on career coaching offered by the National College Transition Network. They also engage in workshop sessions targeted to their role during the biannual MIBEST Statewide Implementation Team meetings. Finally, MIBEST hosts an annual Student Navigator Retreat in which navigators share best practices with each other and receive professional development from state and national resources to help them be more effective.

See <https://occrl.illinois.edu/docs/librariesprovider4/tci/coverpage.pdf> for more information

TABLE 1.

Scaling Navigator Support for Low-Skilled Adults in Mississippi:

	Retraining the Gulf Coast Workforce through IT Pathways (TAACCCT Initiative)	Mississippi Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (MIBEST)
Timeframe*	September 2012–March 2016	January 2016–present
Colleges Engaged	5	15
Navigators Employed	5	22
Students Served	1,334 (MS colleges only)	1,447
Percent without High School Credential	29.8%**	91%
Career Pathway Programs Entered	11	97
Students Who Earned Any Occupational Credential	25.4%*** (N=582)	48%**** (N=1447)

Sources: Retraining the Gulf Coast through IT Pathways Final Implementation Study and Final Impact Analysis; MIBEST program and student data analyzed by the MIBEST Team.

*The MIBEST initiative is an ongoing program. The data presented provide a snapshot for the time period noted.

**Nearly one-third of the total 2,771 TAACCCT participants did not have a high school credential. The specific percentage without a high school credential from Mississippi community colleges is not reported in the evaluation.

***This does not include students who completed their program following the end of the grant period.

****Some MIBEST students are still actively engaged in their programs of study and have not yet attained a credential.

Wheatley notes that MIBEST benefits from strong support from each of the 15 Mississippi community college presidents, which is essential to the ongoing success and sustainability of the initiative. He explains their view of the multiple benefits I-BEST and its navigators bring to the colleges. ***“Through the recruitment efforts of the navigators, MIBEST has increased enrollment in the community college system by over 1,300 students in the last 3 years, bringing in students who otherwise would not have been able to enroll in college. This has yielded \$1.2 million in FTE funding alone.”***

Combined with Pell Grants and other financial aid provided to these students, MIBEST is contributing to the “bottom line” of these institutions. In addition, MIBEST is advancing the credential attainment goals of the colleges. MIBEST has led more than 20 percent of students who exited the program in the first 2 years to attain higher-level community college certificates and associate’s degrees.¹²

Guiding Principle for Storytelling:

“Scaling of transformative change will occur when storytelling is used to facilitate learning about innovation and transformative change.”

MIBEST uses student success stories in its efforts to garner ongoing support for the program. In its public communications, annual reports, and in its appeals for state funding, both the MIBEST Team and the community colleges share stories like Fatimah Sabir’s tale of perseverance. Additionally, stories from employers who hire MIBEST graduates demonstrate that adults without high school diplomas are an untapped resource that helps Mississippi meet its workforce needs.

Navigators themselves play a critical role in efforts to get the word out. They organize MIBEST Week, an annual awareness campaign through which each college promotes the MIBEST program in its local community by celebrating the achievements of MIBEST students, inviting state legislators and college faculty and staff members to talk with MIBEST students, and holding employer forums.

See <https://occrl.illinois.edu/docs/librariesprovider4/tci/coverpage.pdf> for more information.

ALIGNING WITH THE WORKFORCE INNOVATION AND OPPORTUNITY ACT

Building on the effective practices illustrated in MIBEST, the state adult education director, Sandy Crist, began exploring ways to extend these supports to a broader group of adult education students. “Our students are one flat tire away from dropping out,” says Sandy Crist, director of adult education and high school equivalency at MCCB. “The purpose of the wraparound support is to remove barriers for our students and provide resources and support to ensure they get to the next step.”

Through Crist’s leadership, the Mississippi Office of Adult Education and High School Equivalency took a big step toward the long-term sustainability of college and career navigation practices by aligning non-academic advising to the state’s Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act plan. It created the new position of transition specialist, which incorporates essentially the same responsibilities as those of MIBEST Navigators but with a slightly broader mission: to provide navigation services to students almost ready to transition to postsecondary education who go through Mississippi’s adult education centers—a total of 2,945 students in FY 2017-2018—not just those

enrolled in MIBEST programs. By taking on that added responsibility, transition specialists help the state meet its WIOA performance targets. Additionally, the Office of Adult Education applied for and received \$500,000 in WIOA Governor’s Reserve Funds to support the transition specialist position. As illustrated by MIBEST, braiding funding from multiple sources contributes to the expansion and sustainability of programs and innovations like college and career navigation.¹³

“Our students are one flat tire away from dropping out. The purpose of the wraparound support is to remove barriers for our students and provide resources and support to ensure that they get to the next step.”

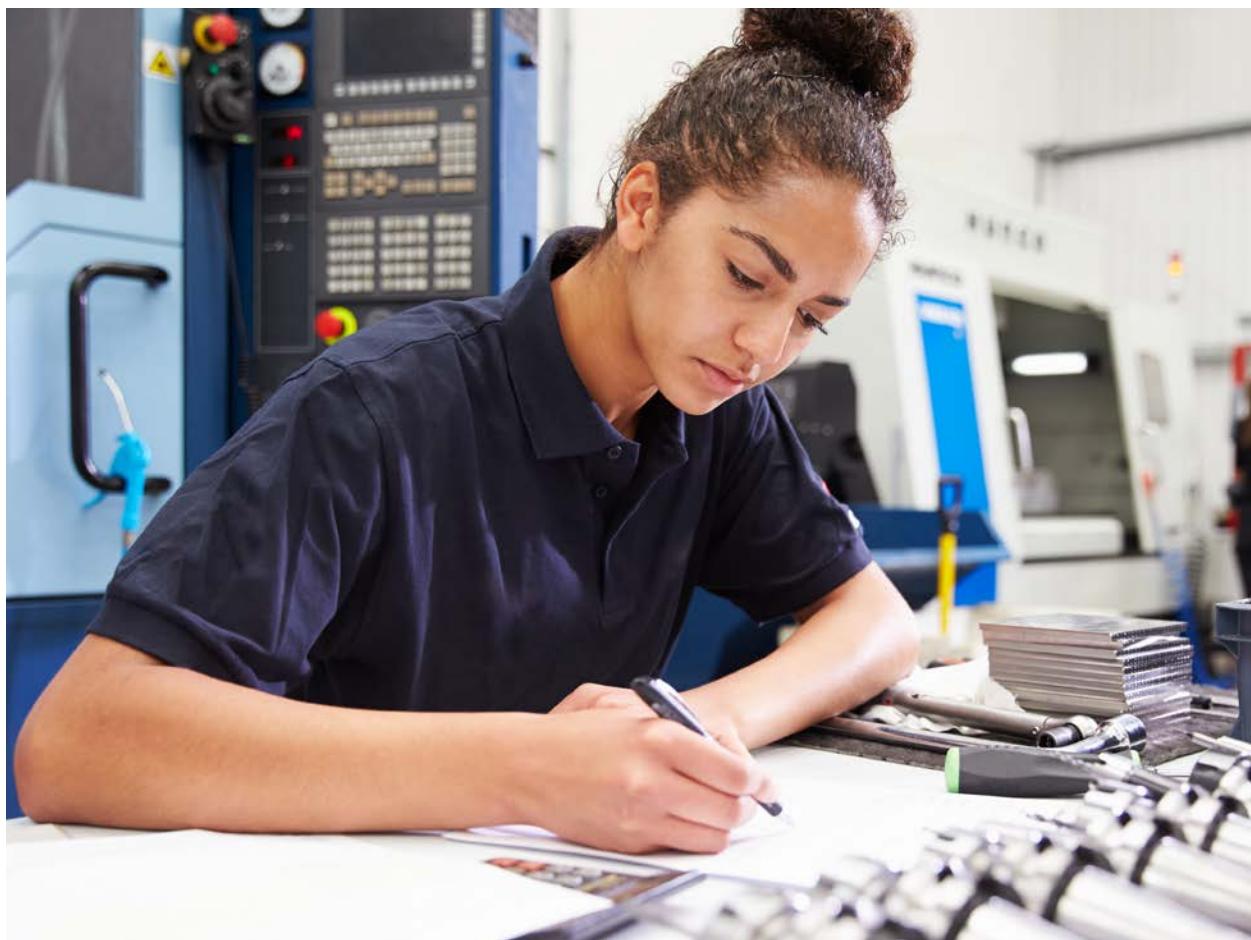
—Sandy Crist
Director of adult education
and high school equivalency, MCCB

Guiding Principle for Leadership:

“Scaling of transformative change will occur when leaders envision, encourage, and support innovation that supports all learners.”

Drawing from the experience in MIBEST and best practices from other states, the state director of adult education used her influence to expand and sustain navigation practices to all adult education students. In the 2017 state grant competition for Adult Education and Family Literacy Act funds, adult education programs were mandated to employ at least one transition specialist in order to receive funding through WIOA. This program requirement ensured that adult education programs put in place the capacity to carry out this component of the state WIOA plan.

See <https://occrl.illinois.edu/docs/librariesprovider4/tci/coverpage.pdf> for more information.



ACHIEVING TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

This case study of Mississippi describes how a state can move from a programmatic focus to a system-wide approach to providing non-academic advising and student supports to low-skilled adults. By taking advantage of the opportunity presented by TAACCCT, Mississippi community colleges gained experience and success in using navigators with program participants, including those without high school credentials. This experience generated support among postsecondary education professionals for expanding the model to all of the state's 15 community colleges through MIBEST, which required the inclusion of navigators and student supports in all MIBEST integrated pathway programs. Lessons learned from MIBEST then fueled an even greater expansion of non-academic advising through adult education transition specialists, who enabled a greater number of adult learners to benefit from these services.

The MIBEST and Office of Adult Education staff at MCCB utilized a range of strategies to support the implementation and expansion of college and career navigation services, which other states might also consider: program mandates, capacity building, braided funding, and practice and policy changes. Embedding non-academic advising services in the state's WIOA plan for adult education services has also created a sustained focus on their provision. Due to the results from TAACCCT, MIBEST, and the state's adult education programs over the past six years, Mississippi stakeholders have come to believe that low-skilled adults, such as those who don't have high school diplomas, can and do succeed with the strategic support of navigators; thereby helping the state of Mississippi meet its critical need for a middle-skill workforce.

RESOURCES

On SkillsCommons

- Field guide of TAACCCT innovations: Strengthening Student Support Services to Improve Student and Worker Outcomes <http://support.skillscommons.org/showcases/field-guide/student-support/>
- Resources to develop student support tool kits from Mississippi community colleges and the National College Transition Network, a technical assistance provider for the TAACCCT project, on SkillsCommons:

Tools for Developing Student Support Tool Kits and Plans

- Student Support Toolkit Content Checklist <https://www.skillscommons.org/handle/taaccct/6589>
- Navigator Program Plan Template <https://www.skillscommons.org/handle/taaccct/1913>

Examples of Student Support Tool Kits and Plans

- Meridian Community College Student Support Services Toolkit and Plan <https://www.skillscommons.org/handle/taaccct/4127>
- Pearl River Community College Student Services Tool Kit <https://www.skillscommons.org/handle/taaccct/5719>
- Navigator Program Plan <https://www.skillscommons.org/handle/taaccct/2601>
- Copiah-Lincoln Community College Tool Kits and Navigator Plan <https://www.skillscommons.org/handle/taaccct/6632>

On WorkforceGPS

- Prioritizing Services for Those Most in Need: Helping the Low-Income and Disadvantaged https://ion.workforcegps.org/resources/2015/12/07/19/22/Prioritizing_Services_Special_Populations_Low-Income_Hard-to-Serve
- Connecting Community Colleges With Employers: A Toolkit for Building Successful Partnerships <https://strategies.workforcegps.org/resources/2018/04/06/00/39/Connecting-community-colleges-with-employers-A-toolkit-for-building-successful-partnerships>
- WISE Consortium: Career Navigator Guidebook https://taaccct.workforcegps.org/resources/2016/12/19/15/36/Resource_WISE_Career_Navigator_Guidebook_Version

From OCCRL's Transformative Change Initiative

- Strategies for Transformative Change: Intrusive Student Support and Contextualized Developmental Education <https://occrl.illinois.edu/docs/librariesprovider4/tci/strategies-for-transformative-change/intrusive-support.pdf>
- Strategies for Transformative Change: Using Navigators to Support Student Success <https://occrl.illinois.edu/docs/librariesprovider4/tci/strategies-for-transformative-change/gulf-coast-it.pdf>

RESOURCES

Other Resources

- *College and Career Navigator Trainer Manual* <http://www.collegetransition.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/NavigatorManual-July2015.pdf>
- *Helping Adult Learners Navigate Community College and the Labor Market* https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/files/content/docs/pubs/update_cte_march2013.pdf
- *Promoting Persistence Through Comprehensive Supports* <https://www.jff.org/resources/promoting-persistence-through-comprehensive-supports/>
- *The Aspen Institute Workforce Strategies Initiative: Annotated Bibliography of Resources for Navigators* <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/annotated-bibliography-resources-navigators/>

ENDNOTES & CREDITS

1. TAACCCT stands for Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training. This program provided nearly \$2 billion over a seven-year period to help U.S. community colleges to deliver industry-aligned credentials for unemployed and underemployed adults.
2. Information about Fatimah Sabir is drawn from the MIBEST Online Reporting System (MORS) and an interview with the student conducted by Nikitna Barnes, MIBEST program manager, on July 31, 2018.
3. Workforce Strategies Initiative, *Retraining the Gulf Coast through Information Technology Pathways: Final Implementation Report* (Washington, DC: Aspen Institute, 2017), https://www.taacccteval.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Bossier-Parish-Community-College_Final-Implementation-Report-1.pdf; Draft Analysis of 2017 MIBEST Evaluation Site Visits, (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute).
4. Karp, *Toward a New Understanding of Non-Academic Student Support*.
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7. Melinda Mechur Karp, *Toward a New Understanding of Non-Academic Student Support: Four Mechanisms Encouraging Positive Student Outcomes in the Community College* (New York: Community College Research Center, 2011), <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/new-understanding-non-academic-support.pdf>.
8. U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.
9. Ashweeta Patnaik, *Retraining the Gulf Coast Workforce through Information Technology Pathways—Final Impact Evaluation Report* (Austin: Ray Marshall Center for the Study of Human Resources, The University of Texas at Austin, 2016), <https://www.skillscommons.org/handle/taaccct/15559>.
10. Workforce Strategies Initiative, *Retraining the Gulf Coast through Information Technology Pathways*.
11. The Workforce Enhancement Trust Fund (or WET Fund) is derived from a percentage of the state's Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund and is utilized to support customized workforce education and special initiatives to meet business workforce needs.

ENDNOTES & CREDITS

12. MCCB analysis of FTE funding for MIBEST students enrolled in 2016 through 2018. Also, MCCB analysis of credential attainment for MIBEST students who completed or exited the program in 2016 and 2017.
13. “Braided Funding Toolkit,” JFF, accessed October 10, 2018, http://application.jff.org/braided_funding_toolkit/; To access JFF’s Braided Funding Toolkit, log on to <http://application.jff.org/>, click on “Request Access” next to “Accelerating Opportunity Braided Funding,” click on the link for “Accelerating Opportunity Braided Funding,” click “Log In” in the top right corner, and then click on “click here to register.”

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