Introduction

The MassGrad Evaluation Briefs share findings from the evaluation of programs funded by the MassGrad initiative, whose purpose is “to substantially increase the number of students who earn a high school diploma.” This evaluation brief is the second in a series focused on MassGrad-funded Gateway to College (GtC) programs in Massachusetts.

GtC is a dual enrollment program that engages youth who have dropped out of high school or are struggling to graduate on time. GtC enables students to complete the credits needed for their high school diploma at an institution of higher education, while simultaneously earning college credits. The program aims to provide supports that will meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of students while they acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in school and in life.

Bristol and Quinsigamond Community Colleges (BCC and QCC) received MassGrad Gateway to College (GtC) awards in October 2011, and Springfield Technical Community College (STCC) received the final MassGrad GtC award in the spring of 2012. The 2013-14 school year marks BCC’s third year of implementation and QCC’s second. STCC enrolled its first cohort in September 2013.

Each GtC site is staffed by a program director who works with liaisons from sending districts and schools to identify and support students’ transition from the traditional high school to the GtC setting. Each site also employs one or more resource specialists who are primarily responsible for providing both academic and socio-emotional supports to students.

The information reported in this brief was obtained from observations of program and staff development activities; interviews with program directors, resource specialists, community college faculty, and district- and school-based partners; and review of GtC program documentation. The practices described below were reported by one or more of the sites as having contributed to their program’s success.

Promising Practices Reported by Sites

Forming leadership teams that include both college and school district representatives. All three colleges formed leadership teams that included school district representatives during the program planning phase. During this time, leadership teams were able to develop a shared vision for the GtC program; create student recruitment, enrollment, and retention policies; and begin to develop a memorandum of understanding between the college and the school district.

Regular communication between program and school/district staff. The BCC program director scheduled monthly phone meetings with representatives from the partner school district and high schools in order to discuss program policies, student concerns, and district or school issues that may affect the GtC program’s recruiting efforts, enrollment, or curriculum. The BCC resource specialists also contacted the high school guidance counselors frequently throughout the school year to discuss program recruitment, the potential for success of specific applicants, and the status of current students. Communication among the program, district, and schools has allowed these stakeholders to address issues proactively and collaboratively.
Monitoring student attendance closely. BCC and QCC program staff reported that frequent absences are a major barrier to student success. BCC implemented communication policies and systems to monitor students proactively. All students are required to check in with the resource specialists before class daily. Student attendance information is sent daily to the teaching faculty, who are required to notify the resource specialists of any absences not documented in the attendance report. In addition, students are expected to notify the resource specialists and their professors prior to a known absence. If no notification has been provided, program staff contact the student to check in and remind them of the college’s attendance policy. BCC reported that due to these policies and systems, no student exceeded the maximum of six allowed absences without first having communicated with a resource specialist on multiple occasions.

Implementing an academic monitoring and alert system. BCC and QCC program staff noted that some students struggle with completing coursework on time, if at all. Resource specialists from both colleges reported that initially they were only notified at the end of the semester that a student was struggling, and that by then it was too late to provide much support. In response to this challenge, BCC developed a system that tracks attendance and coursework more proactively. Students are assigned one of three colors: “green” students are meeting attendance and coursework expectations; “yellow” students have missed one or two classes, have not completed one or two homework assignments, and/or have missed a deadline; and “red” students have exceeded one of the cutoffs for yellow status. BCC’s resource specialists check in with “yellow” students and assess their support needs. “Red” students receive intensive support and intervention, which may include additional tutoring and/or meetings with a student’s parents or caregivers. As a result of this system, BCC resource specialists have been able to intervene before a student’s lack of attendance and/or coursework completion resulted in automatic program dismissal. BCC representatives said that students fulfilled program expectations more successfully when they knew they had these structures in place and a team of caring adults holding them accountable and supporting their academic efforts.

Instituting study time and tutoring for students. BCC and QCC staff reported that students’ greatest challenges in coursework completion were inadequate skills in time management and setting priorities, lack of quiet study space at home, and a need for more intensive one-on-one instruction. Both sites have implemented out-of-class supports for students who are struggling academically. BCC has implemented a mandatory study hall on Fridays for all students. During study hall, students may work independently or receive support from resource specialists and tutors. QCC students are encouraged to complete their homework in the GtC program office if they need a quiet space. QCC requires students who are in danger of failing a course to use the college’s Transition Center and/or attend an academic lab for tutoring. Resource specialists believed that students who took advantage of these structures were able to fulfill program expectations more successfully.

Establishing a professional learning community. BCC created opportunities for GtC teaching faculty to meet regularly and receive professional development related to their GtC work. They participated in a week-long training, met bi-weekly to discuss program issues and student support strategies, and met between semesters to make program refinements. BCC faculty reported that their frequent meetings have enabled some of them to coordinate course deadlines so that major assignments and assessments are spread more evenly across the semester. Faculty reported that they liked hearing about their students’ behavior and progress in other classes during these meetings, because it gave them insight into how they could work more successfully with these students in their own classes. The resource specialists also participated in these meetings so they were able to suggest additional support strategies.
**Fostering a sense of community among GtC students.** BCC and QCC each use some of the following strategies to foster a community atmosphere:

- During orientation, new students speak with students from previous cohorts about their experiences in the program and have the opportunity to form friendships with their classmates.
- First semester students are encouraged to take all of their classes together.
- Some students participate in a community service project together.
- The college offers summer activities to keep students in the habit of coming to campus daily and connecting with their classmates.
- Program staff encourage students to get involved in the college’s sports program, either by trying out for a team or attending a game together.

**Accommodating a growing student population.** BCC and QCC both reported challenges associated with supporting an increasing number of students as the programs grow over time. Resource specialists at BCC decided to provide the most intensive support to first-semester students, while communicating to second- and third-semester students that they could be more independent because they are “growing and maturing.” Nonetheless, due to the strong relationships that the resource specialists have built with the students, some students were upset about the decreased level of support. BCC also reported that as the number of students has grown, more instructors have been needed to teach GtC-specific sections of courses, and more seats have been needed in general college courses. The program director reported that he is working with the college deans and the Department of Academic Affairs to accommodate these changes.

For inquiries about the evaluation, please contact Abigail Egan at the UMass Donahue Institute: aegan@donahue.umassp.edu; (774) 455-7380.