# Comparative Cost Analyses of Community College Student Success Initiatives

Taylor K. Odle

*"Policymakers and institutional leaders alike are often told to do something because it "works" but are left with little (if any) information on what it costs—or, more importantly—if they can afford it."*

Community colleges serve as "engines of opportunity," particularly for low-income, racially minoritized, and first-generation students. Yet, completion rates remain low: only ~30% of students graduate within 6 years, less than half the rate of public universities. A big reason is resources: community colleges spend far less per student than four-year schools, leaving them with limited capacity to support students. We know from research that certain strategies (like embedded tutoring, basic needs supports, and early alert systems) can help students and improve graduation rates. What we don't usually know is what they actually cost. This study fills that gap with the first comparative cost analysis of six proven student success initiatives, breaking down annual spending, cost per student, funding sources, and budget trade-offs so leaders can make smarter, more informed investments.

## STUDY AND METHODS

The study selected six colleges in California, Ohio, and Texas for their strong implementation of evidence-based student success practices and their performance with Black, Hispanic, and Pell-eligible students. At each participating college, the research team identified a single initiative to study.

Each initiative had to meet three conditions:
- Consistently cited by leaders, staff, and faculty as a core strategy.
- Established or emerging causal evidence that it raises student outcomes
- Not already studied in cost analyses: Initiatives that have already published cost studies, like corequisite remediation, CUNY ASAP, or guided pathways, were not included.

The Initiatives

**1. Basic Needs Supports:** Campus-based resource centers that provide food, clothing, and emergency funds (e.g., utility bills, transportation, childcare), and help connect students to public programs like SNAP.

**2. College Success & Career Exploration Course:** A required, credit-bearing first-year course focused on academic skills, life skills, and career planning. It is taught by trained instructors with support from peer mentors and offered online and hybrid.

**3. Early Alert Systems:** Technology-enabled referral systems where faculty/staff flag students experiencing academic, financial, or personal challenges. Early alerts help staff target advising resources to students most at risk of dropping out.

**4. Embedded Tutoring:** Peer or professional tutors placed directly in credit-bearing courses, particularly in subjects with high failure rates. Students are defaulted into tutoring without needing to seek it out.

**5. Emergency Financial Aid:** This program provides students with financial support to help them stay enrolled when unexpected costs (like car repairs, medical bills, or housing challenges) might otherwise derail their studies. Much of the spending goes directly to students, rather than staffing or overhead, making the program distinct from other support initiatives.

**6. First- and Second-Year Experience (FYE/SYE) Programs:** Cohort-based, wraparound support programs for new community college students. They offer priority course registration, dedicated success coaches, career/transfer advising, peer mentors, and a student success center with various programming options.

How the Author Estimated Costs

To estimate costs, the author used the Ingredients Method, which calculates the full "social cost" of a program. This approach catalogs all the ingredients needed (personnel, facilities, supplies, technology, student time, and in-kind donations), measures how much of each is used, and assigns a dollar value based on national market data, fringe benefits, and amortized capital costs. Crucially, it counts induced costs (like student time spent in required courses) and in-kind costs (like donated food for a campus pantry) to reflect the true resources required. The result is a detailed picture of total annual and per-student costs, along with who bears them (students, institutions, or external partners).

## KEY FINDINGS

Below is a comparison table of the six initiatives, showing annual cost, per-student cost, students served, primary cost drivers, and who bears the burden.

| Initiative | Annual Cost (approx) | Per-Student Cost | Students Served (annual) | Primary Cost Driver | Cost Burden Distribution |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Basic Needs Center | $1.07M | $712 | 1,500 | Materials (food, childcare, emergency aid) | 65% college, 35% in-kind donations |
| College/ Career Success Course | $2.90M | $918 | 3,160 | Student tuition & time (69% of resources) | 69% students, 31% college (net tuition revenue offsets costs) |
| Early Alert | $79.9K | $570 | 140 | Personnel (2 FTE staff) | >99% college |
| Embedded Tutoring | $2.48M | $1,246 | 2,000 | Personnel (tutors, staff) | 92% college, 8% students |
| Emergency Financial Aid | $357.5K | $1,324 | 270 | Scholarships (89% of costs) | 85% college, 14% in-kind donations |
| First/ Second Year Experience | $671.2K | $1,199 | 560 | Personnel (advisors, coaches) | 98% college, ~2% students |

**1** **There are many research-proven ways to improve community college outcomes, six of which are the focus of this paper, but knowing what works is not enough. Colleges, states, and funders must also understand what it costs, who pays, and whether those costs are sustainable and equitable.** Policymakers and campus leaders need more than impact studies; they need clear, comparable cost data to make smart choices. This study shows that costs vary widely across initiatives, even when all have evidence of effectiveness.

**2** **High-cost programs don't always serve more students, and large-scale programs aren't necessarily the most expensive.**

**3** **Program design shapes cost distribution: For programs like tutoring and early-alert systems, staff time makes up the majority of expenses, whereas materials and supplies account for a larger share of total costs in basic needs and financial aid programs (55–89%).**

- The college/career course imposed major student costs: 69% of resources came from students' time and tuition, time that could be spent otherwise working or in other credit-bearing courses.

**4** **A significant portion of resources (up to 35% for some programs) come through in-kind donations or temporary funding, raising concerns about sustainability and consistency year to year.**

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

**1** **Leaders need to understand program costs, and should use this comparative cost data to align programs with institutional priorities.** There is no "one-size-fits-all" solution. In practice, this means using cost analysis as part of a strategic decision-making framework: asking not only what works, but what works here, for our students, within our budget.

**2** **Leaders should consider not only the total costs of student success initiatives, but also who pays them. Programs risk inadvertently widening inequities if they impose greater burdens on students least able to absorb them.** For example, mandatory college success courses may require students to pay additional tuition and fees, while programs that demand extra time, such as extended advising or participation in workshops, can reduce the hours students have available for paid work. For low-income students already balancing jobs and coursework, these hidden costs can be just as decisive as tuition in shaping persistence and completion. By shifting more of the cost to stable institutional funding streams, leaders can ensure these interventions truly expand opportunity rather than reinforce existing disparities.

**3** **Leaders and policymakers alike should work to institutionalize and sustain effective programs, rather than relying on uncertain external support.** Philanthropic and in-kind support for effective programs is great, but precarious funding streams jeopardize the continuity of services, including those that actually improve outcomes. Rather than simply leveraging funds that rely on public donations or political will, leaders should consider shifting existing funds toward strategies that are effective and efficient.

**4** **Policymakers and funders should encourage (or require) similar cost documentation in future program evaluations.** By publishing detailed ingredient lists and methodology, this study models transparency that others can adopt.

## FULL WORKING PAPER

This report is based on the EdWorkingPaper "*Comparative Cost Analyses of Community College Student Success Initiatives*" published in August 2025. The full research paper can be found here: https://edworkingpapers.com/ai25-1268