

# Student Support and Retention: College-Specific Integration of Social Work Case Management in a Higher Education Setting

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## Abstract

University student support services are broad and varied. These services are generally located centrally on campus rather than in a specific academic area. Offering a decentralized, college-specific student support and retention model that partners with academic and student affairs allows for a more holistic, integrated approach to student support resources. UA Little Rock has implemented this innovative model by housing a licensed social worker in each of its main campus colleges. These social work specialists provide case management services to assess student needs and then connect the student to needed resources. This includes a wide range of services, from triage of at-risk students for mental health, academic, and financial stressors to the coordination of on-campus and community referrals. The primary goals of this initiative include increased student use of case management services, improved student retention, and increased student satisfaction. Pilot evaluation data indicates that a diverse population of students across multiple disciplines is utilizing the decentralized services. Retention rates for students receiving case management services differ based on their presenting issue(s). To support the ongoing evaluation of services, there is a need to more clearly standardize data collection without disrupting practice.

**Keywords:** student support, social work, case management, college student retention



## Introduction

Traditional student support services offered by universities are broad, varied, and generally housed centrally under either student or academic affairs. These services may include health and counseling services, student retention initiatives, peer support programs, and tutoring. In traditional student affairs practice models, there is a clear separation between student and academic affairs, although both contribute to student learning (Manning et al., 2017). In these models, the reporting structures and operating budgets are separate, allowing each area to focus on its primary mission. In innovative student affairs practice models, such as the “ethic of care” or “academic=student affairs collaboration” models (Manning et al., 2017, p. 278), academic and student affairs work collaboratively to provide services that present the student with the best chance of success. While each approach has its own challenges, they share the benefits of encouraging students’ intellectual development within an environment of care and a highly supportive learning environment.

There is evidence that services that encompass academic outcomes and customary student affairs support better serve students (Berger et al., 2015) and that a collaborative approach to student and academic affairs leads to better outcomes for undergraduate students (Whitt & Schuh, 2015). Thus, building on existing student affairs/academic affairs partnerships provides students access to a full spectrum of supportive services. Adding a college-specific focus to centralized student support resources allows students to access services in a familiar location in addition to broader university services. This decentralized college-based model of student care and retention allows the college to provide a holistic, integrated approach to resources that brings case management expertise into the academic side of the house.

This paper presents a model of student support and retention that integrates both broader university support services and college-specific support implemented via a social work case management approach. This model is based upon social work “person in environment” and strengths perspectives, which consider the commonalities of student populations as well as the varied demands and circumstances of students from different majors and academic backgrounds. We will discuss this approach along with the process of providing support for students based on their individual needs to provide them with the best chance of success.

## Background

### Student Support Services and Student Need

Student support services play a significant role in the recruitment and retention of university students. While the actual services offered vary across institutions, most offer student support in the form of new student orientation, academic advising, counseling and health services, and

tutoring or writing support. These services may be offered to all students, with additional resources available to specific populations based on need. In particular, students from minoritized populations and first-generation students may face specific challenges in the transition into college due to a lack of institutional knowledge (Parks, Gerron, Seijo, & Keys, 2022). These challenges may be further exacerbated by a lack of faculty who reflect the experiences of minoritized student populations, making it difficult for those students to find or create a support network. In order to best serve a diverse student body, student support professionals must exhibit “multicultural competence” in working with students different from themselves (Pope & Mueller, 2017, p. 392).

In a study of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) vs Primarily White Institutions (PWIs), Mitchell (2018) found that students from minoritized populations felt that faculty at HBCUs were more supportive and approachable than did students at PWIs. Accordingly, Mitchell emphasized the importance of providing supportive and safe venues for students from minoritized populations to access “academic, social, or emotional support” (p. 93), particularly at PWIs. Improving perceptions of and access to these types of resources may increase retention and academic achievement for these student populations. Similarly, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) requires social workers to engage in anti-racist, anti-oppressive practices based on incorporating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) principles. This includes an understanding of “the intersectionality of multiple factors” such that “a person’s life experiences may include oppression, poverty, marginalization, and alienation as well as privilege and power” (CSWE, 2022, p. 9).

With growing numbers of non-traditional students in higher education, universities must also consider support for students who are balancing school with paid employment, caregiving, and financial stress (Denning et al., 2018). The number of students with mental health needs has increased exponentially over the past couple of decades, with almost 40% of college students experiencing a serious mental health problem, even prior to the COVID-19 epidemic (NASEM, 2021). Fewer students are living on campus and growing numbers are taking classes online, factors that must also be considered in the provision of supportive services.

For non-traditional students, Denning et al. (2018) found that bolstering social integration, defined as “the process by which a group of individuals bond and feel a sense of belongingness with each other” (p. 169), may moderate the relationship between family, work, and school stressors and negative affect. For first-generation and international students, additional specialized supports such as family initiatives, social programming, and financial resources may play an even larger role in student success and retention (see, for example, Mthimunya & Daniels, 2019). Another student population likely to benefit from access to additional support is student parents since many university policies do not consider students who have parenting and other caregiving responsibilities (Moreau, 2016).

With a diverse student body, there is a great need to recognize the intersectionality of challenges faced by students with multiple areas of need. Intersectionality theory holds that individuals have multiple, socially constructed identities so that people may be members of more than one group at the same time (Warde, 2017). Students from minoritized populations may also be first-generation, non-traditional, and/or parents. These multiple and interlocking identities contribute to compound levels of stress and/or oppression. Many of these students may also experience mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, which can affect overall health and threaten college completion. According to the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2021), as many as 43 to 86% of postsecondary students with a diagnosed mental health issue drop out of college. Student service providers must be able to provide services that recognize and address these compound challenges in ways that also meet individual needs (CSWE, 2022; Park et al., 2022; Pope & Mueller, 2017).

## Financial Emergencies

Financial emergencies are one of the primary factors that contribute to students leaving school before degree completion, particularly for low-income students (Geckeler, 2008). In most universities, financial aid is focused on tuition expenses but does not provide for smaller, emergent expenses, especially for low-income and non-traditional students (Korn, 2014). However, these seemingly small needs are often enough to throw a student off-track and, sometimes, out of school. Cason et al. (2008) identified “expenses related with daily living: housing, food, transportation, and...childcare” (p. 45) as primary factors for consideration when addressing financial support for college attendance. Mthimunye and Daniels (2019) also found that financial assistance was “vitally important when endeavoring to achieve satisfactory academic performance and success” (p. 8).

## Case Management in Higher Education

Case management in higher education is “a solution-focused approach to assisting students with a wide variety of needs” (Brunt, 2012, p. 5). Many campuses have put systems in place to provide a one-to-one approach to students in distress that complements behavioral intervention and mental health support teams (Adams et al., 2014; Black & Taylor, 2021; Brunt, 2012; Day et al., 2016). Student affairs case managers are generally housed in the dean of students’ offices, counseling and health centers, and academic units (Adams et al., 2014).

In a study of low-income students in two-year colleges, Evans et al. (2020) found that a comprehensive case management program, which included “mentoring, coaching, [resource] referrals and [emergency financial assistance],” had a positive effect on persistence and degree completion (p. 935). Day et al. (2016) explored case management in higher education through

the lens of student affairs competency areas (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). Among the professional competencies highlighted are advising and support in which student affairs case managers “provide support, referral, and guidance to students as well as to faculty and staff members” (Day et al., 2016, p. 52). This is generally case management without direct care, as these professionals are unlikely to be licensed in a clinical profession. However, Reynolds (2017) emphasizes that the helping role of student affairs practitioners requires them to recognize and respond to the mental health needs of students. This requires a familiarity with counseling theories and an expanded skill set in order to advocate for students with mental health concerns.

In a study of student parents, Sallee and Cox (2019) recognized that both the availability of too few resources and an abundance of hard-to-navigate services create obstacles to student success. Students who found institutional resources difficult to navigate often elected to rely only on family or themselves, losing trust in the ability of campus support services to assist them. However, students with ongoing support from “institutional agents” (Sallee & Cox, 2029, p. 638) who recognized the multiple roles and challenges faced by these student parents gained multiple support networks on campus. These resources are particularly important for first-generation students who may not have anyone familiar with navigating a higher education environment.

## Social Work Case Management

Generally, a higher education case management model is structured to provide student support in non-academic areas of need. However, Berger et al. (2015) note that focusing on academic outcomes should not be seen as a separate issue from student affairs support. Social work case management offers a broader perspective, inclusive of both clinical and non-clinical practices that may be readily applied across the higher education environment. Social work case management principles include the following: continuity of services, accessibility, relationship building, support based on need, facilitating independence, and advocacy (Elder et al., 2015; Mas-Exposito et al., 2013). The application of these principles ranges from identifying persons at risk to coordinating a variety of services and providing direct clinical services (Mas-Exposito et al., 2013).

Adams et al. (2014) present a case management model for student affairs that draws from both broker and social work theories. This model combines the idea that a case manager is a broker who “provides little direct and no-medical services, but...helps to arrange services between the client” and other university or community resources (p. 449) based on the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) standards of case management.

Social work perspectives that inform a case management model include ecosystems theory, which takes a person-in-environment approach, and strengths theory. Ecosystems theory centers the individual within the multiple and overlapping systems with which they interact and

considers the social environment within which these interactions occur (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2013). An important perspective of ecosystems theory is the person-in-environment focus, which “sees people as constantly interacting with various systems...[which] include the family, friends, work, social services, politics, religion, goods and services, and educational systems” (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, as cited in Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2013, p. 20). Social workers can then provide support and resources to help individuals improve those interactions. Similarly, a strengths theory perspective, which focuses on empowerment, allows social workers to assess their clients’ inherent resources and abilities and then build upon them. This perspective holds that every person has strengths, and the social worker’s job is to recognize these strengths and collaborate with the client to understand and utilize their own abilities to access necessary resources (Saleebey, as cited in Kirst-Ashman, 2007).

A social work case management model that bridges the gap between academic and student affairs allows the case manager to address the whole student. The application of this model includes assessing resources and interventions that can address both academic and nonacademic challenges. This holistic approach is evident in the social work case management initiative initially implemented in one college at UA Little Rock in 2016. It is currently expanded to cover three colleges on the university’s main campus.

## Application of a Social Work Model of Case Management in Higher Education

The University of Arkansas at Little Rock is an urban and metropolitan university integrated into the capital city and the region. University partnerships, both public and private, across the region offer opportunities for the institution to both shape and be shaped by the surrounding community (UALR, 2024a). The institution serves a diverse student body in terms of age, ethnic/racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Demographically, in 2022, 62% of students identified as female, 21% of students identified as Black, and a little more than 23% of students identified as other or undisclosed race. In this same time frame, the age of students at UA Little Rock ranged from under 18 to more than 50 years old, with 51% of students over the age of 24 (UALR, 2024b).

In 2016, the College of Education and Health Professions at UA Little Rock received a financial gift for student retention and program completion for students in the nursing program. Based on an assessment of student needs, a Student Support Specialist position was created within the college to provide an on-site support system for nursing students. The Student Support Specialist initially focused on students on academic probation and in nursing pathway programs, which partnered with local hospitals to provide a pipeline of future employees after graduation. After a brief trial period, this support was extended to all students in the college to address nonacademic and academic factors that adversely affected student progression. These services have continued, through academic restructuring and the formation of a new college, so that case management services are available for all students in the college, which includes nursing, social work,

criminal justice, counseling, health and rehabilitation, and business. Students may be referred for services by faculty, staff, or self-referral.

The Student Support Specialist position requires a graduate degree in social work and at least two years of practice experience. The position's primary responsibility is to provide case management services for students in both academic and non-academic areas of need. Housing this position within the college allows for a holistic, integrated approach to resource provision that not only reaches students in their home programs but also assists faculty and staff seeking help for at-risk students. Often, college personnel recognize that a student needs additional support, but they are still determining what resources are needed or available. The ability to refer students to a familiar, licensed social worker on-site allows faculty and staff to feel confident that the student will have access to necessary resources.

The Student Support Specialist provides case management that ranges from an initial assessment of student needs to coordination of and referral to a variety of services both on campus and in the community, to providing direct clinical services. For some programs, students on academic probation are required to meet with the Student Support Specialist to develop an action plan prior to registering for classes the following semester. The Student Support Specialist then follows up with the student prior to the start of the semester, again at midterm, and prior to registration the following semester.

A second facet of the Student Support Specialist's role is the provision of emergency funds. As noted above, financial emergencies are a significant barrier to degree completion, particularly for low-income students (Geckeler, 2008). The primary reasons for requesting funds include job loss, unpaid internships, and unexpected expenses. Funds are specifically needed to pay for monthly utilities, medical bills, transportation, and course supplies. Although these funds cannot be used for tuition, they may allow students to redirect funds that would have been used to cover other urgent needs.

While this decentralized model of student support differs from the more traditional support services offered to the university as a whole, the social worker in the college works in close partnership with university services, including the care team, advising, and university counseling services. The Student Support Specialist also maintains a comprehensive network of community resources for student referral and assistance, along with a close partnership with professional advisors in the college and consistent outreach to faculty. Specialists are familiar with the various academic programs within the college and regularly reach out to the academic units. This contributes to more personal student referrals for case management and support.



## **Purpose**

The college-focused social work case management model has now been expanded so that each college on the university's main campus has a Student Support Specialist position. The overall goals of this student success initiative are increased student use of case management services, increased referrals by faculty and staff, increased student retention, improved student satisfaction with the services offered, and the overall evaluation of intervention success. For the purposes of this program evaluation, the following research questions are addressed: 1) What student populations utilize the existing case management services? 2) In what areas of the college are students most likely to reach out for assistance? 3) What are the semester-to-semester retention (or graduation) rates of students who access the college's social work case management system? 4) How do retention rates of students who utilize social work case management services within the college vary by presenting issue or population? 5) How do semester-to-semester retention rates differ between students who receive emergency funds and those who do not?

Student data, including use of services, referral source, number of visits, award of emergency funds, and semester-to-semester retention and program completion, is tracked by the Student Support Specialist and reported in the aggregate for assessment and evaluation purposes. The assessment offered in this article uses existing data to evaluate the success of the social work case management model for student support in the initial college. The work will make a meaningful contribution to the body of literature on student support and retention initiatives in higher education.

## **Methods**

### **Sample**

The population for this program evaluation consists of students referred to the Student Support Specialist in one college over the fall and spring semesters from August 2021 to May 2023. Once an initial referral is made, students are contacted within 24 hours; follow-up contacts are made if the student does not respond. Some students may have only one interaction with the social worker, while others may seek assistance multiple times over several semesters. During the program evaluation timeframe reported in this article, there were 779 referrals to the Student Support Specialist. This includes students referred for services over multiple semesters and those not responding to outreach efforts. Semester-to-semester retention data was available for only 372 of these students. Student enrollment in the college averaged 3012 students over this same period.

## Data Collection

This project utilizes demographic and assessment data that was routinely collected by the Student Support Specialist prior to and sometimes during initial appointments. For students referred through the Care Team, initial data was sometimes collected by a staff member in that office. Data typically collected includes race/ethnicity, sex, major, level in school, source of referral, categories of expressed need, and satisfaction with services offered. The Student Support Specialist also tracked students receiving emergency grant funds (See Appendix A for the initial intake data form). Any identifying information was disassociated from, including student names and student ID numbers. Comparative data on the overall student population was extracted from interactive dashboards maintained by the Office of Institutional Research and Analytics. Student persistence was measured by whether a student enrolled in classes the semester following the referral to the Student Support Specialist.

## Results and Discussion

### Descriptive Statistics and Student Responses

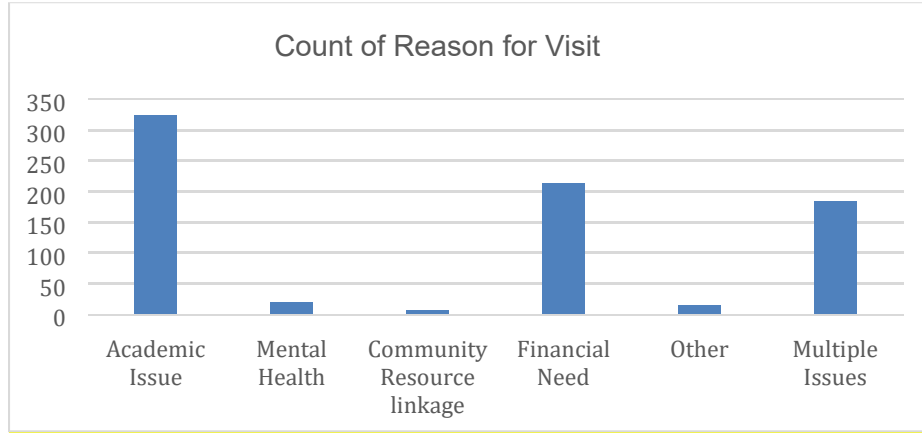
Descriptive statistics for the overall college population are presented here to provide a framework for consideration of the students referred to the Student Support Specialist for assistance. Overall student enrollment for the college averaged 2950 from the fall 2021 semester to the spring 2023 semester. Of these students, the mean number of students who identified as female was 2174, the mean number of students who identified as male was 765, and 10 did not disclose sex. On average, 869 students identified as Black, 1457 identified as White, 607 identified as other races/ethnicities, and 18 were of unknown race/ethnicity.

#### Question 1: What Student Populations Utilize the Existing Case Management Services?

During the four semesters covered in this evaluation, 779 students were referred to the Student Support Specialist for support. As noted previously, this number includes students who were referred over multiple semesters as well as students who did not elect to meet with the Student Support Specialist. Of the 779 students referred to the Student Support Specialist during this time frame, 557 identified as female, 152 identified as male, and 70 did not disclose sex; 332 students were African American/Black, 182 were White, 36 reported other races, and 229 did not disclose their race/ethnicity.

The primary reason for referral was academic concerns, including students struggling in a particular course and those on academic probation. The secondary reason for referral was an expressed financial need. Students who met with the Student Support Specialist were able to apply for one-time emergency funds, ranging from \$250 to \$500. Smaller numbers of students

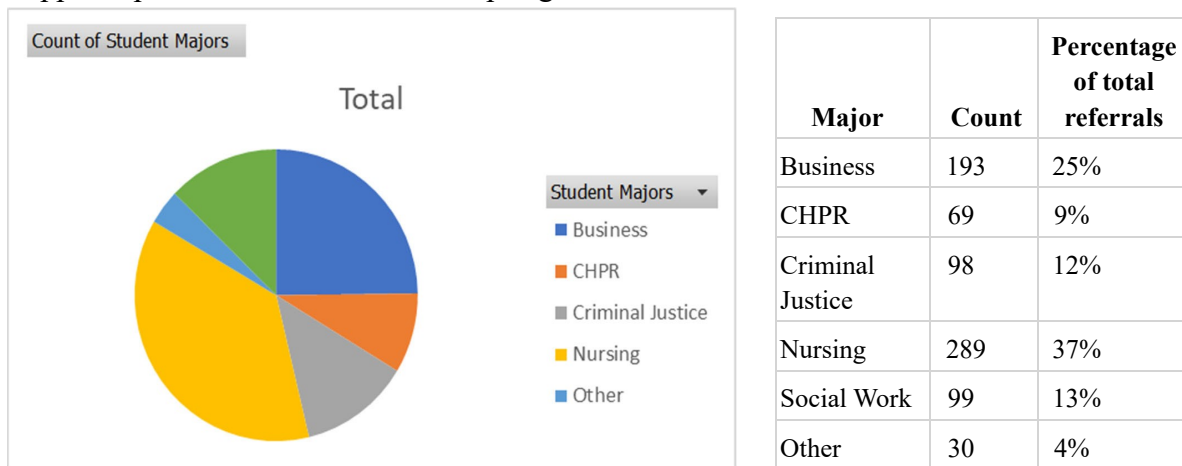
were referred for mental health concerns, the need for community resources (such as shelter or food pantries), and other issues such as disaster relief. Many students were referred for multiple issues, generally consisting of financial need in conjunction with academic or mental health concerns. The frequency of student referrals by presenting issues is shown in Figure 1.



**FIGURE 1.** Reason for student referral.

**Question 2: In What Areas of the College are Students Most Likely to Reach Out for Assistance?**

Of the five academic units in the college, the Schools of Business, Nursing, and Social Work have the largest student enrollments. Spring 2022 student enrollments were 838 (30% of college enrollments), 895 (32% of college enrollments), and 501 (18% of college enrollments) respectively. The School of Counseling, Human Performance, and Rehabilitation (CHPR) had 337 or 11% of college enrollments, and the School of Criminal Justice had 268 or 9% of college enrollments of the students enrolled in the spring 2022 semester (UALR, 2024b). Figure 2 indicates the count and percentages of declared majors of students referred to the Student Support Specialist from fall 2021 to spring 2023.

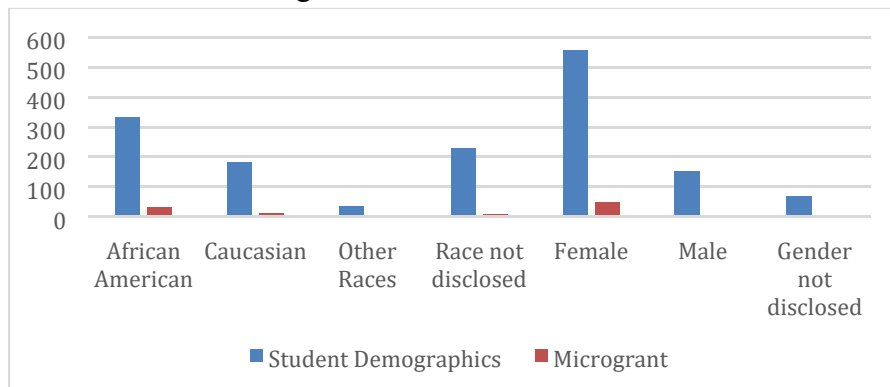


**FIGURE 2.** Student referrals by major.

While students from across the college are referred to the Student Support Specialist, trends are clearly evident in the academic units from which students are referred. The School of Nursing is one of the largest programs on campus. It has historically required nursing students on academic probation to meet with the Student Support Specialist prior to enrolling in classes the next semester. This requirement and the higher enrollment numbers in Business and Nursing are reflected in these counts. Students in the “Other” category include students enrolled in another college, prospective students, and students previously enrolled in the college.

### Emergency Financial Assistance

A limited number of emergency funds are available to students who express financial need as long as they have not already exceeded the full cost of attendance. The amount of the available microgrants ranges from \$250 to \$500 dollars. Over the four semesters considered in this analysis, 54 students were awarded emergency funds. The demographic breakdown of students who received funds is shown in Figure 3.



**FIGURE 3.** Characteristics of students receiving emergency funds.

Question 3: What are the Semester-to-Semester Retention Rates of Students Who Access the Social Work Case Management System Within the College?

Semester-to-semester retention data was only available for 372 students who met with the Student Support Specialist over the stated evaluation period. Table 1 shows student retention figures by presenting factors.

Questions 4 and 5: How do Semester-to-Semester Retention Rates of Students Who Utilize Social Work Case Management Services Within the College Vary by Presenting Issue, Population, or Receipt of Emergency Funds?

The relationships between the assessed factors and student retention were analyzed using logistic regression in R. Due to the amount of missing data in the combined model, each factor was

considered individually. While no significant differences were found by sex, class level, or microgrant received, the logistic regression model indicated that race may influence retention. For this model, the intercept is highly significant ( $p < 2e-16$ ), indicating that the log odds of the outcome when all predictors are zero are significantly different from zero. Students who identified as neither Black nor White or did not disclose their race appear to have different retention outcomes than other students ( $P < .01$ ), with Black being the reference category. The odds ratio of 0.8642 indicates that students of other races have approximately 13.58% lower odds of being retained as compared to students who identify as Black. Results are summarized in Table 2.

**TABLE 1.** Student retention counts by factor

Reason for Referral	Not retained	Retained	Major	Not retained	Retained	Student Level	Not retained	Retained
Academic reasons	82	91	Business	39	50	Freshman	24	44
Other reasons	3	15	CHPR	9	20	Sophomore	27	52
Financial reasons	23	49	Criminal Justice	24	30	Junior	43	68
Multiple Reasons	30	77	Nursing	47	101	Senior	30	47
			Social Work	14	26	Post bac & Graduate	14	21
			Other	6	6			
<b>Total</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>232</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>233</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>232</b>
Microgrant Receipt	Not retained	Retained	Sex	Not retained	Retained	Race	Not retained	Retained
No microgrant	132	213	Male	25	43	Black	53	106
Microgrant	7	20	Female	102	173	White	31	67
						Other Race/not disclosed	55	60
<b>Total</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>233</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>216</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>233</b>

For this model, the dispersion parameter for the Gaussian family is 0.2309563. The null deviance is 87.062 (df=371), and the residual deviance is 85.223 (df = 369). With an AIC of 515.5, further investigation of model fit is warranted.

**TABLE 2.** Retention by race

	Estimate	Std. Error	t Value	Probability
<b>Intercept</b>	0.66667	0.03811	17.492	<2e-16 ***
<b>White</b>	0.01701	0.06172	0.276	0.7830
<b>Other races/Not disclosed</b>	-0.144493	0.05883	0.0142	0.0142 *

Results for the logistic regression analysis of the reason for student referrals also indicated a significant difference in retention among students ( $p < 2e-16$ ), with an intercept of 0.52601 with a standard error of 0.03618. The coefficients for the predictor variables, with academic reasons as the comparative variable, are shown in Table 3 (below). Overall, this model suggests that the reasons for referral to the Student Support Specialist are significant predictors of student

retention, with financial reasons ( $p < .05$ ), multiple issues ( $p < .01$ ), and other reasons ( $p < .01$ ) significantly different than academic reasons.

**TABLE 3.** Retention by reason for referral

	<b>Estimate</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>	<b>t Value</b>	<b>Probability</b>
<b>Intercept</b>	0.52601	0.03618	14.539	<2e-16 ***
<b>Community or mental health resources (other)</b>	0.30732	0.11785	2.608	0.01*
<b>Financial resources</b>	0.15454	0.06675	2.316	0.02*
<b>Multiple issues</b>	0.19361	0.05852	3.308	0.00**

For this model, the dispersion parameter for the Gaussian family is 0.2264331. The null deviance is 86.530 (df=369), and the residual deviance is 82.875 (df=366). The model AIC is 506.43. The odds ratios for these factors indicated that students who were referred for academic reasons had lower odds of being retained than students who sought assistance for other reasons. The odds of retention for students referred to the Student Support Specialist for community or mental health resources were approximately 1.359 times higher than for students referred for academic reasons. The odds of retention for students seeking financial assistance were 1.167 times higher, and for students seeking assistance for multiple issues, were 1.213 times higher than for students seeking academic assistance.

Because 42% (n=325) of students seeking assistance from the Student Support Specialist were referred for academic reasons, the lower odds of retention for this student population are concerning. Since many of the students referred for academic reasons, particularly in the nursing program, are already on academic probation, it may be that the referral comes too late for adequate intervention. For example, many nursing classes are offered in a 7-week format, so the time to improve academic performance is limited. Interestingly, the majority of students seeking assistance for “multiple reasons” have both academic and financial concerns, so it may also be the case that these students are better at identifying threats to retention and seeking appropriate resources. Students seeking community resources often had a finite need, such as access to food or assistance with temporary services. Very few students reported a need for mental health services, although these may have been intertwined with other expressed needs.

## Lessons Learned and Looking Ahead

The needs of students are reflective of the community in which they live. Practice experience lends itself to identifying and taking necessary steps to address student needs while considering the environmental contexts in which the individuals live. The current social, political, and economic climate contributes to resource access, as does diversity in nontraditional, parenting, and first-generation student needs that also affect resource allocation. Today’s college students

are increasingly diverse: 48% of undergraduate students and 38.8% of graduate students are members of underrepresented or minoritized populations. On average, 11% of all full-time undergraduates and 41% of part-time undergraduates in public institutions are over the age of 25 (NCES, 2023), 17% of undergraduate students are first-generation (Redford & Hoyer, 2018), and 58% are female (NCES, 2022).

As with any initiative, there are both meaningful discoveries and insights for reconsideration. The decentralization of student support in the form of social work case management within individual colleges has created a cognitive shift for faculty and staff regarding the service needs of students and the campus community's responsibility to address those needs. Due to the visibility of the Student Support Specialist within the college, more timely education and intervention are available, creating trust and greater ease of use for referrals. The social worker is the human link between the student, college faculty and staff, and the university-wide support systems. Additional work in supporting these alliances and their impact should continue. Even so, a number of important lessons have already been learned as this initiative has been institutionalized more broadly.

## **Need for Improved Data Management**

The Student Support Specialists are experienced social work practitioners rather than researchers, and others who support and track student interventions need more experience in evaluation measures. The pilot evaluation summarized in this article has provided a better grasp of what data needs to be collected and how data collection tools can be better streamlined. With an understanding of how this evaluative data can be used to improve the services offered, the case management team can work collaboratively to improve the data collection processes.

Initially, a spreadsheet system for data management and an intake form for collecting student intake data were established. Medical software was adopted in partnership with the university counseling services to capture additional student information. This software system served as a place to deposit secure progress notes and information critical to the interaction between the social worker and students. With the spreadsheet system, the practitioner identified specific data points relevant to the review of the student population served; however, this system has proven less reliable in capturing data to support appropriate student follow-up and evaluation. Investment in a case management data tracking system designed for student affairs casework could be useful in managing the type of data needed for a strong assessment of this case management-based initiative (see Day et al., 2016).

## **Importance of Clarifying a Practice Model**

With the implementation of a social work case management model in a higher education setting,

there is a need to clearly define where case management should move to direct services and where referrals to other providers should occur. The effectiveness of service decentralization relies upon the practice model deemed most appropriate in this setting, with practice models informed by broker, strengths-based, and clinical approaches. While the current initiative is built upon person-in-environment and strengths perspectives, there is still a need to clearly define the social work practice model in order to connect service provision with practice evaluation.

## **Need for Additional Resources**

Due to the campus community's familiarity with the social work team and investment in each college, student referrals have increased. The increase in referrals contributes to decreased appointment availability and provision of time-sensitive case management and large-scale academic probation recovery programs. This highlights a need for increased community partnerships with resource organizations, continued MSW intern partnerships, and, ideally, additional staff to support each college's peak needs and special programs/projects.

As the number of students seeking assistance continues to grow, there is also a strong need to address the intersectionality of challenges students face. The number of international and first-generation students will increase by adding two other main campus colleges to this initiative. For these student populations, as well as for students from minoritized populations, student parents, and non-traditional students, bolstering social integration and a strong sense of belonging in the institution is imperative. Additional support targeted specifically to these populations of students is needed.

Community partnerships are key to effective service delivery. Based on emergency fund limitations, it is paramount to continue to foster partnerships that feed unique student needs for non-traditional students. These partnerships increase community involvement in the education of students. Additionally, the combined service delivery could foster common goals, increase resource impact, highlight shared responsibility, and build knowledge based on the expertise and strengths of the partners. These factors will provide greater and more timely access to resources that would otherwise require multiple attempts to secure them.

## **Limitations of the Current Study**

In addition to the concerns and lessons summarized above, a primary limitation of the current study is the amount of missing and limited data for analysis. Students who were referred to the Student Support Specialist often did not complete the prerequisite paperwork prior to their appointment. Without consistent research or evaluation experience, the Student Support Specialist and related staff often prioritized only certain variables, so other fields in the data collection tool went unfilled. The overall data collection was inconsistent without a strong and



consistent data management system. As services and evaluation needs expand to additional colleges, the prerequisite data forms and data collection and tracking methods will be addressed moving forward. Due to deficits in the current data, assessment of some of the initiative goals was limited.

## **Conclusion**

While there are a growing number of decentralized models of student services, having a full-time social work position at the college level for student support is an innovative approach. This innovative model has allowed a focus on student needs specific to the academic units in the college and an increase in the number of students referred for assistance. However, data from this evaluation indicates that students referred to the Student Support Specialist primarily for academic needs may have lower odds of retention than those referred for other issues. One of the reasons may be that students reach the Support Specialist too late to take full advantage of the available resources. However, these findings indicate a need for earlier intervention and increased focus on preventative measures. This may include education on available resources, increased early tutoring and coaching services, and an increased focus on those academic units that refer to a high number of students with academic challenges.

The social work case management model highlights a multi-pronged approach to resource provision in higher education. The benefits of a social work “person in environment” approach to student retention within the college fosters student success and awareness. Students and faculty can reach out to a licensed professional in the college with whom there is regular contact and who is easily accessible. Housing social work practitioners in the college allow the Student Support Specialists to work with the students “where they are.” The recent expansion of these social work roles to additional colleges also allows for a team approach, with the Student Support Specialists meeting regularly to share resources, process cases, and maintain a consistent approach to student-based case management. The specialist with the longest tenure and experience serves as a coordinator for this team, providing additional support and advocacy for the needs of the overall team. Support from administrative leadership creates opportunities for additional resources that may be used to increase a sense of belongingness for students, increase access to emergency funding, and prioritize tutoring and coaching services as part of the case management approach.

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