

LET'S GET READY

New study shows Let's Get's Ready raises retention rates at Southern Maine Community College.

The research firm Mathematica conducted an independent analysis comparing SMCC retention to other community colleges nationally.

From Mathematica's report: Mathematica conducted an external, quasi-experimental analysis of Let's Get Ready (LGR), which provided preliminary evidence that LGR can improve first-year retention rates. The evaluation focused on LGR's impact on students at Southern Maine Community College (SMCC), which adopted the program in 2021 as a campus-wide initiative. The analysis compared the first-year retention rates at SMCC after the introduction of LGR with those at a group of other community colleges. A rigorous statistical approach—known as the "augmented synthetic control method"—created a comparison group of similar colleges that did not have LGR (Ben-Michael, Feller, and Rothstein, 2021), but which reflect similar trends in retention rate to those at SMCC prior to LGR.

To estimate the impact of LGR at SMCC, the evaluation compared retention rates at these similar colleges to those of SMCC students who entered college in 2021 and 2022, after SMCC adopted LGR. In other words, the comparison colleges represent what might have happened during 2021 and 2022 in the absence of LGR, like a control group in a randomized experiment.

Using this approach, the evaluation estimated that LGR increased first-year retention rates by 2.5 percentage points. This impact was statistically significant at the 5 percent level, suggesting that it would be unlikely to find an estimate as big from chance alone. This effect is relative to a baseline first-year retention rate of 53 percentage points at SMCC in 2020, the year before SMCC adopted LGR. The magnitude of this impact is notable given the modest estimated cost per student per year reported by LGR. The evaluation explored several other ways of looking at the data to help make sure the conclusions still hold up, including using alternative comparison groups and statistical methods. These additional analyses generally found positive impacts on first-year retention rates, ranging from 0.8 to 5.6 percentage points. Not all estimates were statistically significant, which could be due to a range of factors, including smaller sample sizes that sometimes do not provide a clear enough picture to estimate the impact with certainty.



A 2.5 point increase in one year is a very meaningful success, especially for a low-cost, easily scalable program like LGR.

Mathematica's rigorous, quasi-experimental design provides important evidence of Let's Get Ready's impact, especially considering that the augmented synthetic control method is recognized as one of the most robust approaches available short of a randomized controlled trial.

A 2.5 percentage-point increase in first-year retention represents notably meaningful progress in higher education and especially in the community college environment. Retention rates are notoriously difficult to shift. Large-scale, well-funded initiatives often produce only one- to three-point gains, with many showing no observable impact despite years of sustained work (e.g., Page et al., 2024; Rossman et al., 2023; Tippetts et al., 2022). National data from 2004 to 2017 show that community college retention improved by just about five points over that entire thirteen-year period despite substantial institutional investment (Monaghan & Sommers, 2021). In this context, a 2.5-point improvement at SMCC within the first year of a new program is both statistically and practically significant.

STUDENT IMPACT

The importance of the LGR's impact is clear: First-year retention is one of the strongest predictors of whether students will eventually complete a degree or certificate, but stopping out carries lasting financial consequences. Without an associate degree, workers earn roughly 20% less each year (about $10,000 less annually) than their peers who graduate. Over a lifetime, that adds up to $400,000 *per student* in lost earnings and opportunity (Carnevale et al., 2021). The decision to stop out often becomes permanent, limiting access to stable employment, career mobility, and financial security. The impact of persisting through college extends beyond financial benefits. Research shows that college completion is linked to overall wellbeing, life satisfaction, and better mental health (Faas et al., 2018). Each additional student who persists represents not just progress toward a degree, but also toward higher earnings, greater stability, and expanded life opportunities.



INSTITUTIONAL IMPACT

Attrition also creates substantial losses for colleges. One study estimated nearly $850,000 in lost tuition revenue over five years from just 136 students leaving early, or about $6,200 per student (Gonzalez, 2022). More intensive completion programs can cost over $4,000 per student (Evans et al., 2020), while Let's Get Ready's virtual, lighter-touch model achieves measurable, statistically significant impact at an annual average cost of approximately $100 per college student. Achieving a measurable, statistically significant gain with such a lean model has real-world impact that is rare in the postsecondary success space and underscores the program's potential for scalability.

A 2.5 percentage-point increase in retention represents meaningful success and a solid foundation for broader implementation, especially for a program that is low-cost and so easily scalable.

References

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