

Politics & Policy

Single Stop USA Connects College Students With Free Money

By [Karen Weise](#) on August 08, 2013

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On the morning of Turner Gray's English 201 final at the Borough of Manhattan Community College last spring, a city marshal evicted her and her two kids from their Bronx apartment. She'd fallen behind on rent after the city cut off her welfare because it mistakenly thought she wasn't working. Money troubles had forced Gray to quit school once before. This time she had somewhere to turn for help. Gray went to her school's Single Stop USA office, where a worker lined up emergency funds from BMCC and, after days of phone calls and paperwork, helped sort out the misunderstanding with the city. "I was back in my apartment in a week and a half," Gray says.

Every year as many as 30 percent of the low-income students at the U.S.'s 1,200 community colleges drop out, often because they can't afford to stay in. Quitting is especially problematic for those who take out loans for a degree they'll never get. Single Stop links students with the more than \$65 billion in government services and benefits that McKinsey estimates go unclaimed each year. The organization's staff figures out which programs students qualify for and then helps them enroll. On average clients eligible for additional benefits collect at least \$5,400 a year. "You are doubling the Pell Grant," says Sara Goldrick-Rab, a sociology professor at the University of Wisconsin at Madison who's studying the program. "That's real money."

The Robin Hood Foundation, an antipoverty group in New York, launched Single Stop in 2001 to help the poor at food pantries and shelters. Then in 2007, Elisabeth Mason, a managing director at the foundation, looked for ways to take it national and decided to focus on community colleges. By 2009 the program had opened its first college office in Brooklyn; today it works at 17 schools in seven states. In the past three years the nonprofit says it has connected almost 63,000 students with \$121 million worth of benefits, tax refunds, and other services. Although its reach is still small, Goldrick-Rab found that Single Stop's New York programs are on track to reduce dropout rates by 20 percent to 30 percent. That would be "quite a sizable and meaningful" effect if the results hold up over the long term, Goldrick-Rab says. "Research shows it's really hard to move the dial for this population." Eduardo Padrón, president of Miami Dade College, the U.S.'s largest community college, calls Single Stop "the most effective and efficient program that we've ever had."

Technology and the will of the staff are crucial to the group's early success, and just as critical to its staying power. Single Stop contracts for services with other nonprofits so it can offer legal and financial counseling. Most sites have only two full-time employees who work as one-on-one case managers for students. On a recent afternoon at the BMCC office, a staffer helped a family answer the 15-question worksheet that Single Stop runs through its proprietary software to see what benefits a student could collect. Another student discussed credit card debt with a financial planner, while a woman with cerebral palsy got help applying for Social Security Disability Insurance.

The high-touch approach has so far limited Single Stop's reach on any given campus. "Our sites are quite voluminous if you compare them to many nonprofit efforts, but they are still drops in the bucket," Mason says. Her goal: expand by targeting students before emergencies strike. The nonprofit will try that at a Miami Dade campus this fall. All new students enrolling online will be prompted to fill out Single Stop's worksheet

and be guided through benefits enrollment if they qualify.

In her preliminary study of the organization's New York sites, Goldrick-Rab found that while Single Stop clients are more likely to stay in school than their peers, as many as a quarter still drop out each year. Housing is often too expensive, and few government programs exist to help alleviate the crunch. Mason says she knows the nonprofit can't fix every problem, but still hopes its approach spreads: "You can imagine in 15 years this being part and parcel of what colleges do as the normal course of business."

***The bottom line:** Single Stop USA helps college students get government benefits and may cut dropout rates by up to 30 percent.*

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