Academic Recovery Evidence Brief

Outcomes, Impact, and Return on Investment from a Multi-Campus Initiative to Improve Gateway Course Success

11 public research universities

1,444 students served

102 course offerings

68% vs 54%

Pass rate for Academic Recovery students vs. students retaking without support

UNIVERSITY INNOVATION ALLIANCE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Academic Recovery demonstrates that targeted, well-designed supports in high-risk gateway courses can materially improve student progression at scale. Across 11 public research universities, the initiative reached more than 1,400 students who had previously failed critical courses—students who are disproportionately first-generation, Pell-eligible, Black, and Hispanic.

Students who participated in Academic Recovery were substantially more likely to pass their course on retake than peers who retook without support. In several courses, Academic Recovery students passed at rates comparable to or higher than students taking the course for the first time.

The Bottom Line

Academic Recovery is one of the clearest examples of how targeted, institutionally embedded interventions can change student trajectories at scale.

It combines academic rigor with practical support, reaches students with the highest risk of stopping out, and delivers measurable improvements in course completion.

The evidence suggests this is not only effective, but essential infrastructure for improving graduation outcomes.

Scale and Scope

Academic Recovery moved quickly from concept to multi-campus implementation. This is no longer a pilot—it is a coordinated, multi-institution intervention operating across diverse institutional contexts.

Participating Institutions

- Arizona State University
- Georgia State University
- North Carolina A&T State University
- Oregon State University
- Purdue University
- University of California, Riverside
- University of Central Florida
- University of Colorado Denver
- University of Illinois Chicago
- University of Utah
- Virginia Commonwealth University

Implementation Timeline

The initiative launched in Summer 2023 and continued through Fall 2024, with campuses implementing across summer intensive, fall/spring full-term, and quarter-system models. Courses spanned math, science, introductory seminars, and other high-risk gateway requirements.

Who Academic Recovery Reached

Academic Recovery reached students with the greatest risk of non-completion—by design, not by chance. Compared to the overall population enrolled in target courses, Academic Recovery students were:

- **Significantly more likely to be Black or Hispanic**
- **More likely to be first-generation college students**
- **More likely to be Pell-eligible**
- **More likely to be female**

These patterns were consistent across institutions and years.

Fair by Design

Academic Recovery is not capturing the easiest students to serve. Campuses deployed this intervention where the risk is highest and where failure most often leads to stopping out.

This alignment between need and investment is a key indicator of program integrity and equity commitment.

Core Outcomes: Course Retake Success

The strongest and most consistent finding is improvement in course retake outcomes.

68% | **Pass rate WITH Academic Recovery**

54% | **Pass rate WITHOUT Academic Recovery**

This represents a difference of roughly 14–17 percentage points, depending on year and course mix. While students self-select into the program, the magnitude and consistency of the difference across institutions and courses strongly suggests that the structure and support matter.

Course Redesign, Not Remediation

One of the most important insights is that Academic Recovery is not simply helping students "try again." In several courses, students in Academic Recovery passed at rates comparable to or higher than students taking the course for the first time.

A Critical Reframe

When designed well, recovery functions as an intentional learning environment that addresses known barriers—not a second-chance version of the same experience.

This opens the door to institutional learning about pedagogy, course structure, and student support design that benefits all students.

Retention and Persistence Signals

Course failure in gateway courses is one of the strongest predictors of non-completion. Improving retake success directly improves credit momentum, time to degree, and persistence.

Among students who passed their Academic Recovery course, approximately two-thirds persisted into the following term. Early cohorts showed very high persistence, with later-year data still maturing due to academic calendar timing.

VCU Case Study: Demonstrating ROI

Virginia Commonwealth University provides the clearest evidence of financial return on investment:

Metric	Result
Participant retention rate	80% (vs. 53% for non-participants)
Retention-based revenue gains	$208,000
Net gain after program expenses	≈ $128,000
Dose-response effect	Students with ≥5 coaching sessions showed materially better outcomes

THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH

University of Utah Case Study: Transforming Pass Rates

The University of Utah's U Succeed program combined targeted recruitment, inclusive pedagogy, and embedded supports into a cohesive course-level model:

Metric	Result
Increase in passing students	**Nearly 70% more passing students**
DFW rate reduction	**Cut from ~100% to 33%**
Retention differential	AR students who passed: 11 pts higher than AR students who didn't; 8 pts higher than non-AR students

Pre/post surveys showed the program meaningfully increased students' academic confidence. Faculty voluntarily expanded their roles and partnered with department leaders to institutionalize changes.

Why This Model Works

Academic Recovery works because it intervenes at the right moment, with the right combination of supports. This is not a generic student support program—it is a precision intervention aimed at one of the most expensive failure points in higher education.

The Model Is Powerful Because It:

Targets Known Choke Points
Focuses on high-enrollment, high-DFW gateway courses that block degree progression

Bundles Critical Supports
Combines course redesign, tutoring, coaching, and affordability in one intervention

Reduces Friction
Removes financial and logistical barriers for students already off track

Creates Institutional Learning
Generates insights about which course designs work best for all students

Limitations and What Remains Unknown

Academic Recovery generated strong evidence of course-level success and short-term persistence, but limitations remain. We present these transparently:

- Selection bias is possible, as participating students may differ from non-participants in motivation or other characteristics
- Implementation fidelity varied across campuses
- Some Year 3 outcome data is lagging due to academic calendar timing
- Longer-term impacts on graduation and post-college outcomes are still being tracked

These limitations directly informed the design of subsequent phases focused on prevention and stronger causal analysis.

Implications for Investment

The evaluation supports three clear conclusions:

1	**This work is worth continuing.**	The scale, reach, and outcomes justify further investment.
2	**The next phase should focus on refinement and replication.**	The strongest-performing courses and institutions should inform a more focused model.
3	**Academic recovery is a systems strategy, not a temporary fix.**	With refinement, this approach can become part of how institutions routinely address DFW courses—even after grant funding ends.

Looking Ahead

The learning generated through Academic Recovery now serves as a foundation for broader, more preventative approaches.

If these supports work so well after failure, why wait until students fail to offer them at all?

The next phase will test proactive interventions that can reach thousands more students while maintaining fidelity to what students and data have shown actually works.

This evidence brief is part of the Academic Recovery document suite.