

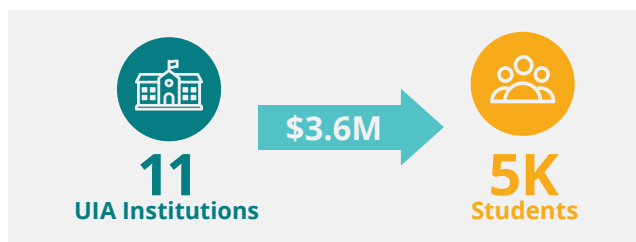
Completion Grants Playbook

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Completion grants and other forms of emergency aid have emerged as a promising way to help students overcome financial difficulties and continue their journey to graduation. The COVID-19 crisis brought even more attention to the importance of helping students navigate sudden financial hurdles. While the federal government intervened to provide aid to students struggling through the pandemic, most ongoing emergency aid comes from institutions and philanthropic supporters eager to find proven, tangible, and replicable ways to help more students graduate.

Inspired by the promise of completion grants, the University Innovation Alliance (UIA) undertook a multi-year completion grant initiative designed to increase retention and completion rates among first-generation students, low-income students, and students of color. Two UIA member institutions had already demonstrated success with completion grants. In 2011, Georgia State University (GSU) introduced the [Panther Retention Grant](#), which provides relatively modest aid to eliminate or reduce student account balances and allow students to remain enrolled in the university and graduate. Following the initial success of the Panther Retention Grant, the University of Central Florida (UCF) implemented a similar effort—the [Knights Success Grant](#)—building on the lessons learned at Georgia State.

Successfully scaling and transferring student success innovations is at the core of the UIA's work. With financial support from Ascendium Education Group and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 11 universities participated in the completion grant program. Over the course of three full academic years, the 11 UIA institutions combined to provide \$3.6 million in completion grants to nearly 5,000 students. The average grant award was \$741, with the average grant across institutions ranging from \$423 to \$1,000. Eighty-three percent of these students completed their degree or remain enrolled at their university.



Consistent with the UIA's mission of sharing the group's experiences to accelerate the adoption of student success innovations, UIA institutions worked together to produce this playbook. While the parameters for UIA completion grant eligibility were identical across all institutions, each university established its own processes around why, when, and how to award completion grants. By drawing on these varied experiences, we aim to highlight questions that other universities should consider when assessing a completion grant for their own campus, elevate practices that were effective, and show how our universities overcame certain challenges.

Within each section, we have identified key issues for institutions to consider and included examples from UIA campuses. We have also included specific action steps universities can take as they work through the process of introducing completion grant to their campus. The playbook explores several recommendations in greater depth:

Understand Institutional Barriers and Student Financial Needs

- Review institutional drop for nonpayment and hold policies
- Talk to students about their financial expectations
- Analyze how and when students pay their bills, or have trouble doing so
- Be aware that students with the lowest income may not have the highest unmet need
- Look beyond the student account
- Assess need in summer terms
- Consider the unique needs of transfer students
- See the completion grant as part of the larger aid framework

Design and Implement the Grant Awarding Process

- Establish communication and share data among offices
- Determine the timing of awards
- Define time to degree and satisfactory academic progress
- Decide whether to award automatically or invite applications
- Consider whether to require students to meet with advisors

Evaluate and Share Outcomes

- Build evaluation into your implementation plan
- Communicate with university leaders and external audiences

While this playbook does not delve into every decision made across all 11 universities, it does identify and explain shared challenges, solutions, and other experiences. We hope it helps other institutions replicate successful practices, avoid some challenges that UIA campuses experienced, and develop a deeper understanding of how a completion grant might be implemented most effectively on their campus. For the complete playbook, please visit: <https://completiongrants.theuia.org>.