

Metro Lowers Cost per Graduate at a University and a Community College



Summary

Metro is a program founded in 2007 by a long-standing partnership of San Francisco State University (SF State) and City College of San Francisco (City College). It is a redesign of the first two years of college to increase bachelor's graduation rates, and at the community college, completion of associate degrees and transfer. Metro's outreach focuses on high school graduates who are low-income, first-generation and/or underrepresented.

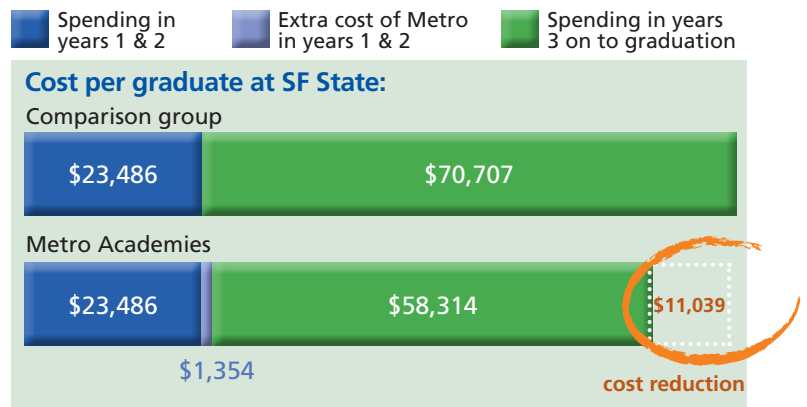
With modest additional costs, Metro has been able to sharply improve student outcomes during this critical time window when the data show that very large numbers of students would otherwise drop out. Metro organizes students into academies of up to 140 students at SF State and 120 at City College. Metro's distinguishing feature is that students participate in a long-duration cohort, creating a personalized educational home with peers, faculty and a counselor who know them well.

By making a small extra investment on the front end—the first two years of college—institutions can realize large cost reductions on the back end.

Less attrition + timely graduation = cost reduction

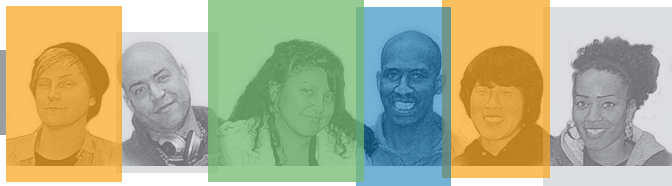
Metro students strongly outperform their more advantaged peers in graduation rates and time to degree, despite the fact that most initially placed at "double remedial" in English and math. Metro sharply reduces attrition and extra units that do not count towards graduation—known in the literature as "excess units." Once these hidden costs are factored in, it becomes clear that Metro is substantially less expensive per graduate than current practice.

At SF State: Metro requires an additional investment of \$677 per student per year for two years—a 5.8% increase—yet reduces overall costs per graduate by 12%, or \$11,039, leveraging each dollar of investment more than 8 times. Throughout the CSU, the most common time to graduation is now six years. In contrast, for most Metro students, a full year is shaved off, with more than half of Metro students graduating in five years. Metro students also save on average, one year of tuition and earn an extra year of wages.



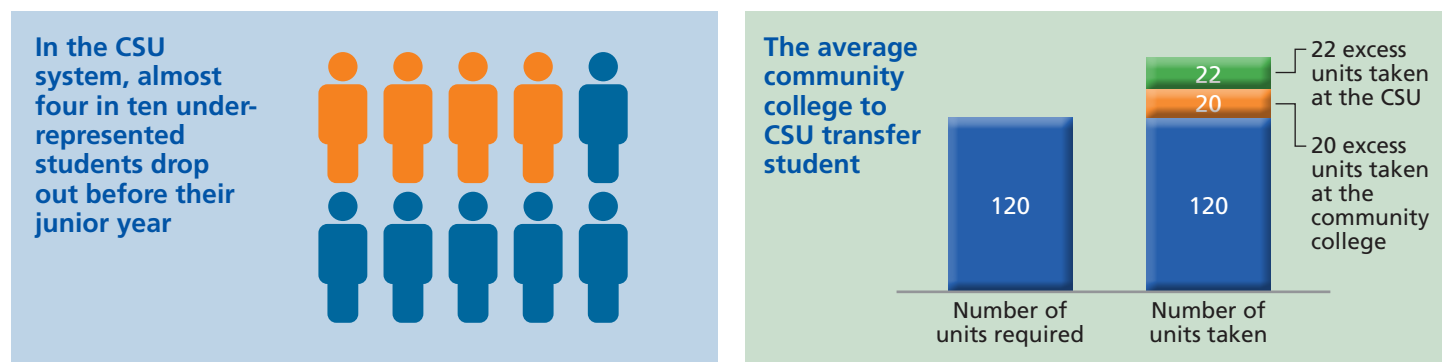
At City College: Metro requires an additional investment of \$790 per student per year for two years—an 8.5% increase—yet reduces overall costs by \$24,088 per completer (graduation and/or transfer), leveraging each dollar of investment more than 15 times. Having been through a well-aligned curriculum and arriving as fully-junior-ready transfer students, City College Metro students who transfer to SF State earn their bachelor's degree on average in only two years, rather than the typical three years.





Problems

The research literature shows that there are very substantial hidden costs in current practice: attrition, students taking courses off path, course repetition, and delayed time to degree. Extra units that do not count toward graduation is one important reason for delayed completion, especially for community college students. Students may enroll in off-path courses when they have poor access to academic advising, change majors or when the courses they need are not available and they enroll in random courses to maintain their financial aid eligibility. Students also accrue extra units when their community college courses are later not accepted at the California State University, a problem increasingly being addressed through Associate Degrees for Transfer. For the community college system, the Legislative Analyst's Office estimated the cost to California of excess units at \$160 million per year. Too often these losses are accepted as inevitable. Metro is demonstrating that with a coherent long-duration program aligned across the segments, underrepresented students can succeed.



Methodology

The technical expert on this study was Dr. Robert Johnstone of the National Center for Inquiry and Improvement, with a review of methods by national cost expert Jane Wellman. Dr. Johnstone used the pro forma model, an approach that has been used to analyze the cost efficiency of many educational programs in California Community Colleges since 2005. This study identified the annual spending on Metro and non-Metro students and calculated average time to degree for both groups, using program operating budgets from the 2016-17 academic year and institutional data on costs and student outcomes. At both institutions, we compared outcomes for Metro students to those for non-Metro students matched by Institutional Research on many variables. For more info on Metro student outcomes and the comparison group, see [Metro's annual data flyer](#).

Metro program features and scale-up

In addition to the long-duration cohort, students take a "home base" general education class together each term over four semesters, with student services tied to this class (e.g. tutoring, counseling and financial aid reminders). Other classes are also set aside for Metro students, who are able to satisfy GE grad requirements in all 289 majors in the CSU as well as the UC. Each cohort has a coordinator who follows students over time, assuring that no student falls between the cracks. Metro also provides a faculty learning community to support instructors to master engaging and relevant pedagogies. By 2019, there will be 18 Metro Academies operating at SF State and City College (14 at SF State, four at City College).

Conclusion

Data on outcomes and cost indicate that the Metro model holds promise to cost efficiently increase college success and degree completion for low-income, first-generation and underrepresented students. By investing a small amount on the front end—the first two years of college—institutions can realize a much larger cost reduction per graduate on the back end. Often during tight budget periods, institutions understandably develop a default stance: "We can't afford any new expense." However, once the current high costs of attrition and excess units are brought into view, the question shifts fundamentally: Can we afford *not* to strengthen the support we give California's young people, allowing more students to cross the finish line to graduation?