

EVALUATION OF AUSTIN COMMUNITY  
COLLEGE'S STRENGTHENING  
INSTITUTIONS PROGRAM GRANT  
ANNUAL IMPLEMENTATION EVALUATION REPORT



RAY MARSHALL CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF HUMAN RESOURCES

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# **Evaluation of Austin Community College’s Strengthening Institutions Program Grant**

IMPLEMENTATION EVALUATION REPORT THROUGH JULY, 2020

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# INTRODUCTION

## OVERVIEW

The U.S. Department of Education awarded Austin Community College (ACC) a \$1.7 million Strengthening Institutions Program (SIP) grant to develop programs to help students understand smart money management and college financing. The grant, “Achieving Student Success through Financial Aid Education and Financial Literacy,” funds the activities of the Student Money Management Office (SMMO) to teach students about money management and to help the ACC community understand the connection between students’ academic and financial goals. The objectives of the SMM program were to 1) establish a system of sending text message alerts about financial aid requirements and deadlines, 2) promote awareness of financial literacy through outreach and education for students and professional development for faculty and staff, and 3) enhancements to the web-based Degree Map planning tool to provide personalized real-time financial aid information.<sup>1</sup> SMMO leadership consistently applied a continuous improvement model to ongoing activities which naturally led to both the modification of some planned activities as well as the inclusion of additional elements of student financial guidance and supports.

Despite the relative affordability of community college research has identified financial challenges as one of the factors influencing student persistence and retention (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Indeed, fewer than 40 percent of community college students complete a certificate or degree within six years of enrollment (Bailey, et al. 2015). Individuals who do not complete training to achieve a certification or an Associate’s Degree experience lower earning potential than those achieving these educational goals (Belfield & Bailey, 2017). The local Austin Metro Area anticipates job growth in industries requiring at a minimum, a middle-skill credential (Cumpton, Juniper, & Patnaik, 2019). Consequently, education beyond a High School Diploma or GED has become the path to financial wellbeing for most families. Students facing financial challenges are making decisions regarding how many classes to enroll in, and balancing study time with work and family responsibilities. For some students an unanticipated financial need may influence their capacity to persist in their educational goal. The theory of change leveraged by the SMMO

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<sup>1</sup> Degree Map, an easy to use web-based application, allows students to chart their education goals, plan class schedules, track progress toward completion, and remain better informed about degree requirements, time involved, and cost.

program focuses on the need to connect students to information to promote their financial wellness; connecting students to information and resources should increase their financial wellbeing and increase the likelihood that students will persist to achieve their educational goals.

ACC's SMMO utilized several approaches to increase student access to and utilization of financial information.

- 1) Providing financial aid information to students (e.g., through the texting intervention);
- 2) Developing student financial habits and supports (e.g., through the Rainy Day program);
- 3) Increasing connections across ACC programs for direct supports (e.g., the Emergency Use Fund) and to increase the number of students served; and,
- 4) Increasing the sense of community among participating students.

These varied approaches were intended to allow students multiple access platforms, different programs targeting specific aspects of financial information (e.g., budgeting, and saving), and direct access to potential aid (through FAFSA and the Emergency Use Fund). Students identified an unexpected benefit of SMMO reaching out through two-way texting, a sense of personal connection to SMMO staff and through it, Austin Community College.

ACC hopes to demonstrate that the activities of SMMO will be linked to improvements in measures of student success such as graduation rate, time to completion, retention/persistence, and cohort loan default rate (CDR). ACC partners with the Ray Marshall Center (RMC), an organized research unit in the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas, to perform impact evaluations on the effectiveness of SMMO program efforts on the student outcome measures of interest, as well as a project implementation evaluation.

## **EVALUATION DESIGN**

The SMMO implementation study seeks to document the evolution of the program from the initial development and implementation starting in July 2016, continuing throughout the duration of the five-year program grant period. The growth and refinement of the SMMO program is a key focus area for the implementation evaluation. This study examines modifications in program design in order to understand how and why changes were made. The documentation of the program's evolution over time may help to inform the development of other community college student money management efforts.

Previous RMC reports from the ACC SMMO implementation and impact evaluation are available on the Ray Marshall Center website at [raymarshallcenter.org](http://raymarshallcenter.org). This report, the fourth report of the five-year grant cycle, examines the implementation and evolution of the program throughout the grant period. This report outlines the progress of key initiatives, describes data-driven project modifications, and project refinements in response to the needs of the participants being served and to improve program efficiency. This report also includes information pertinent to how ACC in general, and the SMMO program in particular, responded to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

This report will present findings related to each of the following research questions:

1. What progress has SMMO made in the implementation of the project stated objective?
2. How has SMMO changed over time and why?
3. What program and institutional factors contribute to or impede program goal implementation?

The implementation study draws on multiple sources of data to answer these questions: the ACC and SMMO websites, the SMMO Advisory Committee reports, interviews with program staff, Peer Money Mentor focus group responses, SMMO social media platforms, and various SMMO program reports and documents.

## **REPORT ORGANIZATION**

This report presents detailed information regarding the implementation of specific initiatives, key modifications made during the reporting period, and factors that impede or support the program in meeting the stated objectives. The first section of this report discusses SMMO text messaging interventions, continuing campaigns, and collaborative efforts; followed by a section describing two student engagement programs: Peer Money Mentors and Rainy Day Saving. The next section describes additional SMMO financial literacy education, services, and outreach activities. The final section of this report provides a summary discussion including information on sustainability efforts, options, and opportunities.

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<sup>2</sup> By March 30, 2020, all ACC student support services were transitioned to online and campuses were closed for all nonessential activities.

## Student Money Management Project Mission

The Student Money Management Office supports Austin Community College student success by providing accessible and relevant money management education, enabling student to make informed financial decisions.

### TEXT MESSAGING INTERVENTIONS

Research has demonstrated that a well-timed text message or “nudge” can help students’ follow-through with their intentions and make progress toward their goals (Castleman & Meyer, 2016). The principles of nudging emerged from the field of behavioral economics to help people navigate complex decisions like the ones students struggle with in college. Text message nudges designed to focus students’ attention on immediate issues such as registration deadlines and FASFA completion are being used by a number of colleges across the country. Castleman and Page (2016) found first-year community college students who received text messages through a financial aid text message campaign were nearly 12 percentage points more likely to persist into the fall of their sophomore year compared to community college freshmen who did not receive the texts. San Francisco State University (SFSU) launched a campaign to increase student retention rates that included 11 text messages sent to newly enrolled students throughout their first semester. Text messages reminded students of important deadlines for registration and financial aid, and encouraged students to maintain their goals and remember their aspirations. SFSU students enrolled in the Metro Academies College Success Program, a program designed to support students at high risk for dropping out of college, experienced a 10 percent increase in retention rates compared to control group students (idea 42, 2016).

Text messaging campaigns are the central component of the SMMO strategy to support students to be successful at ACC. RMC’s analysis of ACC’s text message intervention focused on financial wellness found large positive impacts on fall-to-fall retention among first-time in college (FTIC), credential seeking students. Students who received the text messages were 10 percentage points more likely to return to ACC in the fall of their second year of college, compared to students who did not receive the text messaging intervention (Patnaik & Cumpton, 2020). Table 1 identifies the different text messaging campaigns initiated or coordinated by SMMO staff, the intervention target population, and the collaborating individuals or departments. The remainder of this section provides information on the

elements and procedures of the text messaging intervention and additional details for each of the interventions listed in Table 1.

**Table 1. SMMO Text Messaging Interventions**

Intervention	Target Students	Collaborators
Financial wellness information	Students attending Area of Study (AOS) sessions and Student Success classes	Area of Study and Student Success Instructors
Reinforcing financial wellness information presented in AOS and Student Success classes	Students attending AOS and Student Success classes	N/A
Inform eligible students about support services	Students eligible for support services	Student Services Office
Scavenger Hunt for financial aid information	All students	Financial Aid Office
Loan Information Workshop follow-up	Students participating in a loan information workshop	Financial Aid Office
Financial aid information	Students receiving and eligible for financial aid	Financial Aid office

#### TEXT MESSAGING ELEMENTS AND PROCEDURES

The first text message in a series always asks each student to confirm their interest in receiving the text messages. This process eliminates inactive numbers and establishes the students' continued interest in receiving the messages. This step lowers the number of participants, reducing the texting implementation cost.<sup>3</sup> Further, at the beginning of each academic year, SMMO sent a message to the previous year participants asking students to reconfirm their interest in continuing to receive text messages.

SMMO staff selected Signal Vine, a two-way text messaging platform, to distribute the series of messages. Phone numbers were loaded into the text service provider in waves. Early in the process of using the platform a number of issues were identified, researched, and resolved with procedures put in place to ensure smooth use of the platform going forward. Primarily, to ensure messages are being sent and the platform is working as expected, staff log into Signal Vine in real-time as the text messages are being sent to monitor the process. The time frame for the Signal Vine system to distribute a text message for a large group is typically four hours. Staff tracked student clicks on web-based information links provided in text messages using Bitly, a link management platform that provides a shortened web

<sup>3</sup> Signal Vine, the text message service, charges a per phone number fee.

address to serve as a pointer to another web address.

Table 2 presents the combined number of students confirming consent to receive text messages during each academic year for all texting projects. During the 2018-2019 academic year, 13,483 ACC students participated in text messaging campaigns initiated by SMMO staff or developed in collaboration with other student services—a threefold increase in student participation from the previous years. The increase in student participation was primarily driven by the institutionalization of a new ACC Administrative Rule (the Rule). In Spring 2019, the Rule allowed departments interested in sending students text messages to use the ACC Colleague student information data management system to access student phone numbers to text students without receiving prior written consent.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 2. Student Consent to Text Messages**

Academic Year	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020
Confirmed Consent Total	3,065	4,244	13,483	11,241

Note: The first text message sent asks students to reconfirm their decision to receive SMMO text messages by responding with “yes” or “no”.

The Rule requires the initial text must include a clear opt-out option and alleviates the demands of seeking paper consent forms. Eliminating manual data entry, the Rule lowered the risk of error in transcribing phone numbers into the system; and eliminates the lag between the time students sign forms, and the time their information is uploaded into the texting platform. Although the use of the Colleague system decreases the risk of human error in data entry, there is no way to determine if the phone numbers in the system are current, active student phone numbers.

Throughout the project, SMMO text messages were developed and refined using a wealth of information staff obtained from their research on student responses to different text message styles. Taylor and Serna (2018) report that text message enhancements such as including the student name, sender name, providing a link to something specific (such as a specific grant rather than a general information site), and adding a picture all receive more student responses than those that did not include these enhancements. SMMO also evaluated different times for sending messages and determined that students are likely to respond to messages sent between 10 a.m. and 8 p.m.; furthermore, staff discovered that students have no concerns with receiving text messages from school

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<sup>4</sup> To review the ACC student text messaging rule see: <https://www.austincc.edu/admrule/3.05.007.pdf>

as late as 11:30 p.m.<sup>5</sup>

## FINANCIAL WELLNESS

The original text message recruitment plan relied on two primary venues for ACC students to opt-in to receive SMMO text messages, the Area of Study (AOS) information sessions, and the Student Success courses. Students who signed a project consent form opted-in to received up to 18 messages covering nine topics relevant to financial wellbeing, including the following: important dates and deadlines regarding class registration, tuition payments and financial aid applications; information on scholarship opportunities and the Peer Money Mentor Program; links to the ACC's job board, a financial education program platform for tracking student loans, and an instructional videos on completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA); as well as information on available workshops on transferring to a four-year college or university.<sup>6</sup> Students were also recruited to opt-in to receive text messages at tabling events and through the SMMO website. When a virtual workshop was created in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, only 15 of the originally scheduled 60 sessions accessed the material, decreasing student participation from 761 students in April of 2019, to 88 students in April of 2020.<sup>7</sup> Following is a brief description of the AOS session and Student Success courses followed by descriptions of project elements, procedures, and collaborations.

### *Area of Study*

The two hour AOS information sessions introduce students to advisors who present an overview of ACC programs and information relevant to the students' chosen area of study. Prior to the beginning of the fall semester, AOS advisors received training on the SMMO program and texting project. When the texting project was initially rolled-out, in-person AOS sessions presented information on the text messaging program and distributed consent forms for students to opt-in to receive SMMO texts. As virtual AOS sessions became available fewer students attended face-to-face sessions. Although the AOS online sessions provided information on the texting program, few students returned

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<sup>5</sup> To review the content of the A/B text message research series see this report, *Evaluation of Austin Community College's Strengthening Institutions Program Grant: Implementation Evaluation Findings Through July 2018* at: <https://raymarshallcenter.org/2018/11/13/evaluation-of-austin-community-colleges-strengthening-institutions-program-grant-implementation-evaluation-findings-through-july-2018/>

<sup>6</sup> To review the content of first text message series see Appendix A this report, *Austin Community College Student Money Management – Implementation Evaluation: Program Description and Timeline: 2016-2017* at: <https://raymarshallcenter.org/files/2017/09/Final-ACC-SIP-Implementation-Evaluation-2016-2017.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Information from a conversation with SMMO Director, Karen Serna in May of 2020.

consent forms.

### *Student Success*

A second text message reach-out, the Taking Control of Your Money workshop, was offered through the Student Success courses (EDUC 1300 and SDEV 0111). EDUC 1300 is a three-credit course required for all students who have completed less than 12 semester hours. The course provides information to help students succeed at ACC and most students complete the course during their first semester. SDEV 0111 is a one-credit, eight-week mandatory college transition course for incoming students with difficulty passing two or more of the assessment tests. Primarily, the EDUC 1300 instructors scheduled the workshop. Instructors request a presentation by completing a form available on the SMMO website and scheduling was coordinated by the SMMO administrative assistant. While SMMO staff did not have the capacity to present in all Student Success sections, throughout this reporting period staff presented to over 800 Student Success sections reaching nearly 15,000 students, representing as many as 90 percent of the sections each year. In Spring 2020, due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Student Success courses were transitioned to online learning with a virtual Taking Control of Your Money workshop. Similarly to the student response to the AOS virtual presentations, few students returned consent forms.

### **REINFORCING IN-CLASS PRESENTATION CONTENT**

In addition to opting into receiving text messages, Taking Control of Your Money workshop participants were also offered the opportunity to opt-in to receive a text message follow-up survey designed to reinforce the information presented in the workshop. During the workshop, students were asked to fill out a survey to report personal financial behavior regarding budgeting, credit history, and financial aid. The follow-up survey text messages were sent three and six months post-presentation. Table 3 presents the student self-report rate of change for the three financial behaviors measured in the original in-class survey.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Typically, over 700 students agree to receive the follow-up text messages: representing approximately 20% of students participating in the workshops; however, fewer than 100 students responded to the follow-up survey.

**Table 3. Presentation Follow-Up Survey Responses: Rate of Behavior Change by Cohort**

Survey Questions	Cohorts		
	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020
Do you have a budget? (written down)	+8%	+5%	+10%
Have you applied for any scholarships within the past 6 months?	+16%	-13%	+28%
Have you checked your credit report in the past 12 months?	+17%	+1%	+31%

Sources: Student Follow-Up Survey Reports 2017 & 2018; 2018-2019 Academic Year SMMO Annual Report  
 Note: Numbers are rounded.

In the 2019-2020 academic year, staff replaced the personal finance behavior survey questions with the following: 1) Would you like us to contact you regarding your options for meeting with a financial coach? Yes / No; and 2) What other money topics would you like more information about? (see Appendix A: Classroom Survey). Student responses to these two questions and how the responses were used by staff are discussed later in this report.

The remainder of this report section describes the various text messaging intervention collaborations SMMO implemented throughout the program.

**COLLABORATIONS**

Campus organizations collaborating with SMMO staff to send students text messages must submit the messages for approval to both SMMO staff and the collaborating department’s assistant vice president. All messages are evaluated by SMMO staff to support the use of best practices and to ensure messages meet FERPA guidelines. Departments are also required to submit a timeline for text release. Collaborations with the ACC Financial Aid Office began in 2017-2018 and the Student Support Center collaboration began in the 2018-2019 academic year. Both collaborations continued through the 2019-2020 academic year.

***Student Support Center***

During Summer 2017, SMMO staff began working with the Student Support Center to send a six week series of text messages encouraging students identified as eligible to access services to, connect with their on-campus advocate; apply for utility assistance; and complete the FAFSA and

the Support Center application for the following academic year.<sup>9</sup> Nearly half of the students receiving the initial text message opted-in. The Manager of Special Support & Grants, Special Populations, managed the text messaging for this group of students and responded to any requests or questions from students.

### *Financial Aid Office*

#### *Scavenger Hunt*

During the Fall 2017 and 2018 semesters, SMMO coordinated with Financial Aid staff to implement a text message scavenger hunt to educate students about financial aid deadlines and requirements, as well as encourage FAFSA completion. Participating students received eight two-way text message questions (most answers could be researched on-line), and received an automatic response for correct answers or a manual response from staff if the answer was incorrect. In Fall 2018, 328 students participated in the scavenger hunt, an increase in participation compared to Fall 2017 with 286 student participants (SMMO Annual Report, 2019; and Serna & Taylor, 2018).

#### *Loan Information Workshop*

This project, implemented in the 2018-2019 year, sent follow-up text messages to students after they participated in a Loan Information Workshop—465 students participated. Loan Information workshop participation is required of students borrowing a Federal Direct Student Loan for the first time at ACC.

### *Financial Aid Services*

During the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 academic years, SMMO collaborated with the Financial Aid Office staff to offer students text messages relevant to financial aid, scholarships, payment deadlines, and registration dates.<sup>10</sup> A key innovation of this series of text messages was the introduction of a follow-up opt-in text. Students who did not respond to the first opt-in text received a follow-up opt-in text the day after the initial message was sent. The follow-up text increased the overall response rate

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<sup>9</sup> Students eligible for Support Center services have a zero family contribution on the FAFSA. Support Center Advocates coordinate additional student supports such as assistance with text books, child care and utility assistance.

<sup>10</sup> To review the content of the financial aid text message series see this report, *Evaluation of Austin Community College's Strengthening Institutions Program Grant: Implementation Evaluation Findings Through July 2019* at: <https://raymarshallcenter.org/2020/01/28/evaluation-of-austin-community-colleges-strengthening-institutions-program-grant-implementation-evaluation-findings-through-july-2019/>

by 40 percent.<sup>11</sup> Students responding to text messages with questions about their financial aid account were referred to the Student Services Help Desk (Help Desk). Overall, on days that text messages were sent, the Help Desk experienced an average increase of 5.6 percent in calls.

Messages were also sent to students identified as eligible for financial aid, yet had not completed their FAFSA and/or TASFA applications. These students received text reminders specific to their circumstances prompting them to 1) apply for financial aid, 2) complete incomplete applications, or 3) submit completed applications. Students responding with questions received the following text: “That's a good question that is easiest to address with a phone call. Would you call us (ACC’s financial aid office) 512-223-4243. This number is just for texting.”

Students who received the entire series of financial aid text messages were offered an opportunity to provide feedback regarding the texts they received through a five-question survey. The majority of students responding to the survey reported the text messages to be relevant and helpful (346: 83%); of the students responding to the question regarding suggestions for improvements, 90 percent expressed positive comments about the messages and offered no suggestions for improvements (12 percent requesting more messages be included).

Some responses to the final survey question: “Please share anything else you’d like: ...” provided insight into the potential for text messages to contribute to how students relate in general to ACC. Some students expressed that the process of receiving text messages contributed to their sense of belonging and a belief that “...someone at ACC cares...” about them. Research identifies the potential for text messaging interventions to enhance students’ sense of belonging and engagement that may support retention and success. The positive relationship between student engagement, retention, and success is well-established (Thomas, 2012; Trowler, 2010). A recent United Kingdom report reviewed research interventions on first-year student retention, attendance, and grades found that a sense of belonging is critical to student retention and success (Thomas, 2012). Research conducted by Deighton et al. (2018) demonstrated improved outcomes for students who received text message interventions intended to raise students’ awareness

*Reminders for FA info are helpful mid semester when I am swamped with class work and not thinking of FA. It's easy to let important deadlines fall through the cracks without the reminders, or to be too busy to look into the very programs that might make life easier.*

Student Survey Respondent

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<sup>11</sup> The overall response rate includes any response: yes, no and wrong number.

of university support services, even when students did not use the services, compared with a matched control group. Text messaging interventions intended to disseminate information may also, for some students, contribute to a sense of support and belonging.

*I think all students struggle at some point so the texting thing really does help the students. Just having someone check on us, really does encourage us. Thank you for that. You never know what students are facing either in their academics or in their lives. Maybe some students don't have anyone to talk to or to cheer them on, and everyone needs someone, so this addition I believe can truly have a positive effect on students.*

Student Survey Respondent

## STUDENT ENGAGEMENT PROJECTS

This report section discusses two SMMO programs: Peer Money Mentors and Rainy Day Savings. Both programs offer incentives to students to engage in activities that will assist them in achieving their financial goals.

### RAINY DAY SAVINGS PROGRAM



Survey responses of students attending ten community colleges identified a third of the respondents faced a challenge paying expenses; 71 percent reported that paying living expenses was an obstacle to their success, and 55 percent indicated troubles associated with paying tuition and fees. Approximately 58 percent reported facing challenges covering the cost of books, software, and other school supplies (Porter & Umbach, 2019). National surveys of community college students indicate they would have difficulty paying for emergency expenses, with nearly one in five saying they do not have the financial resources available to pay an unexpected \$500 expense (CfCCSE, 2017). Further, the Trellis Company (2018) national survey of college students indicated that 63 percent of students would struggle to raise \$500 in funds for an emergency.

ACC has responded to students' basic needs by establishing food pantries on each campus and offering cash assistance for unexpected expenses through the Student Emergency Fund. In 2018, ACC received 550 student requests for emergency funding and approved 294 of these requests for funding

(Austin Community College, 2018).<sup>12</sup> These resources, intended to assist students to persist in their academic goals by providing emergency assistance, do not address the need for students to prepare for unexpected expenses.

The SMMO program responded to this need by incorporating into the financial wellness curriculum topics relevant to preparing for financial emergencies, and in the fall 2018 semester, the SMMO program created the Rainy Day Savings Program as a proactive intervention to teach students how to save money, build a positive relationship with a financial institution, and be prepared to address a financial issue before it becomes a financial crisis (Serna, Eguiluz, & Taylor, 2019).

SMMO collaborated with the Austin area University Federal Credit Union (UFCU) to pilot an emergency savings program: the Rainy Day Savings Program. UFCU supported the effort with a \$10,000 grant to fund student incentives. The pilot incorporated the Individual Development Accounts (IDA) model offering financial incentives of \$25 (up to \$100) for following through on specific financial wellness activities, including the following:

- Completion of the FAFSA,
- Meeting with a financial coach,
- Setting up direct deposit or directing a portion of a tax refund into their savings account,
- Maintaining a balance of \$475 or greater for at least 30 days,
- Completing an online two-hour financial education course, and
- Submitting an ACC scholarship application.

Students were recruited through class presentations, posters, and flyers distributed on campuses, the SMMO website, and SMMO social media. The pilot cohort of participants (2018-2019) reported that 40.8 percent had no savings and 22.4 percent had a savings of less than \$100 at program entry. For many students entering the program, the rainy day savings account was their first experience with banking. In total, 91 students participated with an average savings balance of \$446 and a combined savings of \$43,016 (2018-2019 SMMO Annual Report). Further, 75 percent of students who participated either graduated or enrolled in classes in Fall 2019.<sup>13</sup> The second program cohort (2019-2020) included 116 students with a combined savings balance of \$27,483 (2019-2020 SMMO Annual Report). This

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<sup>12</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic ACC received federal funding through the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund, a federal grant funded by the CARES Act, to support eligible students financially impacted by the Coronavirus.

<sup>13</sup> Information from a conversation with SMMO Director, Karen Serna in May of 2020.

decrease in student savings for the second cohort may be due to a sense of financial uncertainty experienced by students as the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the local economy.

Following the initial success of the program, SMMO was awarded a two-year grant in December 2019 by the Trellis Foundation to continue the program.<sup>14</sup> This funding allowed SMMO to expand the Rainy Day Savings program to serve a total of 1,200 students: 600 per fall semester of 2020 and 2021. The funding supports a full-time coordinator and student incentives. The program will focus on recruiting two groups of students: first-time in college students and Adult Education students. Students will be recruited using the methods developed during the pilot and the targeted students will receive program information directly mailed to their homes. All instructors working with the targeted students will also be informed of the program. To be eligible, students must be at least 18 years old, degree or certificate-seeking, and enrolled in at least 6 credit hours.

*For example, if we had 10 applications one week, the following week we would ask for bank paperwork, we would hold a drawing for students who turned in their bank paperwork to get that gift card. We would have this flurry of activity right before the deadline.*

Karen Serna, SMMO Director

SMMO staff incorporate a system of continuous improvement in all program activities including the Rainy Day Saving Program. Staff identified that a significant number of students who expressed an initial interest in the program were not completing all enrollment materials, dropping out at some point in the process. Staff evaluated each step of the program enrollment process to determine if significant numbers of students were dropping-out at any specific step. The first step in applying is to complete a Google form to qualify and provide basic information, then students must submit a signed bank form verifying they have

opened a savings account. Students were required to go online to access the form (or SMMO staff can email the form), print the form, sign it and either electronically or directly return the form to SMMO. SMMO staff determined that it was at this point in the enrollment process that a number of students were dropping-out. The process required students to have access to a printer and the ability to scan the signed document in order to electronically return it to SMMO. In response to this challenge, SMMO

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<sup>14</sup> The Trellis Foundation was founded by the Trellis Company to help nonprofit organizations and higher education institutions improve the rates of postsecondary completion.

incentivized students to return the form by entering students who returned the form by a specific date in a raffle to receive a gift card provided by a local business.<sup>15</sup>

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, staff are evaluating the program recruitment plan and considering other options for securing student signatures. With students having less access to campuses, it will be increasingly difficult for students to print and scan the bank form. One of the proposed solutions is to allow students to photograph the signed form and send the picture to SMMO. Also, if acceptable to UFCU, there may be options for students to electronically sign the document.

### PEER MONEY MENTORS

The value of peer mentoring programs at colleges and university has been well established. Studies have shown that peer mentoring programs, especially for first-year students, can help students feel more connected and integrated in to the college (Glaser, Hall, & Halperin, 2006). Feeling connected and integrated to school has been demonstrated to increase student retention (Ward, Thomas, & Disch, 2010). The central function of a peer mentors is to act as role models, build relationships with students and assist students to access information and resources. Research has documented peer mentoring programs have a positive effect on mentors as well, including enhanced listening skills, direct job experience, high grade point averages, and increased retention rates (Monte, Sleeman, & Hein, 2007).

Mentor programs vary in their focus and intensity providing assistance with transition to college life, academic tutoring, and support for specific student populations. Many 4-year colleges and universities have developed financial literacy programs that include peer mentors; however, few community college financial literacy programs are designed to include a peer mentor feature. One of the interesting differences between the ACC SMMO mentor program and four-year college peer mentor programs is that four-year colleges often recruit students who are studying personal finance to provide peer-to-peer financial coaching (Brown,

#### Peer Money Mentor Program Goal

The Peer Money Mentor Program's modus operandi is to empower a select group of ACC students with financial knowledge and resources that will translate to them establishing good financial habits, making confident financial decisions, and educating their peers on money management principles.

Money Mentor Report (2019)

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<sup>15</sup> Gift cards were provided by Austin area Target, Walmart and HEB businesses.

2017). At ACC, student Peer Money Mentors (PMM) represent a wide range of academic disciplines, including the following: Computer Science and Information Technology, Accounting, Health Science, Business Administration, Government, Social Work, Psychology, Biology, and others. The ACC PMMs do not provide direct peer-to-peer financial coaching but rather, the program uses a variety of venues and projects to connect PMMs with students, affording the opportunity for PMMs to share financial wellness information with the broader ACC student population.

Without an available community college PPM program model to learn from, the SMMO staff developed their program including a continuous improvement model intended to regularly evaluate, capture areas for improvement, and implement changes, resulting in a model program for other community colleges to emulate. The program was designed to select a new cohort of participants each semester, provide training on financial wellness, and engage students in activities and projects to share their knowledge with their ACC peers. Participating students receive a \$500 stipend upon successful completion of the program.

The PMM program eligibility criteria require students to be at least 18 years old and meet the following requirements:

1. Completion of 12 credit hours at ACC by the end of the previous semester,
2. A 2.5 GPA by the end of the previous semester, and
3. An 80% or higher completion rate at ACC at the end of the previous semester.

The first cohort of six students began the program in Spring 2017. By Spring 2020, the seventh cohort of PMMs included 12 new students. On average, the program receives approximately 40 applications each semester. In Spring 2018, program alumni were invited to apply to continue participating in the program. Students accepted to continue with the program were assigned a new title, Peer Money Mentor Leaders (Leaders). In this new role, the Leaders are assigned additional responsibilities, including co-presenting in the classroom with the SMMO coordinators, contributing to the SMMO blog, and taking leadership roles in coordinating SMMO activities, such as the Financial Literacy Month activities.

Each PPM cohort receives training on a number of issues relevant to student financial wellness. The range of training topics, such as banking, budgeting, financial aid, and credit, have evolved to include investing and preparing for retirement. Training is provided by the SMMO staff and other local area experts. The PMMs participate in SMMO outreach activities at campus tabling events and assist

SMMO staff during the Finding the Money workshops, by providing individual guidance to students completing the ACC scholarship application. During the 2018-2019 academic year, the program added a new component: Each PMM picks a personal finance topic they are interested in, develops a 10-minute presentation, and coordinates with their instructor to present the material

*We all encourage each other to stay on the path. Doing this for 10 weeks helped build my confidence. Doing this with the group builds a sense of accountability.*

SMMO Peer Money Mentor

to their classmates. These presentations function to expand the classroom reach of the SMMO program mission and introduce more students and instructors to the SMMO program. The PMMs also participate in one group project each semester. Past projects have included making recommendations for collaboration between SMMO and the ACC libraries, hosting a community-wide credit day in conjunction with ACC's spring job fair, coordinating an investment workshop for ACC students, creating and hosting a jeopardy style financial literacy game, and participating in ACC's re-design of the Student Emergency Fund.

The Spring 2020 semester faced the challenge of wrapping up under the ACC response to COVID-19. All on-campus activities, except for essential functions, transitioned online beginning March 30. Coordinators connected with the PMMs virtually to finish up the training sessions and some students were unable to share with classmates their 10 minutes class presentation.

## FINANCIAL LITERACY OUTREACH AND SERVICES

This section discusses the SMMO website and social media platforms; the financial literacy education provided, services offered, and outreach efforts to students, staff and faculty.

### SMMO WEBSITE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The SMMO website was launched in August 2016, followed by the development of a social media presence on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. All three social media platforms display similar content: information on saving, budgeting and paying for school, various other financial wellness topics, and information about and links to community resources. During the spring 2020 semester staff reviewed the number of students accessing the different social media platforms and the amount of time staff invested in posting content. With few students following these sites (Facebook 277; and Instagram 321), staff determined it was not an efficient use of their time to continue with all three

platforms. Staff decided to focus their social media outreach efforts and post SMMO content only on Instagram.<sup>16</sup>

The SMMO website was designed using WordPress, a content management system that allowed staff the control and flexibility needed to quickly and efficiently update the SMMO site, a necessary feature that the ACC website development framework did not support. Throughout the first two program years, the use of WordPress limited the efficient access of the SMMO website through the ACC home page. The ACC home page did not provide a link to the SMMO website and interested students had to use the search function to find the SMMO page, or access the site directly through the SMMO website URL included on SMMO outreach materials. In Fall 2018, ACC activated a new website that included a link to the SMMO website under the Student Support tab on the ACC home page.

The current SMMO website includes the following features: scheduling of face-to-face financial coaching appointments with SMMO staff or virtual coaching from different SMMO partners (Foundation Communities, and the Trellis Company links to educational materials such as YouTube channels, podcasts, radio broadcasts, educational websites, budgeting apps, credit report sites, and scholarship search sites; budgeting materials, saving charts and budgeting templates; details of the Rainy Day Savings and Peer Money Mentor programs; and student relevant blog posts written by staff and Peer Money Mentor Leaders. The site has a translate tab that translates key material into Spanish.<sup>17</sup> One addition to the website in Fall 2019, a Student Questions Answered page, was created to support changes made to the Take Control of Your Money workshop student survey form. The revised survey includes the question: What other money topics would you like more information about? Staff post replies to student responses on the Student Questions Answered page, and email the inquiring student that the response has been posted to the SMMO website.

## **FINANCIAL COACHING**

One-on-one financial coaching offered in-person, online or over the phone was available with SMMO coordinators, or a coach from two of the SMMO programs community partners: the Trellis Company and Foundation Communities. Appointments can be requested online and coordinators were also available during walk-in hours at the various ACC campuses. Few students took advantage of the

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<sup>16</sup> The total number of followers for SMMO Facebook and Instagram were collected on 8/7/2020.

<sup>17</sup> To view the SMMO website : <http://sites.austincc.edu/money/>

walk-in option and this service was discontinued as the program focused on encouraging students to schedule one-on-one sessions. One effort to encourage students to participate in financial coaching was included in the changes made to the Take Control of Your Money workshop student survey form. The form was revised to include the question: Would you like us to contact you regarding your options for meeting with a financial coach? Staff would follow-up with students expressing an interest in receiving financial coaching. Table 4 presents the number of students accessing one-on-one financial coaching services by academic year. One of the ongoing challenges to offering students face-to-face service on campuses is the limited space available to have confidential conversations with students. Following the COVID-19 campus closures, all SMMO financial coaching transitioned to virtual sessions.

**Table 4. Financial Coaching Services by Academic Year**

Academic Year	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020
Students Receiving Services	9	94	80

#### WORKSHOPS AND TRAINING

In addition to the Taking Control of Your Money workshop presentations made to the Student Success classes, SMMO originally coordinated with a number of Austin area financial literacy organizations to present workshops topics related to credit and financial aid (Finding the Money). These collaborations were an effort to build scale to reach as many students as possible with the limited capacity of the SMMO staff. Despite comprehensive recruitment efforts, only the Finding the Money workshop was well attended. SMMO staff elected to discontinue the workshop partnerships with community organizations and applied efforts to ensure the consistency and quality of two workshops going forward: Taking Control of Your Money and Finding the Money. Staff made changes to the presentations in response to student and instructor feedback. The primary change made to the Taking Control of Your Money workshop (discussed earlier in this paper), increased student engagement by including a real-time student budgeting exercise. Students engaged with the presenter to offer suggestions and make decisions to adjust each student’s budget expenses to match income. SMMO staff also offered presentations to student campus organizations as requested, for example, SMMO presented three financial literacy workshops to approximately 70 attendees during a Male Leadership Program event.

In response to COVID-19, as all support services were transitioned to offering online services, SMMO created a webinar, *Managing Your Finances During COVID-19*, which was delivered four times to 184 students, faculty and staff. SMMO also produced a “Crisis Budgeting” video for the ACCTV YouTube channel to assist with budgeting during the pandemic.<sup>18</sup>

### *Finding the Money*

The Finding the Money workshop was designed to inform students about financial aid and how to search and apply for scholarships. During the second program year, Peer Money Mentors were trained to assist students to complete the ACC financial aid form during the workshop.

This workshop was originally three hours long and scheduled on weekends. During Fall 2016, the workshop was presented three times to 65 students with an average attendance of 22 students. The following spring semester, the two workshops offered experienced a decrease in attendance to only 19 students: a decrease of 45 percent from the fall semester. Non-attending students were contacted to identify reasons for failing to attend. Responding students most often reported, *the demands of school work*, intruded upon their intentions to attend. In response to the lower attendance rate staff determined to scale back the workshop to two hours and offer a greater variety of days and times.

In Fall 2017, staff replicated the marketing and outreach efforts from previous semesters offering workshops on various days and times in September and October. Despite 203 students registering only 53 attended the six workshops (a 26% attendance rate). After reviewing the student attendance staff determined: 1) Since registration numbers do not reflect attendance numbers, workshop registration remained open even if the registrants exceed the room capacity; and 2) In support of students’ academic demands, workshops were offered in September only. Going forward, staff offered six workshops on Saturdays at the Highland campus. In Fall 2018, 106 students attended the workshops.

### *Staff and Faculty Training*

One of the original objectives of the SMMO program included integrating Degree Map into the student advising process. Degree Map is a web-based application that allows students to chart their education goals, plan class schedules, track progress toward completion, and remain better informed

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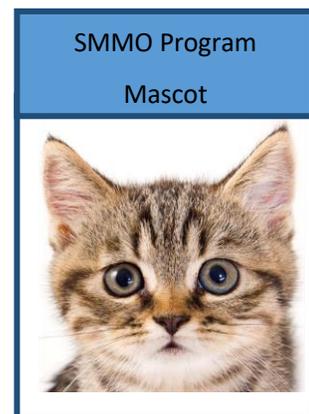
<sup>18</sup> *Managing your Finances During COVID-19* and *Crisis Budgeting* are available on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uth-xYvXxFQ> and [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9N\\_xCOqhrRc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9N_xCOqhrRc)

about degree requirements, time involved, and cost. During Fall 2016, efforts to integrate student financial aid information into Degree Map revealed that only loans acquired while attending ACC could be included on the platform, limiting each student's broader understanding of their student debt. In response to this limitation, SMMO staff committed to training ACC advising staff on how to talk with students about financial issues and elected to integrate the iGrad financial literacy platform into the SMMO website.

Throughout the program reporting period, SMMO staff presented workshops to ACC support services staff on the topic of integrating financial education into student interactions. The workshop, Talking to Students About Money, was presented to over 300 ACC staff members.

### OUTREACH EFFORTS

Throughout the program reporting period, outreach to students included the distribution of program posters and flyers on all campuses, and the participation of staff and PPMs in the ACC Student Life tabling events: River-Bat Bash and resource fairs. Prominent on all outreach materials, including posters, brochures, the introductory PowerPoint slide for all campus presentations, Facebook, and Instagram postings, is the SMMO program mascot. Early in the SMMO program development, staff selected the image of an orange tabby kitten as the program's brand identity. The PMMs participating in the Spring 2019 focus group reported the image of the kitten on a poster caught their attention, resulting in their pursuit of the PMM program. SMMO staff also reported ACC staff have commented on recognizing the kitten as their program brand around campus. In July 2018, SMMO staff presented, "Cut Through the Clutter: Branding Your Program for Student Engagement" at two professional meetings.



SMMO staff continuously informed their work by expanding their knowledge and network of relationships at ACC and within the local, regional, state, and national professional fields of student financial wellbeing. SMMO staff served on two Texas boards relevant to student financial wellness and participated in the national initiative, the Alliance for Economic Inclusion. SMMO staff have contributed to the literature on community college financial wellness programming by presenting at state and national conferences and publishing articles in the Community College Journal of Research and Practice.

## CONCLUSIONS AND SUSTAINABILITY

### CONCLUSIONS

As SMMO staff worked to continuously improve strategies to impact measures of student success, including graduation rate, time to completion, retention/persistence, and the ACC cohort loan default rate, a number of program efficiencies and collaborations have evolved. Staff time has been shifted away from activities that yield low student response and engagement, such as discontinuing the walk-in financial coaching services, and assigning tabling events to the PMMs. Evidence-based practices applied to text messaging have encouraged student responses. The PPM program evolved and expanded to extend the reach of the SMMO mission and ACC students saved a combined total of \$82,579 across the two years of the Rainy Day Savings Program. Successful collaborations with other ACC departments continue to evolve with SMMO taking the lead to ensure text messages sent to ACC students employ best practices.

The new ACC Administrative Rule that allows departments to use the ACC Colleague student information data management system to access student phone numbers to text students without receiving prior written consent, increased the number of students receiving initial text messages. Since the first SMMO project began texting the first cohort of students in the fall 2016 semester, the amount of text messages ACC students receive, either in collaboration with SMMO or by other ACC programs, has increased from 3,065 during the 2016-2017 academic year to 13,483 during the 2018-2019 academic year. As more departments elect to use texting to message students, Castleman (2015) cautions that the efficacy of text messaging will diminish the more exposure students have and encourages college program administrators to make hard decisions and determine, out of all the priorities of different campus stakeholders, which text message campaigns will best serve students. The SMMO staff have contributed to the community college financial wellness literature, particularly in the realm of text messaging students. Their experience and knowledge positioned the program to contribute a larger role in the administration of text messages at ACC.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the ACC Return to Campus Plan for the fall 2020 semester will slowly scale-up in-person classes and support services, remaining focused on courses that require some component of face-to-face instruction such as technical hands-on programs (welding, automotive, nursing, etc.). In-person classes will require new health and safety protocols. All other

courses will remain online and the majority of employees will be asked to continue to work remotely. As the venues for recruiting students to the SMMO programs are offered virtually, the SMMO staff has reworked the program recruitment plans.

## SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability is achieved when the gains of an improvement project persist through staff and organizational turnover and the quality improvement initiatives become the new way of working. Through the training of ACC students, staff and instructors; collaborations with other ACC departments; expanding the program reach into classrooms with the PPM presentations; and the efforts made to maintain a presence on all campuses through outreach activities and the distribution of posters and brochures the SMMO staff have worked to institute the SMMO objectives into the ACC culture and impacted student success. Students who received text messages were 10 percentage points more likely to return to ACC in the fall of their second year of college, compared to students who did not receive the text messaging intervention (Patnaik & Cumpton, 2020).

SMMO staff have elevated the program status within the professional field of student financial wellness by serving on campus, regional and state working groups; presenting papers and workshops at state and national conferences; and publishing their work in a professional journal. In 2019, the SMMO program efforts and achievements were recognized by the Association for Financial Counseling & Planning Education® a nationally recognized leader in financial counseling, coaching, and education, with the Award for Outstanding Financial Counseling.

The SMMO project sustainability requires securing continued funding beyond the initial Strengthening Institutions Program (SIP) grant period (June 1, 2016 - September 30, 2020). All of the efforts described above have positioned the program to be competitive in pursuing other funding sources and demonstrate to ACC administration the value of continued institutional support. The application of the SMMO program interventions will continue to require the focused effort of a dedicated staff. For the upcoming 2020-2021 academic year, the Department of Education (DOE) approved a one-year grant extension. This one-year program extension is funded through carry-over funds available from the original grant, ACC institutional funds for the Director salary, and the Trellis Foundation Rainy Day Saving Program grant supports one of the Program Coordinators.

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## APPENDIX A: CLASSROOM SURVEY



### Classroom Survey

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ ACCEID: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Cell phone number: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

### Survey Questions

**1. The content presented today was useful to me.**

Strongly agree     Agree     No opinion     Disagree     Strongly disagree

**2. Would you like us to contact you regarding your options for meeting with a financial coach?**

Yes  No

**3. What other money topics would you like more information about?**

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If we have resources for you to learn about your requested topic, we will email you!

### Follow Up Text Messages

I'd like to send you text messages to provide you with tips about things like creating and maintaining a budget, encouragement to complete scholarship applications, and reminders to complete your FAFSA. You may also ask me questions via text!

- Message and data rates may apply
- You may opt out at any time by responding "STOP" to a message
- Request assistance at any time by responding "HELP" to a message
- You will receive on average one text message per week for up to 3 months
- Consent to receive texts is not required
- Messages may come from autodialers/senders
- Text messaging content will provide helpful information reinforcing what was presented by the Student Money Management Office (tips and guidance on managing money). Follow up surveys may also be conducted via text message.

**My signature below indicates I have read and understand the conditions of participation.**

**Yes, please send me text messages.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**No, do not send me text messages** (no signature needed).