Minnesota Family Investment Program: Work Study Jobs Initiative

A review of a 2015-2016 demonstration project

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About the Minnesota Department of Human Services

The Minnesota Department of Human Services provides Minnesotans with a variety of services intended to help people live as independently as possible. The Minnesota Department of Human Services serves Minnesotans in all 87 counties and 11 tribes.
Abbreviations

DHS: Minnesota Department of Human Services (department)

FAFSA: Free Application for Federal Student Aid

FPG: Federal Poverty Guidelines

FSS: Family Stabilization Services

MAXIS: Minnesota Department of Human Services’ financial services database

MFIP: Minnesota Family Investment Program

OHE: Office of Higher Education

TANF: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families
Executive Summary

The Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) Work Study Jobs Initiative provided the opportunity for the Minnesota Department of Human Services (the department) to run a small-scale demonstration of funding work study job opportunities reserved for participants receiving MFIP assistance. The MFIP Work Study Jobs demonstration aimed to provide services for very low-income participants balancing the competing demands of school, work and parenting. Unlike traditional work study opportunities, these grants allowed the department to fully fund the work placements of MFIP students, in theory allowing MFIP students increased opportunities to participate in these on-site work opportunities. The project also intended to provide an opportunity for the Office of Higher Education and the department to work collaboratively to serve a shared group of constituents. A direct allocation of $500,000 in state general funds by the legislature in 2014 funded this project for implementation in state fiscal years 2015 and 2016. Six campuses: Pine Technical College, Riverland Community College, Normandale Community College, Saint Paul College, Century College and Minnesota Community and Technical College (MCTC), applied and were allocated funds to implement demonstration projects.

Thirty-eight, or almost 23 percent of eligible postsecondary students receiving MFIP opted to participate in department-supported work study offerings. This led to a small percentage increase in the number of MFIP-students who engaged in work study activities through these schools. The student parents engaged in work study were pursuing a variety of two-year degrees in five broad areas: Liberal arts or general education, medical or dentistry-related fields, human services or education, business or accounting, or computers and technology. Participants were mostly female and had racial and ethnic backgrounds that closely mirrored the diversity of the general MFIP population. One notable difference between those who participated in postsecondary education at these colleges and the general MFIP population was their longer tenure on MFIP. The average number of months of MFIP assistance for project participants was 46.6 as compared to the general population’s 29 months.

During this project, participants were able to reduce their school loan burden by an average of $2,213 while receiving an average net monthly income of $1,537. A portion of this monthly income was the MFIP monthly cash and food benefit which averaged $828 per family. Furthermore, once participants were enrolled in a work study opportunity, they were likely to remain engaged. Sixty-eight percent of participants continued work experience activities throughout the remainder of the project period.
Project implementation was a challenge, and college partners were only able to expend $86,210, or approximately 17 percent of their grants. Century College was able to hire the largest number of students (14), and Pine Technical College was able to expend the largest percentage of their grant (46 percent). Two colleges, Normandale Community College and Riverland Technical College, were unable to locate or enroll any MFIP participants. Data privacy laws prevent the Office of Higher Education and the department from sharing information about participants simultaneously enrolled in both systems. This made it a challenge to locate participants who might be interested and benefit from participating in this initiative. A review of MFIP employment plans showed that participant employment plans did not always accurately reflect the education and work study activities parents were engaged in. This may indicate that communication with employment service workers and colleges or MFIP participants was not consistent. Overall, the MFIP Work Study Jobs project provided assistance for parents as they balanced postsecondary school, work and parenting. The initiative also encouraged useful connections between staff at the department and the Office of Higher Education.
Introduction

The Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) assists low-income families with dependent children and pregnant women by providing cash and food assistance to help them meet their basic needs. Like many Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funded programs, MFIP was implemented statewide using a model which primarily focused on helping families go back to work as quickly as possible. To support participants in their pursuit of employment, MFIP provides families with employment services and rewards work by disregarding a percentage of earned income when determining benefit amounts. Participants enrolled in MFIP must engage in work or work readiness activities such as job search, volunteer work, physical or mental health treatment or educational activities. Most families are subject to the federally mandated lifetime limit of 60 months of assistance. Families interact with two key service components: the eligibility and benefits determination done by county or tribal eligibility workers and the employment services assistance which is provided through public or nonprofit agencies providing job counseling and other employment supports.

The MFIP Work Study Jobs Initiative provided the opportunity for the department to run a small-scale demonstration of funding work study job opportunities reserved for participants receiving MFIP assistance. Through this initiative, project partners aimed to provide services for very low-income participants balancing the competing demands of school, work and parenting. A direct allocation\(^1\) of $500,000 in state general funds by the legislature in 2014 funded this project\(^2\) for implementation in state fiscal years 2015 and 2016. The project also intended to provide an opportunity for the Office of Higher Education and the Department of Human Services to work collaboratively to serve a shared group of constituents.

Unlike traditional work study opportunities, these grants allowed for the department to fully fund the work placements of MFIP students, in theory allowing them increased opportunities to participate in these convenient on-site work opportunities. In 2014, the legislature also changed policies in the Minnesota Family Investment Program to allow participants receiving MFIP more opportunities to pursue education,

\(^1\) 2014 Minnesota Session Laws: Sec. 5. Laws 2013, chapter 108, article 14, section 2, subdivision 6, as amended by Laws 2013, chapter 144, section 25: “Work Study Funding for MFIP Participants. $250,000 each year in fiscal years 2015 and 2016 is from the general fund to pilot work study jobs for MFIP recipients in approved postsecondary education programs. This is a one-time appropriation. Unexpended funds for fiscal year 2015 do not cancel, but are available for this purpose in fiscal year 2016”.

\(^2\)
including up to four years in postsecondary schooling. With passage of this new legislation, students in postsecondary education activities were no longer required to dedicate a certain number of hours in their employment plans to additional work activities officially recognized by the federal government. As with the prior policy, participants were still required to show satisfactory school progress so that education could remain an MFIP-supported activity on their employment plans.

Participating campuses were not required to provider a dollar-for-dollar funding match, but were expected to provide some in-kind administrative support. Funding was to be used to increase the number of work-study placements for MFIP participants. Campuses selected to host MFIP work study jobs had to have had no unspent federal or state work study funds in recent years, and were also required to meet at least one of three criteria: provide a support center for parenting students through the state’s Young Student Parent Initiative supported by federal grants through the Minnesota Department of Health, host an on-campus child care center, and/or have participated in a FastTrack initiative⁴. Participating colleges were also asked to provide MFIP work study applicants with a supportive placement, either an internship within the student’s field of interest, or a quiet placement such as a library aide, which might provide participants study time during slow times. An inquiry led by the department and the Office of Higher Education (OHE) showed that 28 statewide campuses met these criteria. The department sent all eligible campuses a request for letters of interest. Six campuses; Pine Technical College, Riverland Community College, Normandale Community College, Saint Paul College, Century College and Minnesota Community and Technical College, applied and were allocated funds to implement demonstration projects. Table 1 provides information about the individual colleges, award amounts, and number of positions funded.

⁴ FastTRAC is a training program that integrates adult basic education and credit-earning postsecondary education for short-term courses leading to an employer-recognized credential tied to specific occupations and industries: http://mn.gov/deed/programs-services/minnesota-fast-trac/about/index.jsp
Table 1: Participating colleges and funding allocations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Level of Funding</th>
<th>Proposed # of increased positions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Century</td>
<td>Twin Cities metro area</td>
<td>$233,178</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCTC</td>
<td>Twin Cities metro area</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normandale</td>
<td>Twin Cities metro area</td>
<td>$30,000</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pine Technical</td>
<td>Northern Minnesota</td>
<td>$24,131</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riverland</td>
<td>Southern Minnesota</td>
<td>$57,834</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saint Paul Technical</td>
<td>Twin Cities metro area</td>
<td>$49,400</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Background**

The benefits of higher education are manifold. Studies show that higher rates of educational attainment are linked to higher wages, more desirable jobs and increased levels of employment (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013; Djurovich, Fergus, Lewin, 2016; Hout, 2012). Higher education is also linked to increased social connections and mobility, better health, lower crime rates, greater civic participation, increased life expectancy, greater life satisfaction, and an increased intergenerational degree attainment effects (Baum, Kurose, & Ma, 2013; Djurovich, Fergus, Lewin, 2016; Hout, 2012). In 2016, the median weekly earnings of United States high school graduates working full-time was $679 whereas the median weekly wages of individuals with some college was $782, increasing to $1,155 for individuals who had completed a Bachelor’s degree (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). An earlier report looking at median earnings of full-time, year-round workers shows that individuals with an Associate’s degree earn, on average, $12,500 more a year during their peak earning years than individuals with only a high school diploma (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). Statewide statistics mirror national trends: College graduates from Minnesota earn more than those with lower levels of education, and are more likely to be employed in full-time, year-round positions (Minnesota Office of Higher Education & Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, 2010). While it is impossible to predict future earning patterns of current college students, it is estimated that individuals with Bachelor’s degrees who work full-time will earn on average about two-thirds more than
high school graduates over their work lives (Baum, Kurose, & Ma, 2013). Pay differential between high school and college graduates accounts for more than half of increased variance in wage dispersion (Goldin & Katz, 2007). This becomes an equity issue: In Minnesota, there are large gaps in degree attainment. While 43 percent of adults in the state have an associate degree or higher, only Asian Americans (50 percent) and Caucasians (44 percent) exceed the state average. Benefits of a college education extend to low-income parents: a 2003 study showed that welfare recipients who completed two and four-year college degrees reduced their long-term reliance on public welfare benefits (Prince, Steffy, & McFarlane, 2003).

Correspondingly, several economists have noted that a well-educated workforce is key to a state’s economic success. Post-recession employment opportunities are likely to require additional education: projections for the year 2020 show that 65 percent of available jobs will require postsecondary training beyond high school (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). State representatives can attract higher-wage employers and increase the state’s economic strength by helping to increase the number of individuals with a postsecondary education. “Providing expanded access to high quality education will not only expand economic opportunity for residents, but also likely do more to strengthen the overall state economy than anything else a state government can do” (Berger & Fisher, 2013). The economic benefits of an educated workforce stem from the creation of a higher local and state tax base. Indirectly, individuals with more discretionary income may be more likely to purchase non-essential products, therefore helping to stimulate the local economy (Wood, 2005).

While a number of participants who receive cash assistance are likely to benefit from educational opportunities, persistent opportunity gaps in access and educational persistence may make it more challenging for them to enroll and complete educational programs in a timely manner. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have lower rates of postsecondary attendance, (Aud et al. 2011) and non-Caucasian American students are less likely to access and graduate from institutes of higher education (Djurovich, Fergus, Henderson, & Li, 2015). Approximately 65 percent of the total MFIP caseload is non-Caucasian, and recipients of MFIP are by definition low-income. Students receiving public cash assistance are further challenged by the demands of raising children while participating in college. This dual focus brings about additional challenges which can cause student parents to take time off of school, thus delaying or reducing their chances of graduating in a two or four-year period. One study showed that students with

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4 Minnesota Office of Higher Education,

5 MFIP Characteristics report December 2014
dependent children were 17 percent more likely than their peers without dependent children to take time off from college (Gault, 2014). When asked to list specific challenges to their college completion, a sample of student parents listed financial challenges, family care needs, high stress levels, and health as main reasons for taking time off from school (Reichlin, & Fault, 2014). While working is a financial necessity for many students, scheduling work around class times and child care availability can be difficult.

Campus work study programs provide part-time employment for undergraduate and graduate students with financial need. Jobs provided are part-time and are intended to help students pay college expenses while engaging in work that is either civically oriented or related to the students’ course of study. Very limited research has been conducted on the efficacy of federal work study programs, but one study found that the program had a small positive impact on graduation rates, partially because it encouraged participants to reduce their work hours, and better balance their school and employment commitments (Velez, 1985).

Campus work study is designed to offer students a convenient work location and flexible scheduling. State policy specifies that financial aid, including work study income, does not count against the cash assistance for which MFIP families are eligible. State policy further specifies that work study income does not impact future financial aid eligibility because federal loans for higher education do not count income received through work study jobs when determining future financial aid eligibility.

**Evaluation purpose and design**

A mixed method implementation study was designed to assess and learn from the MFIP Work Study Jobs Initiative. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. **What are characteristics of the students who participated in the work study project? How do they differ from students who did not participate in the project or non-MFIP funded work study opportunities?**

2. **What are early outcomes of program participants?**

3. **Is there evidence that any unintended outcomes occurred, either positive or negative, for either the program, its staff, or for participants?**

4. **What are characteristics of sites that were successfully able to implement this program? What variations in implementation occurred by site? Did they affect program outcomes?**
5. In what, if any, ways should the department and the Minnesota Department of Higher Education continue to partner together to support the educational attainment of low-income parents?

Data sources

Data used for this implementation study were obtained from administrative data sources, a document review of related department and college reports, individual interviews, and a literature review. Administrative data were obtained from the department’s data warehouse in which Workforce One (employment services’ program data) and MAXIS (the information system storing eligibility and benefits information) data are stored. Document review included analysis of project-related correspondence, spreadsheets and marketing materials. Individual interviews were conducted with at least one administrator from each of the colleges and the department’s Work Study Initiative contract administrator.

Project implementation

The department sent out award letters to selected partners in March 2015. Selected staff from partnering sites met with the department’s grant and contract administrators in April 2015 to learn more about the program and reporting requirements. Department staff requested that college partners recruit students by working with county and nonprofit employment services staff and through site-based marketing efforts at the school. As part of the recruitment process, college partners created fliers which they emailed to prospective candidates and posted locally. The majority of college providers attended local employment services meetings where they told staff about their program and how to refer MFIP students. Department staff also emailed information and regular reminders to participating employment services agencies.

MFIP student parents were eligible for the program if they were active on the MFIP program, active and enrolled in a participating college or interested in attending a participating college, eligible for work study through their financial aid package, and interested in working part-time at their college. Employment counselors could refer interested and eligible participants through a paper or electronic form to the program at their college of interest. Referrals were checked at the college for eligibility, and an informal interview was scheduled. Colleges could also identify students receiving MFIP assistance and refer them to the work study project. While MFIP funding allowed for this work study process to be non-competitive, eligible MFIP student workers were still asked to submit a resume or application to their job of interest. In cases where MFIP students did not have a resume, they were referred to a college career counselor for assistance. Once
the student was placed in an appropriate position, college staff completed required administrative paperwork that allowed students to start their new job.

Invoices and mandatory reports were due quarterly and provided the department with information about MFIP student employees, their employment opportunities, hours and wages. Projects ran for five quarters, from April 2015 through June 2016. Four of the six selected colleges were able to recruit a total of 38 MFIP participants to engage in work study opportunities. Colleges that were able to recruit participants spent between 10 and 46 percent of available funds, described below.

Site Descriptions

Century College

Century College is a two-year community and technical college located in White Bear Lake, a suburb of Saint Paul, Minnesota. In 2015, it served 13,000 students, more than half of whom were first generation students, and 38 percent of whom were students of color. Administrators at Century College pursued MFIP Work Study funding because it would allow the college to better work with a currently underserved student population, and to provide staffing resources for its newly developed student resource center. Staff at the college felt that resource room positions would especially benefit the MFIP student population because the positions allowed student workers to familiarize themselves with campus resources and to avail themselves of professional development opportunities. Century staff strongly believe in the importance and benefit of student work study, “one of the most empowering things students can do is work on campus… These positions allow students to connect more deeply to resources on campus and for college staff to develop more relationships with partners and county providers” (Jersak, M., 2016). Through the MFIP Work Study program, Century College provided student participants with opportunities to work in targeted positions created specifically for this group of MFIP students, or in any of the positions generally open for students employed through the work study program. MFIP students opting to work in the targeted positions often served as “resource navigators,” and were asked to encourage fellow students to attend events and classes, develop resources, and promote the resource center.

The additional money from this grant meant that work opportunities were available for all interested students. Century College planned to employ 25 MFIP student workers in its resource center and in open positions across campus. To enlist these workers, college staff made several attempts at program outreach and recruitment. College staff worked with the financial aid office to generate a list of students who, based
off of their FAFSA, were both parents and potentially income-eligible for MFIP. College staff also worked with local county agencies to present the opportunity to county supervisors and employment counselors. Interested students were then referred by their employment counselor to staff at Century College through the designated referral form. Referred students next met with a counselor at Century College to discuss their interests and skills, and how these might fit within available campus positions. Once eligible students and supervisors determined that a student would work well in a particular setting, students filled out an application from the student aid office and participated in an interview.

**Minneapolis Community and Technical College**

Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC) is a public, two-year college located in downtown Minneapolis. The school serves about 13,000 students a year, 27 percent of whom are first generation students, and 58 percent of whom are students of color. The college offers students more than 150 associates degrees, diplomas and certificates. Program administrators were interested in this additional funding because they believed that they had a large number of student parents who might benefit from these opportunities. Staff were also interested in using grant funds to reactivate a recently defunded peer-to-peer mentor program. College staff estimated that they have approximately 250 work study opportunities available at a time. Through this additional funding, the school had the opportunity to provide 20 more opportunities to students receiving MFIP assistance.

Minneapolis Community and Technical College, like other sites, relied heavily on MFIP employment counselor referrals to locate and then enroll participants. To seek referrals, staff from MCTC connected with staff from the department and Hennepin County. They also attended local meetings for managers and staff, as well as employment and resource fairs targeting MFIP participants. When a referral came into the college, a meeting was set up for a participant to talk about a position with their prospective supervisor. Individuals who seemed a good fit for the job were asked to submit a resume and cover letter and to complete hiring paperwork. Students without a resume or cover letter were directed to the college career center for assistance. MFIP-funded work study opportunities were not posted through the traditional student employment portal, but were only available for MFIP-eligible students. Eligible students could work up to 20 hours a week at a rate of $9.50 an hour.
Pine Technical and Community College

Pine Technical and Community College (PTCC) is a public, two-year community college located in Pine City, Minnesota. Pine Tech enrolls approximately 1,900 students a year, the majority of whom are part-time (77 percent), and 9 percent of whom are students of color. Administrators from the college pursued this funding because it provided additional resources for students in need. Additionally, Pine Technical and Community College is the MFIP employment services provider for the surrounding area, and it made sense to strengthen existing internal connections.

College staff worked with the director of the employment and training program to apply for and implement the grant. The program was presented to eligible students in several ways: through their employment and training providers, presentations at the student-parent center, and individual encounters with students asking for TANF-mandated activity verification from counselors or other administrators. Interested students were asked to find a job of interest, reach out to the supervisor, apply, interview, and ultimately begin the hiring process. The only difference between MFIP work study and the general work study offerings was the funding source. Economic conditions and the availability of higher-paying jobs in the community led to the process not being overly competitive. All interested MFIP work study students were placed in a job.

Pine Tech structured its work study offerings to ensure student privacy – neither students nor supervisors could distinguish between MFIP work study and general work study offerings. This privacy was important to at least one student who had asked whether participating in this program would signify that she was on public assistance. In keeping the programs quite similar to traditional work study, administrative staff was able to quickly get the program running. It also allowed them to keep a more centralized process for spreading the word about this opportunity.

Saint Paul College

Saint Paul College is a community and technical college located in Saint Paul, Minnesota. The college strives to provide comprehensive learning opportunities, offering its approximately 11,000 students 43 associate degree programs and 79 career certificate and diploma programs. Saint Paul College educates a diverse student base, which includes 61 percent students of color (Saint Paul College, 2016). Administrative staff at Saint Paul College were interested in partnering with the department so they could provide additional work study opportunities for students. Previously, many individuals would compete for the limited number of on-campus positions.
Saint Paul College staff promoted the project by creating a participant-focused brochure; attending a Ramsey County MFIP training session; and by emailing information to MFIP employment services staff in Anoka, Washington, and Ramsey counties. Saint Paul College received approximately 20 referrals, the majority coming from Ramsey County Workforce Solutions and other Ramsey County employment service providers. Of the 20 referrals, only eight individuals followed through on the process of meeting with a counselor to discuss available positions and personal work preferences. For the approximately 40 percent of participants who were referred but not placed, 20 percent failed to respond to a request for an in-person meeting, and the other 20 percent failed to submit a resume or apply for the job.

**Results**

**Financial gains**

Work study is offered as part of federal and state financial aid packages and helps students reduce their loan burdens and earn money to use towards education. During this project, participants were able to reduce their loan burden by an average of $2,213, with an average quarterly take-home pay of $987. Participating student parents were also able to receive an average monthly cash and food benefit of $828, assisting them in reducing opportunity costs associated with attending school. To better understand possible differences between the MFIP students who chose to participate in work study and those who did not, researchers created a comparison group which was comprised of individuals who were active on MFIP and enrolled at a participating college for at least two months during the period of work study program enrollment. A two-month comparison of net income just before and during the program showed that students and their families had on average generated about $331 of additional income a month.\(^6\) Their net income of $1,537 was just below the comparison group’s monthly average of $1,559.\(^7\) This appears to be a positive finding: although individuals in the comparison group had opportunity to find higher paying jobs and work more hours, they only netted slightly more monthly income than the group participating in work study. Figure 2 compares the income of the program and comparison groups in May 2015 and February 2016.

**Figure 2: Two month income comparison, program and comparison group**

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\(^6\) Monthly income comparisons were generated by reviewing income data from March 2015 and February 2016.\(^7\) The comparison group is comprised of eligible, non-participants from the qualifying colleges.
**College participation**

College partners spent $86,210, or approximately 17 percent of their grants. Century College was able to hire the largest number of students (14), and Pine Technical College was able to expend the largest percentage of their grant (46 percent). Two colleges, Normandale Community College and Riverland Technical College, were unable to locate or enroll any MFIP participants. Table 3 presents information about participating colleges and their engagement with this project.
Table 2: Participation and expenditures of selected colleges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>Anticipated number of work study positions&lt;sup&gt;8&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Potentially eligible students&lt;sup&gt;9&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Students hired</th>
<th>Funds awarded</th>
<th>Total expenditures</th>
<th>% expended</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Century</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>$233,178</td>
<td>$50,335</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCTC</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
<td>$19,558</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normandale</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>$30,000</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pine Technical</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>$24,131</td>
<td>$11,219</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riverland</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>$57,834</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saint Paul</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>$49,400</td>
<td>$5,098</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participant characteristics

Almost 23 percent of eligible postsecondary students opted to participate in work study offerings. The 38 student participants engaged in work study were pursuing a variety of two-year degrees in five broad areas: Liberal arts or general education (11), medical or dentistry-related fields (11), human services, education or criminal justice (11), business, marketing or accounting (3), computers and technology (1), and cosmetology (1). Participants were mostly female and had racial and ethnic backgrounds that closely mirrored the diversity of the general MFIP population (Table 4).

<sup>8</sup> The number of anticipated work study positions is based on the information provided in response to the department’s initial proposal. While these same numbers were included in the final contract, they were not adjusted to account for the abbreviated duration of the project.

<sup>9</sup> A list of potentially eligible students was calculated by reviewing the number of students who had an educational activity open with a participating school during the period of program enrollment. The low number of students who appear to be enrolled at Pine Technical College showcases system imperfection: the department only knew about potentially eligible student parents by looking at Workforce One data. The activities noted in that system may not always accurately record who is pursuing education as part of their MFIP employment plan.
With an average age of 29, the group of students participating in work study were slightly younger than the comparison group and general MFIP population, whose respective average ages were 32 and 31. The average participant’s family size was 3.3, and they had an average of 1.9 children each. The average age of a participant’s youngest child was 2.8. Similar to the larger MFIP population, 61 percent of children of these parenting students were under age 6. Participants in the MFIP Work Study Jobs initiative were slightly more likely than the comparison group and general MFIP population to be part of a two-parent family (29 percent, compared to 22 percent for the comparison group and 22 percent of the general MFIP population). Twenty-five percent of student participants were enrolled in MFIP’s Family Stabilization Services program (FSS) compared to 27 percent of the comparison group. One notable difference between those who participated in postsecondary education at these colleges and the general MFIP population was their tenure on MFIP. The average number of months of MFIP assistance for project participants was 46.6 as compared to the general population’s 29 months. In general, students engaged in postsecondary education opportunities tend to have received MFIP benefits for a longer time: the comparison group averaged 64.2 months of MFIP assistance, and the population of MFIP participants in postsecondary education average 42.78 months of benefit assistance. Table 3 highlights demographic characteristics of participants engaged in this project compared to potentially eligible non-participants.

10 Family Stabilization Services (FSS) is an MFIP service track for families with multiple barriers or disabilities who may benefit from a more flexible employment plan. This service track started in February 2008 and enables county agencies to develop employment plans with an emphasis on overcoming barriers to employment, and to use a case management model to help families achieve the greatest amount of economic stability possible.

11 MFIP comparison data comes from the December 2014 Minnesota Family Investment Program and Diversionary Work Program: Characteristics of Cases and Eligible Adults: https://edocs.dhs.state.mn.us/lfserver/Public/DHS-4219Q-ENG
Table 3: Between group comparisons of project participants and the comparison group, eligible non-participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS</th>
<th>MFIP WORK STUDY PARTICIPANTS</th>
<th>ELIGIBLE NON-PARTICIPANTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N=38</td>
<td>N=100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGE</td>
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<td>31.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>GENDER</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEMALE</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MALE</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RACIAL/ ETHNIC BACKGROUND</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American – 42%</td>
<td>African-American – 39%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino – 8%</td>
<td>American Indian – 2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple races – 3%</td>
<td>Asian-American – 6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African immigrant (non-Somali) – 3%</td>
<td>Hispanic or Latino - 8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White – 45%</td>
<td>Hmong immigrant – 1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUMBER OF PEOPLE ON MFIP CASE</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TWO-PARENT FAMILY</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUMBER OF CHILDREN</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AVERAGE AGE OF YOUNGEST CHILD</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MFIP COUNTED MONTHS 12</td>
<td>46.6</td>
<td>64.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAMILY STABILIZATION SERVICES PARTICIPANT</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

12 Number of months receiving state or federal TANF benefits since the implementation of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWORA).
College providers struggled to quickly recruit eligible students. Because of this slower start, only 13 percent of enrolled participants were able to engage in work study activities four of five available quarters. However, once participants were enrolled in a work study opportunity, they were likely to remain engaged. Sixty-eight percent of participants continued work experience activities through the remainder of the project period.

Case management practices

College representatives reported that only approximately 30 to 50 percent of referrals came directly from employment service workers. In addition, MFIP employment plans did not always accurately reflect the education and work study activities participants were engaged in. This may indicate that communication with employment service workers and colleges or the MFIP participants was not consistent. For instance, educational activities were included in 92 percent of participants’ MFIP employment plans, and a part-time work activity was included in 66 percent of the employment plans. In addition, participants completed a variety of activities during the 2015 summer session when many classes were not in session and some work study opportunities were not available. These included activities such as job search, health management, assessment, and uncompensated work experience. During the time participants were enrolled in the MFIP Work Study Jobs initiative, six individuals received notice of case sanctions from their employment services worker for not being in compliance with program requirements. A review of case notes showed that employment services workers imposed sanctions for one of three common reasons: 1) participants did not submit sufficient documentation of their activities to their case manager, 2) participants did not complete enough hours of activities to meet MFIP requirements, or 3) participants were not in contact with their case manager.

A review of case notes showed that counselors were challenged to find meaningful activities for participants during times that class was not in session. One participant was sanctioned for lack of job search activity in the summer months between her periods of school enrollment; in case notes, the counselor noted that the participant resisted job searching because she did not find it to be a useful activity. Two other participants struggled to meet minimum hours in accordance with MFIP’s supervised study time requirement. To meet federal performance standards, participants relying on MFIP and their employment counselors must track

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13 A sanction is a reduction in the income support families receive. In addition to losing some of their income support, parents who are sanctioned can have restricted or no access to child care subsidies and support services (e.g., bus or gas cards).
their hours in specific, recognized activities. To be able to count study time outside of class, the school or instructor must formally submit a statement about how much study time is required or advised for a course or program. MFIP only allows a parent to count one hour of unsupervised study time for every credit hour. To count additional hours, study must be supervised. During this project, students in these participating schools were sanctioned at a rate of 16 percent. While there was no difference in the prevalence of sanction between students engaged in the project and eligible students not engaged in the project, the rates of sanction for both groups are higher than the normal rate. Traditionally only 4 to 6 percent of the total employment services’ caseload is sanctioned at a time.14

Discussion

The MFIP Work Study Jobs initiative provided work study jobs for 38 MFIP participants. Work study jobs allowed participants to reduce their loan amounts by earning income. Work study jobs provided opportunities for participants to work at sites that were conveniently located and designed to further their connection to campus and campus resources. These jobs also encouraged participants to balance work and school commitments by limiting the number of hours they worked in a week. Although college partners were unable to expend all available funding, student participants benefitted from the ability to access guaranteed campus/work study positions. Without MFIP funding, participants would have been required to apply through a competitive process for a limited number of positions. This is important, because in prior years, participating colleges had spent their full amount of work study funds. Most work study participants (68 percent) continued with their school and work study commitments for the duration of the project. Sites reported that many participants asked to continue their placements into the next school year.

Implementation

Implementation was a challenge for college and MFIP employment services staff. The first challenge was the short duration of the project. College administrators found it difficult to engage students and spend down allocated funds in the short 15-month period. Enrollment challenges were further complicated by a lack of shared information; sites did not have a list of eligible participants because of state and federal data privacy laws about public assistance status, and instead needed to market the opportunity to the entire student body and solicit referrals from MFIP employment service agencies. Colleges that successfully

14 Data from the December 2014 MFIP Characteristics report: https://edocs.dhs.state.mn.us/lsserver/Public/DHS-4219Q-ENG
engaged students did so primarily through direct, internal marketing or in-person connections. College administrators found that students already enrolled in school were the easiest to engage as they were able to start quickly and were familiar with the campus and its resources. While MFIP employment services counselors made an effort to refer their student participants, college staff reported that many of these referrals were either ineligible due to a lack of student status, or were unable to be contacted via email, phone, or text message. Because many successful participants were recruited directly through colleges, college administrators found it cumbersome to wait on the MFIP employment services paper referral form, a document which confirmed that the interested participant qualified for this specialized funding. Staff suggested in the future that a verbal approval might help to expedite the referral and enrollment process.

Two schools, Normandale Community College and Riverland Community College, were unable to recruit any MFIP participants for their work study programs. Administrators at both sites noted the difficulty of marketing a program to an unknown group of participants. As one college counselor summarized, “it was a good project with good intentions; I wish that we knew who could have qualified!” (Wasmoen, L., 2016). College staff mentioned that they were surprised by the effort required to recruit participants, noting that they thought that the creation of a program would be enough to inspire participant enrollment. Their difficulty in recruitment may have been due in part to the small amount of eligible participants: data from Workforce One showed that both of these sites had only nine eligible students from which to recruit15.

Projects that were successfully implemented employed two different models of service delivery. With the first model, students went through the traditional work study process and found a placement that was best suited to their interests and abilities. In the second model, the majority of MFIP work study students were placed together in a supportive work environment. Administrators employing the first model noted the benefit of student privacy – engaging MFIP students through the traditional work study process allowed students to keep their source of funding private from their colleagues and direct supervisors. Century College primarily used the second model, employing many MFIP work study students in their resource room. Staff reported that having MFIP work study students in the same location helped them build relationships with other students with shared experiences. Making these connections helped students connect with the college, leading to increased confidence and positive personal and professional

15 Data privacy laws prevent the Office of Higher Education and the Department of Human Service from sharing information about participants simultaneously enrolled in both systems.
development. These supportive communities helped students share experiences and resources, as well as build upon each other's successes.

**Employment services**

Employment services providers may have struggled with understanding and communicating the benefits of work study to their participants. Financial aid and work study benefits can be difficult to understand and communicate. Because work study is part of a total financial aid package, students planning on using their total aid packages can choose to either receive a check for the full loan or grant amount, or reduce the amount of their immediate loan aid to leave room for future work study income. The chaos of living in poverty can make it difficult for people to focus on long-term benefits, which can be difficult (Liu, L., Feng, T., Lee, L. & Li, H., 2012), so it is possible that counselors had difficulty promoting the less immediate benefits of the projects, such as decreased loan burden.

A review of case notes and employment plans showed that case managers sometimes struggled to fully support education within the MFIP system. Education activities were part of 92 percent of participants’ employment plans, but only 66 percent of plans included both school and work study activities. Although 2014 Minnesota legislative changes allowed MFIP students’ additional flexibility in including school activities in their employment plans, the policies do not address how to support participants during out-of-school times, such as summer vacation. These non-school times are important in a service system organized around counting hours of allowed activities. Current practice for this break period is to place students into a job search activity, even when that student is not going to be looking for a job. Interim activities are essential for continuation of child care and support services, as well as for adhering to federal work participation requirements. It is recommended that the department provide additional guidance to employment service staff on how to best work with students during periods of time when school is out of session.

Counselors and participants sometimes struggled with the requirements for activity documentation. One case note recorded a participant’s request to her employment counselor that the MFIP system directly access school records rather than requiring her to obtain signed verification from college administration and professors. Administrators noted during interviews that MFIP’s verification requirements can be embarrassing for participants, since getting signatures often requires that the participant disclose their enrollment in MFIP. While the work study group was very small, they did have a higher rate of sanction
than the general MFIP population. Further investigation is required to understand if this is a trend among MFIP participants pursuing a postsecondary education.

**College work study providers**

Information gleaned from staff interviews suggests that this program helped to promote partnership between the department and the Office of Higher Education. In several instances, it encouraged partnering colleges to think differently about working with low-income parents. Additional funding from this project encouraged college staff to reach out in a more directed manner to what was a largely hidden group – very low-income student parents. The ability to hold positions for this targeted group of students provided college staff with the opportunity to provide employment opportunities to students who may have not otherwise been competitive candidates. In addition to employment opportunities, college staff worked closely with MFIP work study students to provide additional support through career development and work readiness training. College staff were committed to helping students gain employment skills to use in their current jobs and in the future: students were offered the opportunity to lead groups, facilitate presentations, and to branch out into different skill building jobs. College providers reported that they built close relationships with work study students, helping them to increase their understanding of the MFIP program and challenges associated with it. College staff also reported making meaningful connections with MFIP employment services staff. If these connections continue, they may help MFIP counselors to be better versed in campus resources, and refer participants they serve accordingly. College staff may also have a better understanding of MFIP so that they may better advocate on participants’ behalves.

Although to an employment counselor, a participant receiving MFIP and pursuing a college education might seem to be the most self-sufficient among the participants turning to MFIP, college staff reminded employment services staff that this group of parents still has many needs:

The process of even getting into college is so difficult. All students need someone who believes in them – many students are kind of on their own and need that extra support, someone to walk alongside them. There is an assumption that they are fine, but they are still in need of support (Jersak, 2016).

College and university systems have their own challenges in serving low-income students, and many non-traditional students can struggle to successfully complete coursework. In 2011, only 31.6 percent of low-
income, first generation college students graduated from a four-year degree period in six years\textsuperscript{16} (Pell Institute, 2011). In this same period, 35.7 percent of students from families with incomes under 150 percent of the Federal Poverty Guidelines (FPG) had dropped out of school without earning any degree or credentials (Pell Institute, 2011). Overall, Minnesota’s two-year colleges have only a 57 percent retention rate between years one and two; of students who complete a two-year degree, only 20 percent enter a four-year program (Djurovich, D., Fergus, M., Henderson, M. & Li, P., 2015).

**Summary**

Throughout the course of this project, college staff found that MFIP participants struggled with a set of common issues. Although students were eligible for child care subsidies through MFIP, the subsidy was often not authorized in a timely manner or did not provide enough hours to cover required campus activities. MFIP’s requirements for documenting and verifying enrollment status occurs frequent and is time consuming. Students also struggled with housing issues, energy bills, and funding for transportation. These small and unplanned expenses can easily derail the progress of parenting students. According to one counselor, “financial stress is one of the biggest reasons that students do not persist. Financial issues are not just about ability to pay, they are also about the stress of financial burden. When you are extremely low-income and trying to figure out managing resources, any extra costs are a burden” (O’Brien, S., 2016).

Both the public assistance system and the college/university system are large and difficult to navigate. College administrators noted that MFIP does not always work well for student participants, and that paperwork and other requirements can be cumbersome and time consuming for both students and staff. The same documents often need to be sent to several locations, and delays in processing can lead to interrupted cash, food, or child care benefits\textsuperscript{17}. Employment services requests to document participation are frequent, unhelpful to the participant, and often embarrassing. Furthermore, participants can often receive conflicting, official MFIP messages in the mail. These challenges add a layer of difficulty to the complexities that are already part of pursuing a postsecondary education while parenting. A director of a student parent center summarized these challenges:

\textsuperscript{16} Students are eligible to receive a federal Pell grant for no more than 12 semesters or the equivalent of six years (studentaid.ed.gov)

\textsuperscript{17} Although this may occur in practice, “known to agency” policy states that participants are responsible only for submitting forms to one of the agencies that contracts with the Minnesota Department of Human Services for delivery of financial, health care, childcare programs, and employment services.
“To increase access, we need to go beyond permission. There is still too much paperwork, unreliable benefits, and the need to submit the same paperwork multiple times. While the policy has changed, the realities of the system remain a challenge for our busy parents. MFIP is a great resource, but it is a lot of work for our students to keep up with what MFIP requires” (Soland, 2016).

While the MFIP Work Study Jobs Initiative did not reach as many students as expected, it seems that MFIP and the Office of Higher Education might benefit from continuing to partner to better serve a group of individuals who are often underserved in both systems.

**Limitations**

This mixed methods study was not designed to ask the larger question about the project: Does work study assist students in staying connected to school and/or graduating? Limitations came from the study design (observational rather than a random control design), the small sample size (N=38), and restrictions in data collection. A future study is recommended to better understand how MFIP and Office of Higher Education can best work together. State statute would have to change to allow researchers to access detailed information about the performance, graduation, and funding of college students receiving MFIP assistance.

**Recommendations**

Although funding for this initiative ended in June 2016, there are still many ways in which the Office of Higher Education and the department can continue to work together to support student parents. State and federal work study positions will continue to be an option for MFIP students pursuing a postsecondary degree. Consequently, the department could work with employment services staff to help MFIP participants better access existing opportunities and build upon recent policy changes which have allowed student parents better access to postsecondary education opportunities. Recommendations for this future work are detailed below and summarized in three sections: Implementation, program operations and policy changes.

**Implementation recommendations**

The MFIP Work Study Jobs Initiative benefitted the 38 participants who enrolled, and was well-received by college partners. This is a small number of beneficiaries, and overall, only 5 percent of MFIP participants are engaged in postsecondary education and could have qualified to participate in this program. Nevertheless, Minnesota’s economy benefits from a more skilled labor force, and the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development urges the state to better educate and train its increasingly diverse
workforce (Hines, 2015). Approximately 63 percent of MFIP participants working with Employment Services have earned at least a high school diploma or General Equivalency Degree and might benefit from additional education\(^{18}\). Administrators should consider how future projects might be structured to support individuals already enrolled in college whilst also engaging participants who might be eager to pursue opportunities for further education.

Besides this, new programs take time to implement: Two-year funding time frames do not allow enough time for full program implementation, thus limiting the ability to establish a program that is stable enough to achieve anticipated outcomes. It is recommended that the department consider issuing new project-based grants for longer periods of time. When possible, the department should mandate data sharing agreements so that partners can have better information from which to work, and better data collected. If it is not possible to share participants’ names, consider providing college staff with the names of employment services counselors who may have been working with eligible participants. It may be helpful to provide funding for a small percentage of administrative costs so that college partners can dedicate time and resources towards recruitment and participant support.

**Program operations recommendations**

MFIP participants in this program were challenged by balancing the many requirements of parenting, work and school. College administrators suggested that MFIP should serve as a support, and not another challenge to balance. They suggested that the system could be improved by helping it to focus on family stability: Providing consistent family cash grants and stable child care. Two providers also noted that it would be helpful to create a system in which forms could be easily submitted and then distributed to required parties within the MFIP system. College staff also suggested that employment services staff could help student parents locate and pay for flexible and reliable child care providers prior to the beginning of the school session. They also felt it was important to ensure that authorized child care hours fully cover class, study, work and transportation time. College staff noted that any costs, even small ones, are an unnecessary burden to extremely low-income families: They suggested that participants’ college success rates might be bolstered through additional financial supports for textbooks and child care copayments. It is recommended that the department and the Office of Higher Education continue to work together to better understand how student parents can access existing resources.

\(^{18}\) Workforce One review of statewide data for May 2016.
Policy recommendations

The success of Minnesota’s labor force is contingent upon developing a skilled workforce to replace retiring workers. Because a large portion of people enrolled in postsecondary schools are nontraditional students, the state legislature should continue to look at ways of supporting this intersection between low-income parents and non-traditional college students. Current state policy, which allows disregard of the financial assistance income provided to student workers, seems to help make school a financial possibility for these low-income families by helping to stabilize and increase their take-home income. Furthermore, the cash and food assistance provided through the MFIP program assists student-parents who might not be able to support their families solely through educational loans. It is recommended that the department continue to support resources for postsecondary institutions that allow them to better support the growing number of non-traditional adult and parenting students. This could include helping postsecondary institutions better connect qualifying student parents to MFIP benefits. It is also recommended that the department review policies that are currently limiting MFIP participants’ ability to engage in postsecondary education activities. These policies include documentation and supervised study time restrictions which are onerous and might be embarrassing to student parents receiving MFIP benefits.

Conclusion

The MFIP Work Study Jobs project supported 38 individuals as they balanced postsecondary school, work and parenting. During this project, participants reduced their financial aid burden by an average of $2,213, with an average quarterly take-home pay of $987. The average net monthly income for these families was $1,537. The majority of participants (68 percent) continued with their placements once they started, and site administrators reported that participants seemed engaged and satisfied with available opportunities. Although the project benefitted project participants, the $500,000 grant was not implemented as quickly or seamlessly as intended, resulting in a net expenditure of $86,210, or only 17 percent of available funds. The work study initiative encouraged useful connections between staff at the department and the Office of Higher Education. Recommendations in this report were provided to assist with future project implementation, policy formulation and planning.
References


Appendix One: Questions for Administrators at Partnering Colleges

1. Why was your organization interested in participating in this project?

2. How did you provide targeted work study funds to MFIP participants? What, if any, additional resources were required?

3. What, if anything, did this state-allocated funding allow you to do differently?

4. Approximately how many participant referrals did you receive? Can you describe the process of working with outside agencies to generate referrals?

5. Were you able to work with all of your participant referrals?

6. How do program beneficiaries describe their program experiences?

7. How will this program effect the way in which you serve future students in the MFIP program?

8. What, if anything, worked especially well?

9. What, if anything, would you do differently next time?

10. What are the three most important things we should know about your experience with this process, and the experience of serving MFIP clients?