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Single Stop USA at Essex County College

**Research and Recommendations on
Outreach and Effectiveness**

Final Report

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I. Executive Summary

Access to higher education is an important step in poverty reduction, and Single Stop USA plays a pivotal role in providing community college students with the tools to stay in school. These vital tools include financial counseling, legal aid, and assistance accessing public benefits. As Single Stop USA wishes to expand its services, it is important to understand the experiences of community college students in accessing public benefits, what barriers they face in this endeavor, and what causes students to drop out of college. In order to serve and help the maximum amount of students, it is important to be aware of what outreach strategies are most effective in attracting clients to Single Stop USA's services. It is also critical to understand the level of satisfaction of current Single Stop clients to highlight possible areas for improvement in Single Stop's delivery of services.

The research team approached Single Stop USA's goals and research questions through a qualitative lens. One hundred surveys were completed by Essex County College (ECC) students to get a general consensus of who the students are, if they have ever taken a break from school and why, and their experiences with public benefits. In addition, Single Stop clients and non-client were interviewed to gain an in-depth understanding of students' experiences with barriers to enrollment, benefits, benefits access, and how to improve outreach services. Lastly, ECC employees were interviewed to ascertain potential collaborative opportunities with Single Stop within the school and discuss outreach strategies.

Barriers to Enrollment

Of the broad population sampled in the student survey, 37 percent of student surveys had taken a break from school for a minimum of one semester, and 31 percent of those students cited

the cost of tuition as the main reason for deferment. For non-client students, interviewees believed financial constraints to be the largest barrier to enrollment, and for almost half, chronic medical conditions affect their ability to remain in school. On the other hand, there was no consensus among client interviewees regarding barriers to college enrollment. Barriers ranged from attaining a work-life balance with school to transportation challenges to homelessness.

Public Benefit Experiences and Views

Both client and non-client respondents have previously used or are currently receiving public benefits. However, the survey results showed 52 percent of students have received no information on public benefits while 68 percent had never inquired about their eligibility. Client interviewees were familiar with public benefits, although many believed they were not eligible. Non-client respondents expressed frustration with the application process. More than half of interviewees needed public assistance but became extremely frustrated with the application process and ultimately gave up.

Single Stop Experiences and Views

The majority of respondents, including survey respondents and non-client interviewees, were unaware of Single Stop USA's presence on the ECC campus. Only 17 and 29 percent of survey respondents and non-client interviewees, respectively, had ever heard of SSUSA. Of employees interviewed, one-half knew of Single Stop and had referred students there in the past. These employees and non-client students uniformly had a positive view of the services SSUSA provides ECC students. Additionally, clients were consistently satisfied with their experiences with SSUSA, although many were unaware of all of the services Single Stop offers.

Outreach Strategies

It was consensus among client and non-client students and ECC employees that fliers are ineffective in student outreach, as they just get lost among the chaos of other posted ads.

Students believed that in-person, student-to-student outreach would be the most effective strategy. Many students expressed a desire to hear about services from a peer instead of “an employee in a suit.” Employees believe that Single Stop should make employee referrals as easy as possible by providing all employees with a handbook of services and pamphlets to distribute to students.

Recommendations

We recommend the following activities for future outreach strategies and service:

1. **Enlist student ambassadors** – Student ambassadors should be recruited through internships or Work Study, because in-person student outreach is preferred.
2. **Enhance publicity and marketing materials** – Fliers are ineffective, and pamphlets and employee handbooks outlining SSUSA services would be more beneficial.
3. **Enhance the use of technology** – SSUSA is lacking a presence on the ECC website, which deters students from contacting them.
4. **Partner with other organizations and departments** – Expanding upon SSUSA’s ECC partners will allow them to better reach the students it seeks to help.
5. **Adhere to appointments** – Single Stop should be aware of wait times and should possibly limit the walk-in hours.
6. **Inform past clients of other services** – Encourage clients to utilize multiple services by educating them on other services SSUSA provide.

II. Single Stop USA

Community college students face a number of barriers and burdens while trying to further their education. These barriers contribute to high rates of non-completion. In October 2008, 3.4 million young American adults were enrolled in community colleges, which was up 10.9 percent from the previous year. However, within six years of beginning a two-year program, 46 percent of students will drop out. Ultimately, only 31 percent of community college students actually complete their degrees (Single Stop USA). Community college students differ from students in “traditional” four-year programs in ways that make them more susceptible to leaving school before completing a degree. In particular, community college students report challenges regarding childcare, housing, financial problems, family illness, and immigration issues (Single Stop USA). Without the appropriate services and resources to mitigate issues, these concerns can lead students to take a break from school or leave altogether.

The Community College Initiative (CCI) seeks to help students access benefits which can reduce the hardships and barriers to continued access that many community college students face. The Initiative works with financial aid departments and other student services to target those students who could most benefit from the free services, which include tax preparation, legal services, financial counseling, and screening for public benefits eligibility (Single Stop USA). Single Stop serves as an intermediary between students and existing state and federal resources for which they may be eligible. Single Stop partners with local initiatives to access available resources and reach out to students. While the short-term goal of this effort is to connect students with the immediate benefits needed to weather financial difficulties and stay in school, the long-term goal is ensuring economic success to allow students to complete their degrees (Single Stop USA).

Single Stop currently works with partners to provide CCI at schools throughout the City University of New York (CUNY) system, as well as the City College of San Francisco, Miami Dade College, and Essex County College. The Benefits Enrollment Network (BEN) technology tool, which screens clients for multiple benefits and services during a 15 minute meeting, is tailored for each state. In 2010, the CCI programs were expected to provide help 8,000 students access \$40 million worth of benefits and services (Single Stop USA). Initial data on the programs suggest that students who use the CCI program are more likely to stay in school (Single Stop USA).

III. Essex County College

Set in Newark, Essex County College is the fifth largest community college in New Jersey and serves a diverse population of students (Office of Institutional Research). In Fall 2009, 13,314 students were enrolled; this was the largest class in college history and an increase of 8.1 percent over the previous year (Office of Institutional Research). Full-time enrollment has increased by 3 percent over the previous year; 59 percent of students in Fall 2009 were enrolled full-time across all four ECC campuses.

Ninety percent of ECC students live in Essex County, almost 40 percent of them in Newark itself. Women consistently make up 60 percent of the student population at ECC. Young adults (those ages 17 to 22) comprise 49 percent of the student population. Another quarter were between the ages of 23 and 30, 14 percent are between 31- and 40-years-old. Eleven percent of students were over age 41 (Office of Institutional Research). ECC is racially diverse. Fifty-two percent of students identify as black, while another 23 percent identify as Hispanic. White students comprise 12 percent of the population, while another 4 percent are Asian/Pacific Islander (Office of Institutional Research).

Retention from Fall 2008 to Spring 2009 was 75.7 percent; retention from Fall 2008 to Fall 2010 was 53.7 percent (Office of Institutional Research). This was short of ECC's goal of 65 percent (Office of Institutional Research). The three-year graduation rate (for first-time, full-time degree seeking students) has been between 5 and 6 percent over the last three years. Even after six years, only 16.4 percent of students graduate. In FY 2008, 962 degrees were conferred, a college record (Office of Institutional Research).

IV. Benefits Access

Benefits access may be more important than ever for American families. One in four jobs does not pay enough to keep a family of four out of poverty, totaling 29.4 million (Water-Boots 2010). Twenty-eight percent of working families are below 200 percent of Federal Poverty Level (Water-Boots 2010). However, participation in work-support programs is low among families with at least one full-time worker; only 5% of low-income, working families with children receive the full package of support for which they qualify (including Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, child care, Medicaid) (Water-Boots 2010). Recent research has sought to understand the low rates of utilization of many public benefits in an effort to expand outreach efforts and encourage participation.

There are many reasons why families do not participate in these programs. Many families lack information on available programs or do not know they are eligible. Many individuals who would benefit from public assistance may think they do not qualify; these individuals may not think they are “poor enough,” may have questionable citizenship status, may not have dependents, or may have been rejected in the past (Sherwood 2009). Benefits applicants may find the application process inconvenient. In-person meetings are often required for document submission, which is especially difficult for those with children or have inflexible work schedules (Sherwood 2009). Applicants may also find government offices inconveniently located, crowded and with long wait times, and a lack of privacy that lends itself to a “DMV-like” experience while discussing personal issues (Sherwood 2009).

Individuals who are eligible for benefits may be resistant to receiving them. Many may decide that a benefit is too low to be “worth the hassle” or else may recoil from a stigma (real or perceived) attached with receiving public benefits (Water-Boots 2010). Some individuals may

have mistrust of government or of the community-based organizations that assist in benefits access (Sherwood 2009). Others may be ideologically opposed to government benefits or may not want to ask for help (Sherwood 2009).

Given the importance of public benefits for many American families, government and organizations are increasingly focusing efforts on expanding awareness, access, and uptake. Building the capacity of community-based organizations (CBOs) can help remove some barriers to receiving benefits (Water-Boots 2010). CBOs and government agencies can work to improve convenience through providing benefits screening at local organizations, including colleges, utilizing screening tools to streamline the application process and eliminate duplication, and by reducing the “hand offs” among staff members (Sherwood 2009).

In order to mitigate the resistance some people feel toward public assistance, government can work with community-based organizations whose community roots make them a trusted source of information and assistance for diverse populations (Sherwood 2009). Using targeted messages to attract diverse populations may also increase awareness and access among those who think they do not qualify. These individuals can also be targeted through cross-referral from multiple agencies and organizations. Agencies could also work on maintaining contact with clients who were not eligible at an earlier date (Sherwood 2009).

V. Methodology

Since barriers to college completion and benefits access vary across demographics and geographic regions, the research team approached this project through a qualitative lens in order to illustrate some of the common themes. Qualitative research is “is a broad approach to the

study of social phenomena and is...pragmatic, interpretive and grounded in the lived experiences of people...” (Marshall & Rossman 2006:2). The social phenomenon of benefits use and access among students at ECC lends itself to a qualitative approach, because it fluctuates among participants, a characteristic that is more appropriately captured through an individualistic approach versus a quantitative method. Although Single Stop USA aims to tailor its services to as many ECC students as possible, its strategies will be best evaluated after a deeper understanding of the student population is known.

While the goal of qualitative research is not to generalize to broad populations, instances where populations have similar demographics and backgrounds allow the researcher to apply the insight that qualitative research offers and ultimately help organizations like Single Stop USA improve its services. Since Single Stop USA is an organization that intends to expand access to public benefits for community college students, uncovering students’ familiarity and experience with public benefits will shape the way SSUSA understands the student experience and improve services to targeted populations. The following sub-sections delineate in greater detail the methods used in collecting qualitative data from students at ECC, both clients and non-clients of Single Stop USA.

Individual Interviews

According to social scientists Rubin and Rubin, “Qualitative interviews listen to people as they describe how they understand the worlds in which they live and work” (1995:3). Because the research project seeks to comprehend the experiences of ECC students regarding college retention and benefits access programs, the researchers explored this topic via the individual interview. Because of the personal nature of the research topic in discussing individuals’

experiences in education, background and socioeconomic conditions, the researchers determined that one-on-one interviews were the best research method, as they permit the interviewee to feel more at ease and allow the interviewer to delve more deeply into participant responses and the subject matter.

Topical, semi-structured interviews¹ were conducted with eight Single Stop USA clients and seven non-clients. The overarching goals of the interviews were to glean information not only on individuals' personal life experiences, their experiences at ECC and with public benefits and benefits application processes but also on their perceptions of accessibility and barriers to benefits access, best marketing techniques for student outreach, and recommendations for improved services at ECC.

Recruitment for the individual interviews was attempted via telephone calls, email lists and in-person recruitment on campus. Names and contact information for SSUSA clients were provided by Kevin Kurdziel, liaison for SSUSA at ECC. He randomly selected SSUSA clients and generated two lists for the research team, from which the researchers contacted clients via telephone and email to solicit their participation in the study. Through use of these client lists, the researchers were able to conduct eight interviews with SSUSA clients for the study.

Additionally, in-person on-campus recruitment provided participants who were not clients of Single Stop USA. The research team first attempted to recruit non-clients by attending a weekly seminar hosted by the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) office, which helps disadvantaged students access higher education. Since the Single Stop office works closely with the EOF office, it was quite easy to arrange for two team members to attend the seminar and briefly explain the

¹ In a semistructured or focused qualitative interview format, "the interviewer introduces the topic, then guides the discussion by asking specific questions...and poses specific questions to get detail, example and context" (Rubin & Rubin 1995:6). Topical interviews are aimed to learn about particular events or processes. (Rubin & Rubin 1995: 6).

study and recruit participants. Approximately fifty students expressed interest in participating in the study and provided their names and contact information to schedule a follow-up. As the research team attempted to reach out to these students via telephone and email, the responses only yielded one or two students who were still willing to participate. Afterwards, team members decided to approach students via alternate means by seeking out ECC students who were in the cafeteria and in a Saturday morning class on campus. This strategy was more successful in obtaining students' cooperation for the non-client data collection. The students who agreed to participate as respondents in our study were ultimately interviewed by three members of the research team.

In addition to exploring the overall goal of our data collection (to understand benefits access among ECC students), the client interviews focused specifically on the participants' experience using Single Stop's services and potential recommendations on how to improve their work at ECC. Appendix 1 is the client interview protocol. The composition of the eight client interviews consisted of one client who used SSUSA tax services exclusively, two who used financial services exclusively and the remaining five who have used a combination of two or more of SSUSA's tax preparation, legal and financial services. Also, four of the client interviews were conducted in person while four were conducted on the telephone.

Non-client interviews focused on participants' personal experiences and opinions on benefits access as well as their familiarity (if any) with SSUSA. Non-clients were also asked to evaluate the perceived effectiveness of SSUSA's marketing and outreach strategies and provide examples of what may be more useful in generating more interest and clientele for the organization. Appendix 2 is the non-client interview protocol. Seven interviews were conducted, and all of the non-client interviews were conducted in person.

Employee Interviews

While collecting data from surveys and student interviews, the research team spent a lot of time at ECC and was approached by several employees looking to know more about the project and Single Stop. Through speaking with ECC professors and administrators, it became clear that employee perspectives and knowledge were potentially valuable additions to the research. As a result, the researchers attempted to contact and interview faculty. Informal phone interviews were conducted with four faculty members to discuss their knowledge of SSUSA, how it can better reach students, and possible partnership with ECC organizations and departments.

The first employee, an employee of the Evening/Weekend College approached us to discuss the project. After expressing a lot of interest in Single Stop and its services, the research team asked if we could speak with her further. The remaining three faculty members interviewed were engaged by calling relevant ECC departments and organizations. Although some interviewees were more than willing to participate, many phone calls and voicemails went unanswered. As a result, the response rate for faculty interviewees was low.

Survey

In order to acquire a more sweeping understanding of ECC students' perspectives and experiences on benefits access and tax preparation, the research team administered a short (less than 10 minute) survey to a self-selected population of students. A survey assists in the awareness of "...the distribution of characteristics, attitude or beliefs" on benefits access among community college students at ECC (Marshall & Rossman 2006:125). The survey's questions aimed to provide the researchers with general student information as well as students' awareness

and use of benefits access programs. In pairing the background information with programmatic questions, the researchers hoped to provide SSUSA with concrete examples of any gaps or patterns in public benefits usage among community college students, whether or not there is a correlation between college persistence, socioeconomic status and benefits access, participants' experiences with the actual application process for public benefits and their history of filing for state or federal tax returns and how to best synthesize these findings for improved services. The survey protocol is Appendix 3.

Recruitment for the survey occurred three different ways. First, two research team members were stationed in a busy hallway of ECC for two hours on a weekday with a sign and free candy to attract potential respondents. Secondly, two research team members then went to common areas of the college, specifically a lower level lounge and the cafeteria, to recruit groups of students to participate in the survey on a week night. Team members went person-to-person and group-to-group and requested student participation, offered them the aforementioned candy, and explained the optional informational component to be entered into a raffle. Participants returned surveys to the researchers immediately after filing them out. Finally, two team members spoke to students in a Saturday morning class and administered the surveys to them, while also informing them of the raffle prizes. We hoped that surveying on a weekday, a week night, and a Saturday would provide a complete picture of the ECC population.

Focus Groups

At the onset of the data collection phase of this research study, the research team sought to conduct 3 different focus groups comprised of both SSUSA clients and non-clients. Once recruitment commenced, we soon discovered that coordinating multiple student schedules and

achieving cooperation was extremely difficult given the time constraints, which resulted in the abandonment of the focus group method and reliance instead on the survey and on individual interviews for all participant categories.

Incentives

Incentives were offered to participants for both phases of the data collection in this study. For the individual interviews, both client and non-client interviewees were given a \$15 gift card to Wal-Mart, Target, or Amazon.com. Students who participated in the survey and voluntarily provided their names and contact information were entered in a raffle to win one of five \$5 gift cards to Amazon.com.

Limitations

Time and Scheduling Constraints

The primary concern for the research team as this project developed was completing the research goals within the allotted one semester time period. Once the team was able to begin recruitment for data collection, it was evident that we faced a number of obstacles. First, many of the students who were contacted to participate in the study did not respond to research team's outreach strategies. As a result, the team had to shift outreach strategies from mass emails to calling individual students.

Secondly, scheduling the time for respondents and researchers to be present at the college at the same time posed additional scheduling conflicts. Eventually, researchers conducted a number of interviews on the telephone and sent the incentive via USPS in order to complete the number of interviews with enough time to allow for data analysis and composition of the final

report. The potential effect that the lower response rate may yield on the data may be that the respondent pool is not as diverse as initially anticipated. Also, moving from all in-person interviews to a number of phone interviews may impact the quality or candidness of the responses from participants if they feel less comfortable, are restrained by time commitments or are distracted by something that is blind to the researcher. However, the students interviews via telephone made many of the same points as students interview in-person, so it is likely that the shift from in-person to telephone interviews did not negatively affect the data.

Recruitment Challenges and Non-Randomness

In recruiting SSUSA clients for interviews, the research team found that there is a significantly high portion of clients who have used only tax prep services. While they are still considered SSUSA clients, drawing participants from this pool only could have potentially resulted in skewed or biased data. As a result, the research team requested a list from Kevin Kurdziel of clients who used SSUSA's legal and/or financial services and not the tax prep service. This intentional request could have implications for the findings of the non-randomized client interviews. For non-client interviews, researchers approached students in the cafeteria and a Saturday morning class, so the sample was not entirely random. We saw no noticeable impact of this on the data received.

While recruiting employee interviewees, researchers used their discretion when selecting the relevant people to whom to speak. As a result, the selection of employees was not random. In addition, there was an extremely low response rate, as many employees did not answer the phone or return the call. However, the four interviews conducted with employees provide

information pertinent to the success of the research. Their insights were extremely useful and provided a perspective from within the school.

Recruitment for the survey was more random but could not be characterized as completely random. Primarily, the first means of recruiting for the survey, sitting at a table in a busy hallway, allows the potential participants to self-select whether or not they will complete the survey. Also, placement of the table in a particular hallway versus a different one may lend itself to the critique that placement favors students or majors in a specific part of the school versus another one. The effects of this on the results of the survey are likely very minor.

Personal Attributes

Another potential limitation that could be a factor in the data collection and findings of the research study is the “relate-ability” of personal attributes between the participants and the researchers. While there is no way to know for certain, differences in traits like language, education, race, religion, or ability, among others, may have affected the willingness of some ECC students to participate in the study.

VI. Analysis: Interviews

Client Interviews

In total, 8 clients of the SSUSA site at ECC were interviewed. Clients felt generally positive about SSUSA experience, though most had only used a few services. Benefits screening was especially underrepresented. Clients seemed eager to refer others to SSUSA or improve outreach, indicating that they genuinely find value in the service and want others to access it. Half of clients interviewed reported that they had children, though all of them reported having adult children. Four students had been attending ECC without taking breaks for at least two semesters.

Barriers to Enrollment

There was no clear consensus about which barriers to enrollment may make staying in school difficult for SSUSA clients or other students. One student noted the difficulty is achieving a balance among work, home life, and school, while another noted that some days, it feels like being a student “isn’t paying dividends.” Students voiced frustration with the institutional processes of ECC, especially the difficulty of navigating both academic advising and counseling for financial aid. One student did particularly note that her full-time hourly job puts her beyond the realm of financial aid from the college, but she does not make enough to pay her full tuition herself. As a result, she foresees being unable to enroll next semester.

Common concerns among clients also included the difficulty in physically getting to the campus, especially for those who do not own a car. One respondent takes classes primarily at the West Essex Campus, though she frequently needs classes or services (such as financial aid or

EOF) that are only available in Newark. Another student works in a school-year position and was concerned with finding work for the summer months so she does not have to rely on public benefits. While these concerns are unlikely to cause a student to withdraw by themselves, they may contribute to a culture in which a student feels they cannot fully thrive.

One student indicated that he had recently been released from prison, but had not felt any barriers to enrollment thanks to an excellent support system. Several respondents indicated they either they or others that they knew had faced “personal” issues (such as deaths in the family and childcare obligations) that sometimes make school more difficult. One older interviewee, who seemed very involved in the ECC community, said that she knows many students facing housing issues. “Many students I know are constantly shuffling between friends’ and family members’ homes, and it makes it hard for them to focus on school,” she said. She believed housing to be ECC’s biggest issue in retaining students.

Experience with SSUSA

Clients consistently reported satisfaction with their experiences with SSUSA. One respondent described that staff as “here to help” with any problem; if they cannot provide services at SSUSA, they will refer clients to someone who can. This sentiment was echoed by a student who did not qualify for services provided but was referred to another organization to help with her concern. One client rated her experience with SSUSA as “a ten out of ten,” noting that “Single Stop has definitely helped me lift some burdens in my life that would have cost a fortune.” Another gave SSUSA a nine out of ten and “was impressed that these services are available for free at ECC.” One student said she has been very satisfied with the services provided by SSUSA as they have “informed me of things I would never have known about.”

Tax Preparation

SSUSA has noted that free tax preparation is the most popular aspect of the program at ECC; half of client respondents had contact with the tax preparation program. One woman said that you would have to be completely oblivious to not know about the free tax preparation provided at ECC –“They have advertisements everywhere!” she said.

One client had previously paid for a private tax services but a changing financial situation made that option too expensive. She had used services at another SSUSA location in Newark but switched to this one after enrolling at ECC. This student found tax prep quick, easy, and organized, and she was able to learn tips for tax filing that would get her the largest refund. This client was also surprised to find out that she could receive help on filing her FAFSA from the same tax preparation clinic. Another student used the tax services in 2010 and also had a “second look” done by a private accounting chain; she was pleased that no errors were found, since the process at SSUSA had been simple and she did not have to wait to see someone. Clients indicated being impressed that the service was free. One respondent had intended to use the tax preparation services but was told that she was completing them too late in tax season. While she would have preferred to have them done at ECC, she was glad SSUSA could refer her to another organization that would prepare them. Overall, all clients were pleased with the tax help received through Single Stop.

Financial Services

Half of the clients interviewed had used the financial counseling at SSUSA or planned to do so. Primary concerns among students were learning how to improve their credit reports as well as learning budgeting tips. One student acknowledged the financial services as the primary

reason she uses SSUSA and noted that “I wouldn’t have been able to get to the next step without their help.” Students were also learned about other resources that could help them develop financial planning skills. On the other hand, some clients interviewed who had used SSUSA’s tax prep or legal services were completely unaware of the financial services offered. They seemed surprised when told of the other services Single Stop offers and wanted to learn more about them.

Legal Services

Six clients interviewed had used the legal services provided through SSUSA, though some students had more prolonged contact than others. A client who met with the lawyer from Legal Services of NJ (LSNJ) regarding a landlord-tenant matter felt the service was great; the attorney made it a point to meet the client at LSNJ offices during a more convenient time. Another student noted that the lawyer was very helpful, direct, and not at all misleading; the attorney “gave me the best advice she could.” This student felt comfortable with the setting and would recommend it to others; he feels “a lot of students who have issues should go to them first” rather than trying to fix a situation alone or retain their own attorney.

While students were generally satisfied with the legal services, they did note some shortcomings. According to one student, “[t]hey were helpful to a certain extent. There were a lot of things she couldn’t help me with. She said that she was going to contact someone at her office who is an expert in that area and get back to me. She never got back to me.” Another student was referred to legal services by an administrator at the West Essex campus but could not receive services as she barely exceeded the income eligibility for legal services; however, the lawyer was able to advise her on how to pursue the matter herself. One respondent was referred

to legal services but has not yet used the services for reasons she did not specify.

Benefits Screening

Client respondents indicated familiarity with public benefits even if they had not personally used them; in fact, many clients indicated that they knew they were not eligible for common benefits and were not screened by SSUSA. One respondent was already receiving some public benefits but used SSUSA to get screened for an extension of an unemployment benefit. Another student knew about the screening process through personal knowledge of SSUSA as well as outreach through EOF, and came to them specifically to find out his eligibility for food stamps. One student who was screened for benefits was told that since she is still her mother's dependent (and has no dependents of her own), it would be more beneficial for her family to wait another year and to file for benefits once she was independent.

Some respondents did not use benefits screening as they were already receiving benefits. One respondent had used food stamps for at least three years; she had received TANF and other benefits when her children were younger but no longer qualifies for these benefits. She did not find the benefits application process difficult, as she was able to reach out to family and friends with any questions she had about the process. "If I ever had any questions about how to get food stamps or anything, I knew someone who could answer it" she said. Even though she did not use the screening service, this student thinks this would be a helpful service if students were aware of it. She described the benefits processing as having "...lots of red tape, poor worker morale at social service agencies, lack of effectiveness and efficiency in helping clients which slows down the process..." which could be mitigated by using an intermediary like SSUSA. Although many of the clients interviewed had used the benefit services, others were unaware SSUSA offered

such advising.

Service Recommendations

SSUSA clients at ECC are in the unique position to recommend outreach strategies and service improvement as the organization seeks to spread its mission due to their role both as students and as having firsthand experience with SSUSA. Students generally felt the mission of SSUSA was important and could help students navigate challenges; as one respondent put it, “when you come into school, you have to keep your mind clear” by resolving the issues that detract from your focus.

Overall, clients did not feel that SSUSA had to work against any stigma toward benefits access in appealing to perspective clients. One student explained that diversity of students means many people already receive benefits and are not ashamed about seeking services “whatever they may be.” Another acknowledged that a stigma towards benefits does exist, but has been lessened by the acceptance that this is a difficult time for financially for all Americans. This student feels the benefits of using SSUSA outweigh any negative perceptions: “It is a privilege to gain access to more resources so I don’t see why people would judge each other.” Another student noted that some students may be unaware of how to get the help that they need, so SSUSA should make an effort to spread the word while deconstructing the stigma associated with benefits.

Some students had concerns as to the availability and convenience of SSUSA services. Noting that students are unlikely to use the service if they think it will be time-consuming, the most common request was a more firm adherence to appointment times. A few students had made appointments that had been delayed after walk-in clients infringed upon the time. This

made students feel like their time was not respected, though one student noted that simply coming out of a meeting to explain that there would be a delay could improve the situation. Another respondent felt that additional staff members would help make the process of meeting run more smoothly.

Tax preparation is the busiest time for SSUSA, but also overlaps with midterm exams at ECC, which leaves students wanting to have their taxes prepared but without the time in their schedule to do so. Students agreed that making this process “quick and easy” would help, though there is no consensus as to how to improve on this service with which most respondents were satisfied. One consideration may be making advertising material clear in explaining how quick and simple the tax preparation process is.

One respondent took classes primarily at the West Essex Campus of ECC and felt availability needs to be improved by students at campuses other than the Main Campus. This student had been referred to SSUSA by an administrator at West Essex but noted that she had never seen advertising material for SSUSA at her campus. The student believed it is productive to reach out to students at other campuses to get services at ECC Newark, as all students must come to the Main Campus for other student services, such as Financial Aid or the EOF office; students who knew about SSUSA’s services would be able to access services when they come in to fill out financial aid paperwork if outreach was increased across campuses.

Areas of Focus

Students provided recommendations for areas on which SSUSA could focus to both increase outreach effort and better fit student needs. SSUSA should be sure to market services in both English and Spanish; students said most services at ECC tried to reach out to students who

may speak Spanish as their first language in order to better serve them.

Students may also be facing issues that SSUSA either does not address or does not advertise that they address. SSUSA should either include these areas in their advertising material or make clear to current clients that they can refer students to organizations that provide services. One student noted that a lack of stable housing may cause students to drop out; another reported knowing students who are homeless or are constantly shuffling between “doubled up” living situations with family and friends. One client wondered whether SSUSA would be able to help her with job training and placement, or whether they could refer her to an organization that could help her find a job. One respondent commented that he does not believe the clinic provides services for criminal cases. He understands these cases may be more complicated, but many students could benefit from having a consultation about a criminal case before it derails their studies.

Two students commented in particular on their frustration with the income eligibility criteria for legal and financial services. One suggestion was to raise the income qualifications for those students who are slightly above the income threshold for these services. Acknowledging that providing services to over-income students would increase the organization’s workload, both students offered that they would be willing to pay for these services through a sliding-scale fee system.

Outreach Methods

All clients we spoke with seemed positive about SSUSA and were personally referring people to it, even if they did not use all the services themselves. One referred to herself as a “walking billboard for Single Stop” and feels that anyone who has met her knows about SSUSA;

this same student was actually able to refer another respondent to this study that same week.

Feedback on outreach was mixed; one respondent didn't "know why anyone wouldn't know about the tax prep services by now because it is so advertised" while another noted that SSUSA "doesn't have a presence at the school." The experiences of these students, like that of all students at ECC, clearly differ based on daily activities. One common theme to emerge is that students were busy and were unlikely to seek information about a service on their own; advertising and outreach must grab student attention where they are most likely to pay attention.

Currently, SSUSA partners with a number of organizations and offices at ECC to "target" students who are likely candidates for SSUSA services. About half of respondents were referred to SSUSA by their EOF counselor or knew about SSUSA since Kevin had done a presentation at an EOF forum. Students agreed that EOF counselors were in a good position to help students but felt this level of personal outreach needed to be spread to the larger student body. SSUSA could pursue this goal by partnering with additional organizations, such as College – YES, on campus and making sure that referring organizations are well-versed in the mission and services of ECC. There was particular interest in working with an organization to help smooth the transition for adult students who are returning to school after many years out of the classroom.

Fliers

Though a majority of clients reported seeing SSUSA flyers throughout the school, few respondents thought this was the most effective way to advertise services. One student noted that the current outreach strategy must be working, as he always sees people in the waiting area for SSUSA services. However, other students felt that the sheer number of flyers used on campus made it easy to lose important information. Noting that she only stopped to look at

flyers with images or that advertised interesting-looking events, she explained that “[t]here are so many flyers that look more interesting around the Single Stop flyers that I don’t look at them.”

A number of clients characterized most of the student body as just in the building to attend class; these students walked to class for that purpose and were uninterested in looking at flyers unless one really stood out. The client from the West Essex campus noted that while she had never seen a flyer for SSUSA there, it is the neon flyers that receive the most attention.

Direct Mailings and Email Outreach

Clients were not optimistic about reaching students through emails to their ECC addresses; in addition to reporting they did not check their own accounts, some students noted that students and professors alike seem unaware that they even have ECC accounts. One client was confident that students do check their USPS mailboxes, though, and felt that continuing to send targeted letters at the beginning of the year was a worthwhile strategy.

Technological Outreach

Students did not feel that SSUSA or ECC made effective use of technology in student outreach. One individual had been visiting the ECC website to check his grades when he saw a link to SSUSA on a news listing on the site. While this garnered his interest, he feels that most people would not notice links on the ECC website, due mainly to the design of the website itself.

Noting that many “social media” campaigns fail without strong support of savvy personnel, one student felt SSUSA should not use Twitter or Facebook to expand outreach as this is not the area of their expertise. However, other students believe that Facebook would be effective for student outreach, as “everyone is on Facebook.” Another student suggest using a text messaging service similar to what ECC uses for weather alerts. Students are likely to check their phones

frequently and would at least notice a message coming in via text message.

Student Referral System

The most common outreach strategy to emerge from talking to clients was using personal interaction to engage students in SSUSA services. Several students suggested that “students could be the example”; students who had used SSUSA services or students who worked at SSUSA could visit classrooms during the beginning of the semester to briefly discuss their experience, explain the available services, and distribute promotional flyers. One student notes that other organizations already use this strategy because “many students are already in one place at one time and they are forced to listen or read flyers that are handed out in class.” This strategy would mitigate the concern that it is easy to overlook flyers on crowded bulletin boards. Two students noted that this personal outreach strategy could also make the services more personal and destigmatize public benefits.

A similar strategy would give flyers or business cards to student clients or workers, which they could then distribute to other students; this may mean handing out flyers in a crowded hallway or keeping a business card handy for a classmate who is discussing barriers they are facing. Clients felt this approach would make students feel more comfortable than receiving materials or a promotional speech from an administration or someone in an authority position. Two clients reporting already taking this type of action on their own, either recommending friends to SSUSA or passing along flyers they had. Clients felt this strategy could be implemented at popular school events (fashion shows, sporting events, etc.), which many students attend.

Non-Client Interviews

Interviews with ECC students who have never used the services of Single Stop USA brought to light some preliminary themes that were ultimately connected to the overarching themes and findings of this research. The first notable trend during interviews was that five of the seven non-clients have career aspirations to enter into social work or a related field. Five subjects have also previously received or are currently receiving some kind of public benefit, an experience they found to be generally unpleasant and difficult. In conjunction with the negative attitude towards the application for public benefits, non-client interviewees also felt that negative attitudes about those who receive public benefits was very prevalent, although the level and severity of such negative attitudes varied on a person's individual experience or situation.

Barriers to Enrollment

Perhaps the most critical issue to address when assessing why college completion levels remain low for community college students in low income areas is what are the root barriers to enrollment that students face. Interviewees reported that financial constraints are always a concern when deciding to invest in and attend higher education, but other factors, at times uncontrollable ones, are the major issues that prohibit continued success and advancement in higher education.

Three of the non-client interviewees reported chronic medical conditions as extreme barriers to initial or continuous college enrollment. Two of them are disabled and have been recipients of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) for a number of years. While they have both been continually enrolled at ECC, initial entry to college was made difficult because of their handicaps and frequent medical concerns. The students shared similar experiences and opinions

about the challenge of maintaining a certain performance level and keeping up with coursework. Although one respondent suffered a mental disability and the other a physical one, both expressed frustrations regarding their inability to hold steady employment and have dealt with discrimination from peers and strangers because of their handicaps and receipt of public benefits. Another participant, a parent of four children, noted that medical concerns played a major role in limiting his ability to complete coursework and continue as a college student. All four dependents suffer from chronic medical ailments that vary in severity and attention needed. Thus, the parent and caretaker must interrupt his academic goals in order to tend to the family medical concerns.

Another major barrier to higher education or public benefits is lack of sufficient childcare. Although parenting is a full time job, the desire for individual success and achievement is not absent from respondents who were parents. A common theme among parent respondents was disappointment about the inability to secure childcare during the evenings, the ideal time to attend classes at ECC. This barrier is confounded by financial limitations in not being able to afford appropriate childcare and/or uncontrollable factors like chronic medical conditions that make child care more difficult to find and consequently more expensive for a special needs child. Other respondents also noted that life cycle breaks like imprisonment, childbirth, or unexpected emergencies have impacted the pattern of college enrollment and accessing public benefits.

Experience with Public Benefits

Four of the seven non-client interviewees have had very negative experiences with public benefits in the past. In one way or another, all of them offered a different version of the same

predicament: needing public assistance and becoming frustrated about the application process and ultimately abandoning the endeavor altogether. The most common issues among these participants were the following: very long lines and wait times at county or municipal welfare agencies; lack of information on eligibility requirements, how to apply and what is available; constant miscommunication between welfare workers and potential clients; and being turned away from certain offices without reasons for why or suggestions on what to do next. After one respondent experienced some of these phenomena, his perspective on the public welfare system was drastically altered and now has a self-proclaimed tainted view of public benefits because of the destructive habits of “the welfare queen.”

One participant disclosed that she receives multiple public benefits, but that her preference for becoming aware of eligibility requirements or available programs is through researching it independently. When asked whether or not she would ever use a service like SSUSA to aid in the application to public benefits, the respondent was very adamant about valuing her own independent research and would not take advantage of such services, although she thinks it would be very beneficial to people who are completely unaware of the intricacies of the application processes.

One respondent expressed high levels of frustration with the public welfare system. Being classified as middle class, he says, has hampered his ability to fully participate in the college experience while being a full time parent. He asserted that middle class citizens tend to “fall in between the cracks” for financial aid and public benefits systems since middle class workers earn too much above any thresholds but do not earn enough to afford some of the basic things in life, thus resulting in sacrificial decision making and tightening of lifestyle choices and obligations.

As previously discussed, two respondents have been recipients of SSI benefits for a number of years and have no intimate knowledge with the application process or eligibility requirements since their own status as dependents requires their parents/guardians to apply. Interestingly, these were the only two interviewees who reported having experience with negative attitudes and comments from others because of their use of public benefits. They claim that some of those who question their benefits are “just jealous” and accused them of “not wanting to work” or being “too lazy to get a job,” thus resulting in a severe filtration of information that is shared among peers.

Role of SSUSA & Recommendations for Outreach

Only two of the non-client respondents had ever heard of Single Stop USA at ECC, and their knowledge was limited to having seen fliers but never following through. One respondent even said “Of course I wanted to know how I could earn more money faster, I just wish someone was standing next to the flier so they could explain it to me!” Both respondents reported they never sought out SSUSA’s services even after seeing the advertised services. One said she files as a dependent and her parents do her taxes and the other said that the unclear information was a deterrent to follow up.

When the interviewees were presented with the marketing materials that SSUSA uses on campus and were asked to evaluate their effectiveness in attracting student interest, a number of critiques were offered. First, and common among 6 of the 7 respondents, was that fliers posted on bulletin boards are ineffective and get lost in the chaos of other posted ads. Feedback on the fliers included maintaining a common logo to link all the different services together so the audience is aware that SSUSA is a “one stop shop” for different things versus three or four

different organizations; fewer words on fliers would be more eye catching; and only use of relevant or effective images/photos should be used.

Another response, which was shared by all interviewees, was that in-person outreach is the most effective way to get to students at ECC. Interviewees shared that students do not typically check their ECC email accounts, so email lists are not the best mode of communication but that face-to-face approach was best in connecting with students. Suggestions on how to achieve this included having student ambassadors go to classrooms and give a brief presentation on SSUSA's services; drawing in professors to pass out fliers/informational pamphlets in order to illustrate their support of SSUSA's work; student workers advertising in common areas on campus like the cafeteria or athletic events; and setting up a table during New Student Orientation, networking, or academic events or other large campus events to attract students and disseminate information.

Participants also shared similar views in suggesting that SSUSA partner with other organizations or departments on campus that have greater outreach and access to a broader student population, like the financial aid office. One respondent suggested leaving fliers, pamphlets, or leaflets at the financial aid desk to advertise while another recommended attending and speaking at one of the periodic seminars the financial aid office does for ECC students. Other partnership recommendations included academic departments and similar organizations on campus WISE Women's Center, Next Step, and Gateway to College.

The respondents shared mixed views on the use of the outreach letter and alternate modes of outreach like social networking sites. About half of the participants agreed that hard copy mailings to home addresses would be more likely to be read than emails, but the content of the

letter should be eye catching and attractive, perhaps by highlighting important features or tag lines for students to read. As for social media outlets, five of seven interviewees admitted that their use of Twitter and Facebook is limited to social purposes only (i.e. keeping in touch with friends and family) while two shared that they use the social networking tools to stay up to date on news and organizations that are important to them.

Employee Interviews

ECC has numerous departments and organizations that help students navigate school and balance their education with other life demands. Some such services are provided by ECC departments, such as: Financial Aid, which helps students fund higher education; Academic Support Services, which provides counseling, career planning, financial counseling, and tutors; and Enrollment Services, which aids students with applying, enrolling, registering, and dropping classes. In addition, because the community college cohort is different than a broader university population, ECC caters to their students through special departments meant to meet their needs. The Evening/Weekend College is an example of such an organization. It provides representatives from Enrollment Services, Financial Aid, Transfer, Career Resources, Admissions, and the Registrar during the evenings and weekends for non-traditional students in a one-stop-shop. ECC also has a department for Community and Continuing Education with career services, job training, and personal and professional development classes.

In addition to college departments, ECC has many organizations and clubs on campus to help students facing various life challenges, such as single fathers, felons, troubled youths, high school drop outs, etc. For example, College – YES is a college prep program for out of school youths, many of whom have been incarcerated or are extremely low income. Gateway to College

is similar to College – YES and reengages high school dropouts to complete their GED and take college classes.

While conducting research at ECC, it became apparent to the researchers that the employees of the departments and organizations such as those described above were a valuable resource that needed to be tapped for achieving the goals of the project. Through telephone interviews, the employees provided beneficial insight into possible outreach strategies that SSUSA could use to attract student clients. The employees were from the following college departments or organizations: Evening/Weekend College (2), College -- YES, and Gateway to College.

Experience with SSUSA

Of the four employees interviewed, two knew of Single Stop and both had referred students there that were facing financial difficulties. One interviewee, an employee of the College – YES Program, had SSUSA come speak to their students at an event in the past. She said, “We haven’t done that in a while, but we should do it again.” She believed that College – YES and Single Stop should collaborate more often. Interestingly, when probing the employees who knew of Single Stop as to the student services provided by SSUSA, the employees could only name one or two. One of the employees who has referred students there in the past said, “I am not 100% sure what Single Stop really does.”

Views of Services

All of the employees were very interested in learning about the services SSUSA provides ECC students and were pleasantly surprised by the breadth of services. Of the four employees interviewed, every employee had a positive view of SSUSA services and believed the students they work with could greatly benefit from being introduced to Single Stop. Two employees work with students who are unavailable during the daytime hours and attend ECC during the evenings

and weekends. Many of them work full-time, have dependents, and have very low incomes. “I deal with a lot of students needing to drop classes, because they can’t afford to stay in school. It sounds like Single Stop could help them stay in school.” Two employees work mainly with high school dropouts and at risk youths, many of whom have been incarcerated. “It is important for them to have the services Single Stop offer. They are a needy group.” Overall, every employee was so impressed by what Single Stop offers ECC students that they wanted more information to give to their students. Three of the employees wanted Single Stop to come do a presentation in the next few weeks and send down more information for them to hand out to students.

Outreach Methods

Employee Knowledge and Materials

One common theme discussed by each employee was the importance for employees in other departments and organizations to be aware of the services. Several said, had they known of all the services Single Stop offers, they would constantly be sending students to talk to them. Unfortunately, it was stated that most departments and organizations do not think to reach out to programs like Single Stop. Single Stop needs to initiate communication and make it easy for employees to refer students to them. “The employee isn’t going to take the time, because they’re busy. However, if you make it easy, they will.”

One important aspect of an easy referral process is providing each department and organization with information pamphlets or booklets for reference by the employees and their students. The booklet should include thorough information on each service provided by Single Stop, including what students qualify, how the service can help the students, etc. Employees can then read the booklet at their convenience, refer to it if a student has a problem, and keep some on tabletops for students to flip through while waiting. In addition, it was recommended that

Single Stop publish shorter pamphlets for the employees to hand out to the students interested or in need for easy reference.

One employee recommended SSUSA create bulletin boards of reference in all the departments throughout the school. The bulletin board should provide a list of services and who to contact. Bulletin boards are more effective than flyers, because they are larger and catch the students' eyes.

Partnerships

Another way to reach more students expressed by all of the employees is partnerships with other organizations and departments in the school. Currently, SSUSA has a partnership with the EOF and recruits many students from its presence at EOF events. It was recommended by the employees interviewed that Single Stop expand their partnerships throughout the school.

Three of the employees expressed interest in SSUSA coming to one of their organized events to speak to their students regarding services. The other organizations within the school speak to student-run clubs to recruit students -- "Clubs at school are really good at getting the word out." In addition, the Evening/Weekend College said it would be beneficial for both them and SSUSA to have a Single Stop representative in their offices for students who are unavailable during the day. "A lot of students come here to drop a class for financial reasons at night. If Single Stop was here in the evenings, we could tell them to go talk to them to see if they can help." Partnerships with such departments like the Evening/Weekend College and organizations like College-YES, Gateway to College, and the WISE Women's Center greatly benefit ECC students and allow ECC to retain more students. Although SSUSA has partnered with some of these organizations in the past, a lasting relationship should be formed.

Technology

One employee mentioned the importance of organizations to have an online presence on the ECC website. She expressed that students always reference the website for information, what services to seek, and where to go to get what they need. “For many students, if they cannot find you on the website, they will stop looking.” SSUSA does not currently have a page on the ECC school website that could be found with the other organizations’ pages or by searching for it.

VII. Analysis: Surveys

Our survey of 100 ECC students provided an insight into a wider range of students on campus. Of the students who participated in our survey, Table 1 shows that 83 percent of the students who participated in our survey had never heard of Single Stop. A promising fact shown in Table 2 is the fact that 79 percent of respondents wrote that they would use a free tax-help program if it was available to them.

Table 1

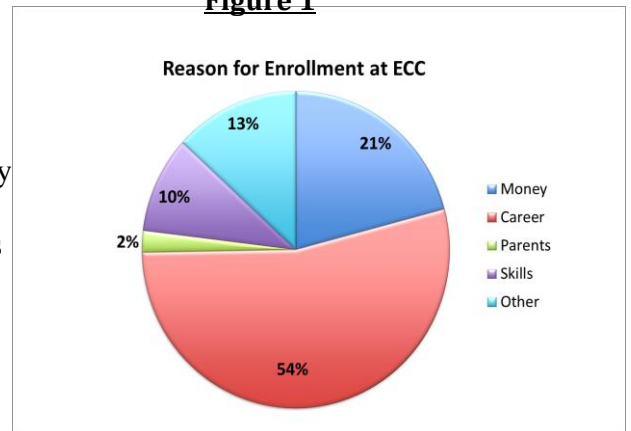
Have you heard of Single Stop?		
Yes	15	17%
No	71	83%
TOTAL	86	

Table 2

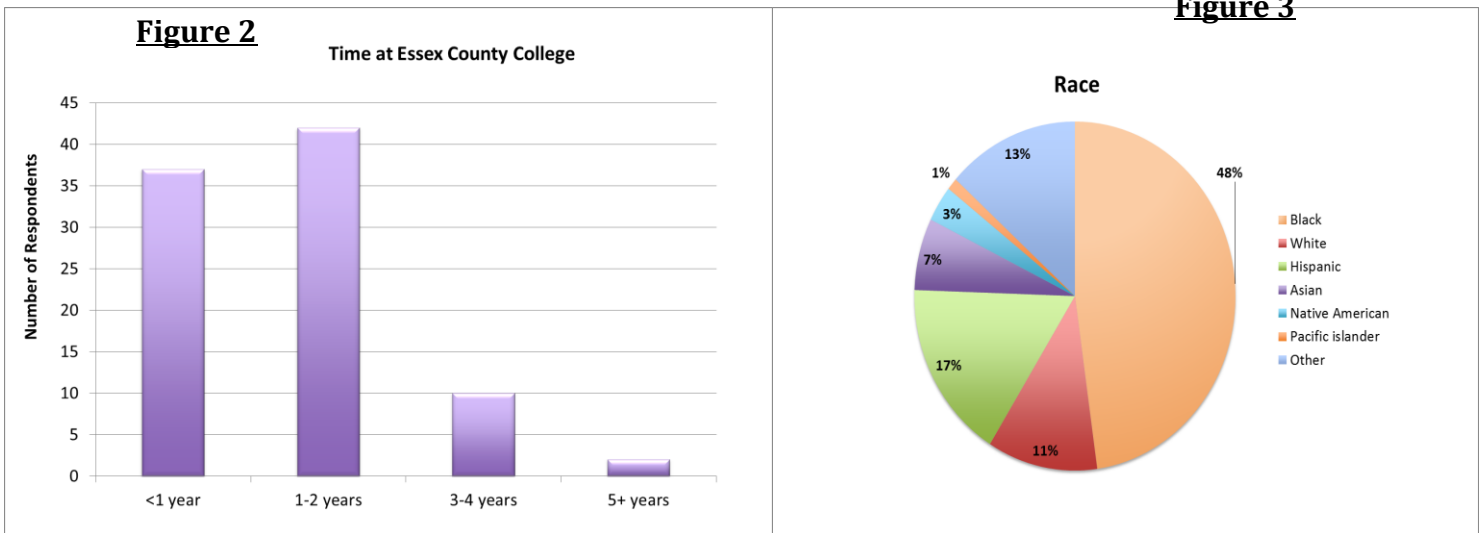
Would You Use a Free Tax-Help Program?		
Yes	61	79%
No	16	21%
TOTAL	77	

Background questions summarized in Figure 1 revealed that most of our respondents enrolled at ECC to increase their career options (54 percent) followed by “to make more money” at 21 percent. Figure 2 portrays the number of years respondents have spent at ECC, with 46 percent having have attended for one to two years and 41 percent who had attended for less than a year. Only 13 percent of respondents had attended ECC for more than the 2 years necessary for an associate’s degree or less (87 percent).

Figure 1



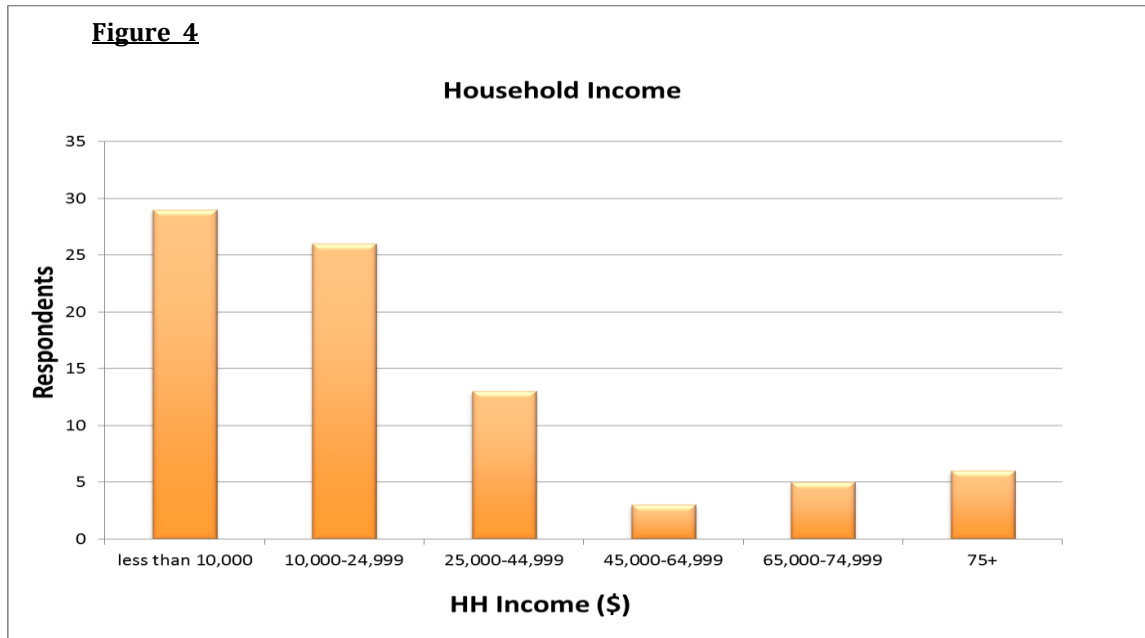
While 58 percent of students never had to take a prolonged break during their college enrollment, those who did take a break cited reasons including the cost of tuition (31 percent), lack of child care (8 percent) and other costs of education (8 percent) as major reasons. Of the 37 respondents who had to take a prolonged break, a plurality (35 percent) took a break for 4 or more years, while the rest were more evenly split among a 1 semester break (24 percent), a 1 year break (22 percent) and a 2-3 year break (19 percent).



Demographics

Demographic responses summarized in Figure 3 revealed that a plurality (48 percent) of our respondents marked their race as black, followed by 17 percent who were Hispanic, with 70 percent were between the age of 18 and 25 and followed by 15 percent between the age of 26 and 35. According to responses to financial questions are shown in Figure 4, with 35 percent of respondents had a household income below \$10,000 with another 32 percent of respondent households earning between \$10,000 and \$24,999 in income. Thirty-two percent of respondents

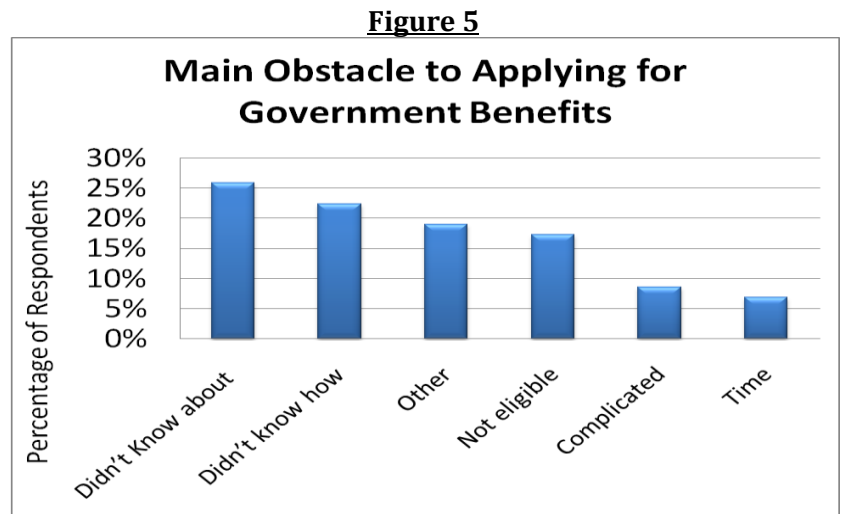
work either full time or part time, with the remainder categorizing themselves as full-time students. Only 8 percent were divorced or separated, 6 percent were married, and the remainder listed themselves as single.



Government Benefits

As shown in Figure 6, most students (52 percent) responded that they received no information on government benefits available to community college students, with only 30

percent answering that they have received some info. Overall, 68 percent of respondents had not checked their eligibility for government benefits, which includes 87 percent of respondents who previously stated that they did not

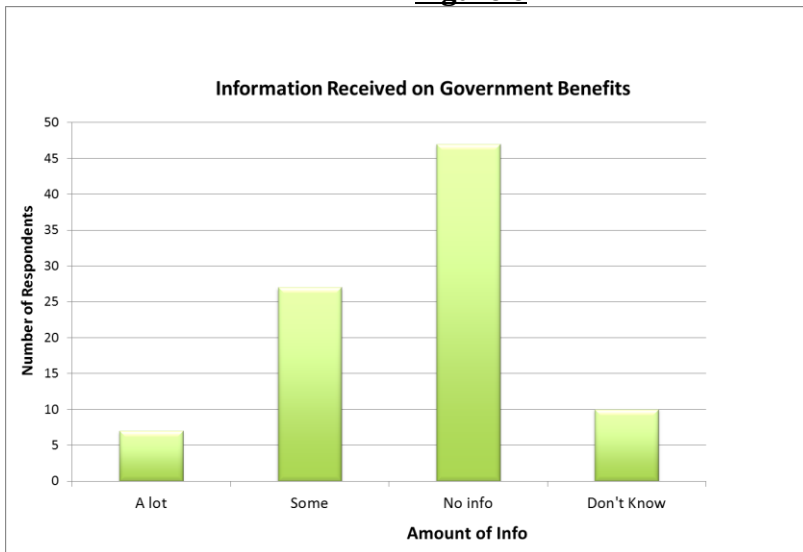


receive any info on benefits. This suggests a strong relationship between information received on

benefits and a student’s likelihood of checking their eligibility. A plurality (26 percent) marked that the main obstacle preventing them from applying for benefits was that they didn’t know about them.

There was no relationship between those who received a lot of information on government benefits and race or income level. However, there was a relationship between race and the likelihood of a student applying for government benefits. Seventy percent of those who applied for benefits were African American, while 17 percent were Hispanic and 13 percent of

Figure 6



applicants were White. This differs significantly from those who did not apply for government benefits, where only 59 percent were African American, 16 percent were White and 25 percent were Hispanic. These numbers show that of the respondents in our sample, African Americans are more likely to apply for government benefits than non-African Americans.

Tax Returns

As Table 3 enumerates, 63 percent of respondents claimed to have filed a federal or state tax return in the past three years compared to 31 percent who did not file and only 7 percent who were unsure. Fifty-two percent of respondents who filed a tax return answered that they did not use a tax preparation service. It is not possible to verify these figures, and it is a question likely to provide false responses, because paying taxes is viewed as a civic responsibility (while not

paying taxes if you owe them is a crime). It is unlikely that based on responses to prior questions that such a large number of students filed a tax return, especially without the assistance of a tax-preparation service.

Eighty-eight percent of the respondents (14 out of 16) who answered that they would not use a free tax help service were between the ages of 18 and 25. Of respondents over the age of 26, 89 percent of answered that they would use a free tax help service if it was available to them. It is possible that this age gap is caused

Table 3

Filed Tax Return in Past 3 Years?		
Yes	57	63%
No	28	31%
Not Sure	6	7%
TOTAL	91	

Did You Use a Tax Help Service?		
Yes	30	48%
No	32	52%
TOTAL	62	

by confusion. Younger students may not understand what a free tax-help service is. There was no clear pattern of differences on the free tax help service or filing a tax return question based on race or income, age was the main only factor that separated respondents.

Responses on Single Stop USA

Of the 15 students who had heard of Single Stop USA, 86 percent were African American. There was a greater ethnic mix in the students who had not heard of Single Stop, however, all 15 Hispanic students who responded to this question marked that they had not heard of Single Stop. 80 percent of those who had heard of Single Stop were between the ages of 18 and 25, and only one respondent who answered yes was over the age of 35.

Only 64 percent of respondents over the age of 36 filed their federal or state tax return, and 29 percent of those over the age of 36 who filed their tax return used Single Stop to file. Of course this just represents two students. Age seems to be the major differing characteristic between those who used Single Stop and those who did not, with no clear differences between

racial or income characteristics between the groups that did and did not use Single Stop. The only two unifying features that all four respondents who used Single Stop had in common were that they had applied for government benefits, and they all filed their tax return. While it is only a sample of four, it is a positive sign that no client was unaware of the services that Single Stop performed. Of the four students who used Single Stop clients, three were African American and one was Native American. Two were between the ages of 18 and 25, and two were between the ages of 36 and 55.

Open-ended Responses

Our follow-up question on government benefits provided some insight into the reasons students do not investigate programs that may help them. Six students wrote that they did not know how to check their eligibility, while three wrote that they did not have the time to apply and one listed not wanting to be dependent on the government. Of the students who did apply for government benefits, three walked into a social services office in Newark and two applied online for food stamps and other benefits.

This survey provided insight into characteristics of some ECC students. However, it is difficult to break only 100 surveys into subsets for more extensive crosstab results, especially when only 15 respondents had heard of Single Stop and only four had used SSUSA. The survey responses indicate several trends that may be useful to SSUSA. The increased likelihood that African Americans will apply for benefits, and the greater willingness of older students to use a tax preparation service, point to two populations that Single Stop may want to target in their marketing materials. For younger students, SSUSA may need to perform an educational function (why the services they offer could be useful) if they want to attract this population.

VIII. Recommendations

After completing data collection and analysis, we drafted a list of recommendations for Single Stop USA on improved outreach and services at ECC. Prior to finalizing the list, we spoke with Kevin Kurdziel for feedback on our recommendations and Single Stop's current practices in order to ensure that our we were not recommending strategies that were already being pursued. The following list is a final list of recommendations for Single Stop at ECC based on both our findings and conversation with Kevin.

Recommendation 1: Enlist Student Ambassadors

During data collection, the participants recounted that in-person student outreach is preferred. Kevin is the primary contact for students at SSUSA, but one person alone may not be able to achieve such a strong level of outreach for the organization. He currently works with two part-time employees of ECC who have been integral in expanding Single Stop's outreach services. However, we suggest expanding the role of students and creating "student ambassador" positions, which would be student workers or interns that serve as liaisons between the student body and SSUSA. Perhaps the most effective student ambassadors for Single Stop would be former or current clients of the organization, since they would be the most knowledgeable on the services that Single Stop provides. Furthermore, their subject experiences would strengthen the testimonies of the student experience at ECC and with the organization. Clients should also be given pamphlets after they receive services from Single Stop to give out to friends.

Student ambassadors may be able to speak in classrooms about their experiences using Single Stop and distribute informational materials. While professors may be hesitant to give up

class time, some professors invited our team to speak to their classes about our project and other organizations do connect with students during class time, so some professors are likely to allow SSUSA representatives into their classrooms. Even if full cooperation with faculty and staff is not achieved, the ability to reach out to a handful of classrooms could prove valuable for Single Stop client recruitment.

Student ambassadors can also recruit and distribute Single Stop materials at large scale campus events throughout the year, such as new student orientation, placement testing, networking events, athletic events, and social events. In addition, student ambassadors can be available in high traffic common areas, such as the cafeteria, to answer questions and provide information on SSUSA services. Our research also found that other organizations at ECC use this method of in-person outreach and it has proven successful in garnering interest in organizations and events on campus.

Although Kevin has attempted to work with the Social Science Department in the past for internship placement, his efforts proved fruitless due to lack of student interest. However, if SSUSA explored the possibility of partnering with the Federal Work Study Program at ECC or worked with the Registrar to provide college internship credits, student interest may increase. Kevin has attempted to make Single Stop a work placement for Work Study students in the past to no avail, but with the new administrative leadership in place at the college, partnering should be revisited. We recommend that exploring student internships and Work Study placements be again considered as a means to strengthen Single Stop's presence on campus.

Recommendation 2: Enhance Publicity and Marketing Materials

It was a common consensus among students that fliers are ineffective in attracting

students. However, both students and administrators alike mentioned the usefulness of having pamphlets with Single Stop information as an effective outreach strategy. Since SSUSA is grant-funded at ECC and the allowable costs within that grant are limited, Kevin suggested that a headquarters-based pamphlet be produced to communicate all of Single Stop's services at community college sites. We recommend that such pamphlets include detailed information about the varied services Single Stop offers and how to contact the administrators on site. These pamphlets can then be used when the aforementioned student ambassadors recruit on campus.

In addition to pamphlets, staff members discussed the importance of having desk copies of a "Single Stop Handbook" that they could quickly reference when speaking to students who may be in need of Single Stop's services. We recommend creating a handbook that would provide more detailed information than the pamphlets and will also serve as a means to liaison between the college administration, students, and Single Stop. This handbook should be given to all of the partners described below in Recommendation 4.

When producing publicity materials, the materials need to be cohesive and have a common logo for proper SSUSA branding. Research shows that the flier materials that are currently used at ECC to advertise Single Stop's services are not uniform and do not relay the message that Single Stop offers all of those services. One student even said, "It looks like there are three or four different groups that are advertising tax prep, legal and financial services. They need a common, visible logo on all the fliers." By including the Single Stop logo in a visible, clear place on the marketing materials, students will understand that it is a "one stop" place for many services, rather than feeling like they need to jump around from organization to organization.

Recommendation 3: Enhance the Use of Technology

Currently, SSUSA is lacking a presence on the ECC website. Single Stop USA needs to have a list and description of services, hours, and contact information on the website for student convenience. Kevin shared the challenges present in communicating and coordinating updated information with the IT department at ECC, but he is hopeful that the new college President, who has an affinity for technology, is planning to revamp the college's website. We recommend exploring the possibility of creating a "Single Stop @ ECC" page that includes all relevant information and services, and potentially the ability to make appointments online.

In addition to the ECC website, Facebook and Twitter can provide free avenues to advertise special events and keep clients updated. While Single Stop currently has a Facebook page, further advertisement for this and the creation of a Twitter page can be included in the improved paper advertisements (pamphlets and handbooks) as well as on the proposed "Single Stop @ ECC" webpage. Kevin noted that the new college President recently lifted the restriction of accessing social media sites on school computers in order to expand outreach and communication to the student body, and we recommend that Single Stop continue to utilize these methods for client outreach and information.

Recommendation 4: Further Partnerships with Other Organizations

SSUSA currently partners with a number of organizations for targeted outreach to potential students, including EOF, Financial Aid Office, and Stay in Step. We recommend expanding SSUSA's partnerships with other organizations and school departments that help students facing difficulties staying in school and help adult students return to school, such as College – YES, Gateway to College, and the Evening/Weekend College. In addition, since adults

with dependents are more likely to qualify for benefits, Single Stop should consider establishing a relationship with the campus child care center to recruit more clients. By expanding partnerships with organizations and departments throughout the school, SSUSA can better reach the students it seeks to help.

Another department that would be a strong and beneficial partnership for Single Stop is the Financial Aid Office. Kevin noted that under the college's previous administration, creating strong ties with this office was often challenging and bureaucratic, but he is hopeful that barriers in collaboration and communication will no longer be obstacles with the new administration; we recommend giving a high priority to establishing this relationship. Since Single Stop serves students with financial difficulties and most students who go to the Financial Aid Office experience difficulties, a system or referral and partnership is appropriate. Moreover, this partnership would be an asset in facilitating the dissemination of fliers and pamphlets to students who visit the Financial Aid office.

Recommendation 5: Addressing Operational Concerns

While student respondents noted that general waiting time and challenging appointment scheduling serves as deterrents to seeking out new programs and services, Kevin is very intentional about keeping an open door and appointment-less policy in order to welcome students at times that best suit their needs. The only Single Stop services that require appointments are for legal counseling, which he agrees should be organized better with more awareness of wait times in mind. Although we understand why an open door policy may be beneficial for some students, we recommend that SSUSA adhere to their appointments in order to keep happy those clients whose busy schedule necessitates prior planning.

While Kevin currently informs students of Single Stop's other services, many students may not be eligible or in need of another service at that time but should be given materials (i.e. the recommended pamphlet) to take home for future reference. A combined effort of Kevin's verbal information along with hard copy and web based materials can amplify cross-referral services and increase the number of students who go to Single Stop for multiple needs. Additionally, Single Stop should continue its strategy of following up with students after several months, including those students who may have been income-ineligible at the initial meeting in case circumstances have changed.

Students also expressed frustration at exceeding income eligibility levels for the legal counseling clinic at Single Stop. Multiple students noted a willingness to pay for these services, as a sliding scale fee system would be less expensive and more convenient than seeking a private attorney or legal counselor. Some of the interviewees appeared confused as to whether or not there was an income eligibility standard for financial services as well. While the income eligibility is required for legal services, Kevin posited that student hesitance in seeking out financial counseling or other Single Stop services was a function of stigmas that surround the work of the organization and its partnership with the EOF department. If students are ineligible for the EOF program or the legal services at Single Stop, then they assume they are not allowed to access other services, for which there are no eligibility requirements. Consequently, in order to minimize student misconceptions about Single Stop's work, the organization needs to maximize its advertising and emphasize the eligibility requirements (or lack thereof) for participating.

Lastly, Kevin shared that since Single Stop's decision to switch its database and tracking program to BEN, Single Stop at ECC has been able to expand targeted outreach and services and has already reached 80% of its goal for this year. Since BEN tracks referrals to other Single Stop

services, trends and follow-up meetings in real time, Kevin and Single Stop can capture a better picture of what its client pool looks like and strategize ways to increase and improve services, especially after viewing our list of recommendations. He hopes that the incorporation of our recommendations paired with BEN's skills will continue to strengthen Single Stop's presence at ECC. We suggest that Single Stop continue to focus on the array of demographics and information that can be provided by BEN and implement our recommendations based not only on these figures but also on the findings of our data collection.

IX. Works Cited

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X. Appendices

Appendix 1. Client Interview Protocol

Background

- How long have you been attending ECC? Are you seeking a degree, or just taking classes to learn skills?
- What are you studying? What do you hope to do with your education?
- Can you tell us a little bit about your family—what is your living situation? Do you have a partner? Do you have children? Are you a caregiver for anyone?
- Age

Barriers

- Have you been continually enrolled since you started here, or have you taken breaks?
 - If you took breaks, were they by choice, or did you feel like it was necessary?
- Have you faced any difficulties that made staying in school, or keeping up the work, more difficult?
 - Financial concerns—difficulty paying tuition, buying books
 - Work issues—inflexible schedule makes it difficult to do attend classes
 - Family issues—difficulty obtaining child care, caring for other dependents
- Do you feel as if the benefits Single Stop offers have relieved some of the burdens you face while attending college?

Experience with Single Stop

- How did you find out about the program?
 - Did you notice any outreach material around campus that influenced your decision to use Single Stop?
- Did the outreach materials you saw/received from Single Stop accurately represent the services that were offered?

- Were the outreach methods you have seen from Single Stop effective in getting you in the door? Why or why not? If not, what method could be more effective in spreading the word of Single Stop's services?
- Discuss different methods of outreach—flyers, email, letters, social media, student-to-student outreach.
- What motivated you to use the services Single Stop offers?
- What services have you used through Single Stop?
- What was your experience with the benefits/tax preparation of Single Stop?
 - Prior to Single Stop, did you have help with tax prep/benefits? Who provided this service? How do they compare to Single Stop?
- Discuss your overall experience with Single Stop. Were you satisfied? Did it help remove the barriers?
- What could Single Stop have done better/more?
- Would you recommend Single Stop to a classmate? Why or why not?

Benefits

- What is your attitude towards the benefits offered through Single Stop? Do you feel as if there is a stigma on campus surrounding the use of the benefits?
- Did you know/think you were eligible for government benefits before going to Single Stop, or did you learn there? If you did know you were eligible, how did you find out?
- Have you tried to apply for benefits in the past?
 - Were you successful
 - If YES -- How did you apply for the benefits in the past? Did you get/need help in the process? Did you find Single Stop made it easier to apply for the benefits?
 - If NO – Why? What held you back from applying for the benefits?
- Did you apply for benefits after being found eligible? What was this process like?

Appendix 2. Non-Client Interview Protocol

- Distribute gift card reward
- Introductions
- General attitude toward public benefits--forms of public benefits are: food stamps, TANF, SSI, Medicaid, Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Energy Assistance, Child Care Assistance (like Head Start), Transportation Assistance
 - What do you know about these? What are some programs you are familiar with?
- Personal relationship to benefits
 - Have you or anyone you know been a recipient of public benefits?
 - If yes, which ones?
 - If no, why not? (Not aware of eligibility, afraid of applying, etc?)
 - What are the most common ways people learn about benefits access programs and applications?
 - Was it an easy or difficult process for someone to access benefits?
 - Was it an easy or difficult process for you or someone you know to apply for benefits?
 - What are some of the pros and cons to the current way to apply for and access benefits? (online vs. in person/mail in applications; in person interview requirements; financial requirements; versions in different languages; etc...)
 - Are some benefits more difficult to access than others?
 - Were there benefits that you did not even know about until you spoke to someone about them?
 - How do people know if they are eligible for benefits—does someone ever tell them, or do they have to figure out on their own?
 - Have you ever experienced negative attitudes or behaviors because you receive public benefits? Why do you think that is?
- Improving the benefits process—what can organizations do?

- What could be done to make benefits easier to understand, easier to access, and/or more positive?
- If you saw an ad promising to help determine what benefits you might be eligible for, for *free*, what would your response be? Would you be curious enough to pursue it?
- Would you be willing to go to an organization like this just because of an ad, or would you need to hear it from someone else (word of mouth, referral from financial aid, etc.?)
- What would be the best way to get to you with such an ad?
- Do you ever use Facebook or Twitter or other social networking sites to learn about academic, educational, professional etc. organizations and services?
 - If yes, what kinds of groups?
 - If no, what is your primary use of these social media tools?
- Email to your school account vs. ads on campus vs. outreach through social media (probably Facebook)
 - Show current ads being used at ECC
 - If you are a SSUSA client, what are some positive and negative experiences you have had in working with the organization? What can SSUSA do to improve their practices from your experience?

Appendix 3. Survey Protocol

Single Stop, USA: Barriers to Access and Effective Outreach at Community Colleges SURVEY

Thank you for participating in this short survey for Single Stop, USA. As a thank you for your time, participants who complete the survey in its entirety will be placed in a raffle for three \$5 Visa gift cards. Your responses are anonymous, and your contact information will be used solely for contacting the winners of the raffle.

College Questions

1. How long have you attended Essex County College?

- Less than 1 year
 1-2 years
 4-3 years
 5+ years

2. What was the main reason you decided to enroll in college? Please choose one answer.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Make more money | <input type="checkbox"/> Learn a new skill |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Increase career options | <input type="checkbox"/> Other |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Parental pressure | |

3. Have you ever had to take a break from college for a prolonged period?

- Yes
 No (**go to question 4**)

If YES to Question 3

a. How long was your break from college?

- 1 semester
 1 year
 2-3 years or more years
 4

IF YES to Question 3

b. What was the main reason you had to take a break while working towards your degree? Please choose one answer.

- Cost of tuition
- Other costs of education – books, supplies, etc
- Conflict with job/employment
- Lack of child care
- Lack of transportation
- Health problems
- Other

Benefit Questions

4. How much information have you received on the government benefits (i.e. food stamps, TANF, etc) available to community college students?

- A lot of information
- Some information No
- information Don't know

5. Have you ever checked your eligibility for government benefits (i.e. food stamps, TANF, ETC)?

YES, how did you do so? Please explain in the space below.

NO, why not?

6. Have you ever applied for benefits?

- Yes
- No

IF YES to Question 6

a. If you had to describe the

application process in one word, what would that word be?

Confusing

Simple

Clear

Other

Difficult

IF NO to Question 6

b. What was the main obstacle that prevented you from applying for benefits?

Lack of time

Too complicated

Didn't know how

Didn't know about them

Not eligible

Other _____

Tax Questions

7. In the past 3 years, have you filed your federal or state tax return?

Yes

Not sure

No

If you answered **NO** to Question 7-

a. Why did you not file your state or federal tax return in the past 3 years? Please explain in the space provided.

If you answered **YES** to Question 7-

b. Did you use a tax help service (i.e. H&R Block)?

Yes

No

If you answered **YES** to Question 7-

c. Did you use a computer-based tax help program?

Yes

No

8. If there was a free tax-help program available to you, would you participate in it?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	
	<input type="checkbox"/> No	
9. Did you get a tax refund in the last 3 years?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
10. Have you received an Earned Income Tax Credit in the last 3 years?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure
	<input type="checkbox"/> No	

Single Stop Questions

Have you ever heard of Single Stop, USA?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No (Go to Demographic Questions)
If YES to Question 13-		
a. Have you ever used Single Stop?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No

Demographic Questions

How would you describe your race?	<input type="checkbox"/> Black	<input type="checkbox"/> Native American
	<input type="checkbox"/> White	<input type="checkbox"/> Pacific Islander
	<input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic	<input type="checkbox"/> Other
	<input type="checkbox"/> Asian	
Age	<input type="checkbox"/> under 18	<input type="checkbox"/> 36-55

	<input type="checkbox"/> 18-25	<input type="checkbox"/> 55+
	<input type="checkbox"/> 26-35	
Annual Household Income	<input type="checkbox"/> Less than \$10,000	<input type="checkbox"/> \$45,000-\$64,999
	<input type="checkbox"/> \$10,000-\$24,999	<input type="checkbox"/> \$65,000-\$74,999
	<input type="checkbox"/> \$25,000-\$44,999	<input type="checkbox"/> \$75,000+
Occupation	<input type="checkbox"/> Full-time	<input type="checkbox"/> Full-time student
	<input type="checkbox"/> Part-time	
Marital Status	<input type="checkbox"/> Married	<input type="checkbox"/> Divorced
	<input type="checkbox"/> Single	<input type="checkbox"/> Separated
Number of children	<input type="checkbox"/> None	<input type="checkbox"/> 3
	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 5 or more

Contact Information- (FOR RAFFLE USE ONLY!)

Name _____

Address _____

Phone _____

Email _____