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Interviews with Influencers: Dr. Susan Gaulden

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This [special edition](#) of Interviews with Influencers spotlights college completion as we approach College Completion Day on May 19th. Chazz Robinson (Education Policy Advisor) sat down with Dr. Susan Gaulden, Vice President for Strategic Initiatives at Passaic County Community College. As one of the first recipients of the federally-funded Postsecondary Student Success Grant, Dr. Gaulden shares how targeted federal investment is helping more students stay on track, return to college, and earn their degrees—offering an inside look at what real impact looks like on campuses.

Video Transcript

Chazz Robinson: All righty, welcome back to another episode of Interviews with Influencers. As College Completion Day approaches on May 19th—mark that in your calendars—we’re featuring experts who are helping students not just get into college, but also get through college.

Today, we're joined by Dr. Susan Gaulden, Vice President of Strategic Initiatives at Passaic County Community College (PCCC). PCCC is a recipient of the federally funded Postsecondary Student Success Grant, which supports efforts to improve student outcomes and boost retention. Dr. Gaulden plays a key role in leading the college's implementation of the grant, and she's here to discuss the impact this federal investment has made in student success.

How are you today?

Dr. Gaulden: I'm well, thank you. Thank you for having me.

Chazz Robinson: So much is going on, and I want to start with this: In your leadership role at PCCC, what does it mean to receive federal grants like the Postsecondary Student Success Grant to help your students complete college?

Dr. Gaulden: Well, it means a whole lot. Grants like this give us the opportunity and flexibility to pilot different intervention strategies and see what truly works for our students. Best practices don't always translate well when implemented on a new campus, but with this funding, we have the breathing room to try new approaches—some work, some don't, but the freedom to experiment is invaluable.

We've also been able to collect a lot of data, which helps us make informed decisions about modifying our policies, procedures, and practices to better serve our students.

Chazz Robinson: I love that. Out of pure curiosity, where is PCCC located, and what kind of students do you serve?

Dr. Gaulden: Our main campus is in Paterson, New Jersey, and we have two additional campuses—one in the City of Passaic and another in Wanaque. We also operate the Public Safety Academy, although those students aren't part of this particular grant project.

Paterson is one of the most socioeconomically challenged communities in the state. Many of our students qualify for Pell Grants due to low estimated family contributions. We also serve many nontraditional students—adult learners, parents, guardians—who face a range of personal challenges. But I have to say, they are some of the most resilient and determined individuals I've ever met. Seeing them cross the finish line always brings tears to my eyes.

Chazz Robinson: You almost got me tearing up. I'm from Milwaukee—one of the poorest cities in America—and I remember MATC being the downtown community college. Students bring so much with them on their educational journey, and we don't always acknowledge that. Funding like PSSG is so important. What services and resources have you been able to provide through the grant?

Dr. Gaulden: I'll start with one of our main goals: We're serving 400 students through this grant—200 are "stopped-out" students who left PCCC for at least two years, and 200 are current part-time

students identified as being at risk of stopping out. We use six criteria, and if students meet at least three, we enroll them in the program.

The heart of the program is success coaching. Every student in the program is paired with a ReConnect Success Coach, trained through InsideTrack's Foundational Coach Training, which is a best practice recognized by What Works Clearinghouse. Students meet with their coaches every two weeks, either in person, on Zoom, or over the phone—whatever works best for them.

Our students often have jobs, children, or caregiving responsibilities, so flexibility is key. Success coaching has been the most impactful part of the program, hands down. Students consistently tell us in surveys and focus groups that having someone who believes in them and connects them to personalized resources has been life-changing.

We also provide a one-time \$200 emergency stipend, processed through their coach. It's not just handed out—we want students to engage with ReConnect and receive ongoing support. We've also distributed laptops, which surprises some people. You'd think everyone in college has one, but many of our students were trying to write papers on their phones.

Chazz Robinson: So you got chills on my skin. It makes me reflect on my educational journey. Like going to college was the first time in three years that I had a bed. It was the first time that I had a library. And people are shocked when they hear that. It speaks to your point that students are viewed as unprofessional or not a good student. The fact that a student is willing to write a paper on their phone, that speaks volumes to them wanting to achieve a good outcome from their educational experience.

Dr. Gaulden: I completely agree. Our students often achieve in spite of tremendous obstacles. And many don't feel comfortable asking for help. That's why we build support into the program. They don't have to ask—we identify the need and present solutions.

In addition to emergency stipends and laptops, we also offer merit-based awards: \$175 at the end of each semester if students are actively participating in the program. That means keeping up with bi-weekly coaching sessions and attending at least two ReConnect-sanctioned events, including workshops, activities, or anything focused on academic support, career readiness, financial literacy, wellness, or even family-friendly fun.

We've had to adapt over time. At first, most workshops were scheduled during the workday, but many students couldn't attend. Now we offer sessions at multiple times throughout the day and we host everything online when possible. We also record sessions so students can access them later.

We cover some course materials for students in hardship and have invested in Open Educational Resources (OER) to reduce textbook costs. We've even paid for calculators and other course-specific supplies. For students fluent in another language, we pay for credit for prior learning exams—like

CLEP or the FLATS test—so they don't have to take unnecessary language courses. That saves time and money.

Chazz Robinson: You're already touching on this, but what are some of the key lessons or best practices you've learned from implementing this program?

Dr. Gaulden: Yes, and I wanted to mention one other thing. It wasn't grant funding that helped, but our college was able to provide additional institutional support. I'm really proud to work at Passaic County Community College because they stepped up. They said if a returning student has a past due balance from years ago—which is often a point of shame and a major barrier—they would forgive that debt. But there's a catch: the student must successfully complete six credits upon returning. That way, the college knows they're serious, and there's some skin in the game, which matters.

The college also allows students to take one summer and one winter course for free. Any out-of-pocket expenses remaining after financial aid and institutional aid are waived. This has really helped students who have reached the max timeframe for financial aid continue progressing without added costs. It's a game changer. This was all institutional commitment. We're currently conducting return-on-investment data analysis. My hope is that we'll show this actually brings money back into the college by bringing students back and helping them persist. Ideally, it becomes a program that pays for itself. I'll let you know once that ROI report is finished.

You asked about best practices, and I want to highlight how successful our program has been. We launched our first student cohort in July 2023. Outreach specialists handled calls, set up events, and started with just 13 students. Right now, we have 325 students enrolled. We've seen exponential growth. As a former math professor, I can say it's been slow and steady, but the curve is rising fast. Currently, we have over 170 at-risk students in our program and more than 150 students who have returned after stopping out. That's huge. Of the students who returned before the current spring semester, about 270 total, 47 have already graduated with their associate degrees. And these aren't random students. These are students who stopped out or were at risk of doing so. We got 47 across the finish line.

By the end of this semester—graduation is coming up—we're on track for another 25 to graduate. And by the end of summer, through our three summer terms, we expect around 20 more. That puts us close to 100 graduates already. For those who haven't graduated yet, many have earned at least 20 credits toward their degrees. They're well on their way. As of December 2024, we had eight students transfer to four-year institutions. That number is low right now, but I expect it to grow the next time we run the report. Again, we've seen exponential growth.

People sometimes underestimate what "impact" really looks like. They want to hear big numbers, like 10,000 students. But getting 20 students to return, especially students who've faced major obstacles, is a monumental achievement. It's incredibly hard work to get even five students to re-engage when life

is pulling them in other directions. Outreach staff are trying to re-spark that belief in college while students are dealing with jobs, kids, and bills. Meeting students where they are is no small feat.

Chazz Robinson: I tell people all the time, the beauty of community colleges, at least the ones I've experienced, is that you have diehard practitioners. I saw this even at my four-year institution. My VP drove to my neighborhood, a place where people typically wouldn't go. Not just schools, but people in general. And she showed up and said, "You've got to finish college." I was shocked. That kind of commitment isn't in reports or metrics. But it makes all the difference.

Dr. Gaulden: We have an amazing ReConnect team. One of our outreach specialists is currently a financial aid director at another institution in a different state. She's also a graduate of Passaic County Community College. She works with us in the evenings after her regular job because she wants to give back to the place that helped her succeed.

If you ever want to see a masterclass in student engagement, it's her. She doesn't let go. If a student hangs up, she calls back and says, "Looks like we got disconnected." She's also bilingual, which is vital because nearly 70% of our students identify as Hispanic, and many are more comfortable speaking Spanish about personal challenges and barriers. One thing that really surprised me—and I've been in higher ed for 35 years—is how many students came back after a decade or more. Of the 150-plus returning students, about 20% had been away for 10 years or longer. I didn't think we'd reach them. I assumed the phone numbers and emails would be outdated. But we did. One student, in particular, left in spring 1992. She came back in fall 2024. That's remarkable.

Chazz Robinson: I love that. I wish I could talk for hours. So I'm wondering, you've shared so much about your students, the work you're doing, and the systems you're navigating. If you had to tell policymakers one thing about your students, what would it be?

Dr. Gaulden: There are serious challenges for non-native English speakers and students coming from under-resourced K–12 systems. Many arrive not fully prepared for college-level work. But we meet them where they are. And I'm proud that our institution has reformed our developmental education and ESL programs to make them more manageable.

Still, we have students who've taken up to 45 credits of developmental or ESL courses. An associate degree is 60 credits. These 45 credits are essential, but they don't count toward a degree. And they burn through financial aid. I'm not saying eliminate these courses. Without them, students wouldn't succeed in college-level classes. But the financial aid policies haven't caught up with this reality. We had one student attempt 56.5 credits before even getting to their college-level coursework. That's a lot, especially for parenting students, those working multiple jobs, or attending part-time. Many are one missed paycheck away from financial disaster.

If we truly want to support students where they are—and we should, because they are the future of our communities and economies—we need to revisit our financial aid policies and systems. Otherwise, students will max out their aid before they earn a degree, especially if they need to withdraw, change majors, or retake a class, which is normal. Our students are not lazy. They're not looking for handouts. In fact, some are skeptical when we offer a free laptop. They ask, "What's the catch?" They're here to change their lives and their families' futures. They're trying to earn better wages and more stable, fulfilling careers. They show up, over and over again, even when everything is stacked against them. Their resilience is incredible. We are so proud of them.

Chazz Robinson: I love it. It's such a powerful thing. A lot of people in positions of influence have no idea what these students go through. But your institution is helping students beat the odds, and that's what matters. Like I said, even helping five students is significant. Getting a student who left in 1992 to return and earn their degree—that's the kind of story that shows what's possible. If we care about economic mobility and return on investment, this is where it happens. Not in the big numbers, but in the impact on individuals, families, and neighborhoods.

Thank you for spending time with me on Interviews with Influencers at Third Way. I really enjoyed this conversation, and I'm excited to see what you and your team continue to accomplish.

Dr. Gaulden: Thank you so much. I really enjoyed my time with you as well, and I appreciate all the work that your organization is doing for higher ed—especially for students who need a voice. I really applaud you for that work. Thank you.