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Working students 'Stop' for help

by [Shayla Durrett](#), staff writer

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Single Stop USA is expanding at City College of San Francisco campuses in an effort to ease the burden of working students so they can overcome poverty and complete their education.

The national non-profit organization attempts to provide assistance for people who struggle to balance work and other priorities with little resources.

"Single Stop builds bridges between students and the vast untapped government resources intended for them by providing students with information on eligibility for various benefits," said Elena Chavez Quezada, the program director for Single Stop in California.

According to Quezada, 29 percent of community college students in the United States have incomes below \$20,000, which forces many of them to seek full-time employment while in school and often leads to high dropout rates.

"Community colleges in general are one of the most effective vehicles for lifting people out of poverty," Quezada said. "They make college-level education accessible to low-income, high-need populations and are the path to economic success for America's most vulnerable students."

The initiative began operating in January at CCSF's Southeast campus in Bayview-Hunters Point. In September, the Ocean campus started using Single Stop and it will be available at the Mission campus by the end of the year.

The goal is to make Single Stop available at all six campuses in the next year.

Single Stop chose offered its services to CCSF because of the diversity of the students and the need for the services.

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"CCSF in particular is an incredible partner for Single Stop because of its commitment to helping students access a wide range of services that will help them stay in school, its willingness to forge innovative new partnerships and its strong leadership," Quezada said.

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"Single Stop is great for students to find out how to make school happen," said Temple Byars, a Single Stop coordinator at the Southeast campus. "It gives students their options about how to afford school."

Single Stop uses the Benefits Enrollment Network, an online screening tool, to input the student's basic information. The system then gives a list of what that specific person is eligible for based on their financial data.

Single Stop coordinators inform students about health and insurance benefits, as well as cash aid, tax credit, child care services, food stamps and the PG&E assistance program.

Once the student has chosen which benefits to receive, a Single Stop coordinator will assist them on the application process for the various benefits and provide follow-up support.

Students can also receive free, one-on-one legal and financial counseling services and tax preparation services.

"I know for a fact that students say they can't afford school or they have to go back to work," said Byars, who has been working at the Southeast campus since January. "It's really a small gap that can be filled by these services."

Every year, about \$3 billion dollars of government resources in California and \$300 million in San Francisco alone are unclaimed, according to Single Stop USA.

Many benefits and tax credits are unclaimed because of complicated applications, eligibility rules and multiple restrictions from the agencies that provide the benefits.

Single Stop expects to increase graduation and retention rates at CCSF by alleviating some of the financial burdens currently facing students and allowing them to focus on school.

"Preliminary case studies have shown that financial interventions alone can increase community college students' retention rates by as much as 70 percent," Quezada said. "To date, however, such initiatives have been largely supported by private, unsustainable, dollars."

Single Stop is funded by sponsors, including the Charles Schwab Foundation, Mayor Gavin Newsom and Tipping Point Community.

"Tipping Point Community chose to partner with Single Stop because of the significant impact this organization can have in enabling low-income individuals to access life-changing public benefits and tax credits," said Rita Louh, chief operating officer at Tipping Point Community, which seeks to end poverty in the Bay Area.

The grant-making organization raised \$1.5 million for Single Stop in the Bay Area at an annual fundraising event.

"Tipping Point Community is excited about the impact Single Stop has already had here in the Bay Area -- nearly \$10 million has been returned to families and individuals since starting services in January 2009," Louh said.

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