

UIA-UMBC Completion Grant Project  
AY22 and AY23  
Summary

UMBC has been offering students financial support in the way of degree completion grants since 2013 (Appendix I). These funds have been instrumental in supporting students who are in their final stages of degree completion (90+ earned credits and 1-2 semesters from graduation), but are unable to persist due to insufficient aid and who have exhausted all other sources of aid. As the data attest, these completion grants have yielded a high rate of return with respect to graduation rates - from 83% to 100% (for students awarded prior to academic year 2022-2023). (Appendices II-IV).

In November 2021, UMBC was awarded a \$45,000 grant through UIA to “test drive” its recently published [UIA Completion Grant Playbook](#). We were pleased to discover that UMBC had already adopted many of the best practices from the UIA Playbook, including prioritizing recipients within 1-2 semesters of graduating and focusing on high need students (as demonstrated by FAFSA). The grant however presented an opportunity to explore a new approach to communicating the award to recipients.

### **Asset-based Language**

Using lessons learned as well as strategies outlined in the UIA Degree Completion Grant Playbook, UMBC leveraged the UIA Degree Completion Grant funding during the 2022-2023 academic year to provide micro-grants to support eligible students to degree completion. Specifically, UMBC explored the impact of utilizing asset-based language to communicate the degree completion grant award to students. That is, we sought to understand how language used in communicating completion grants impacts students’ perceptions of the award, their sense of obligation to complete, and their feelings about the institution’s support and commitment to their success. Beyond the monetary support itself, we believe by being more intentional in *how* we communicate the award to students (using asset-based language), we can increase our return on investment by not only increasing the number of awardees that complete their degree, but also potentially creating life-long alumni supporters of the institution.

According to [Here to Here Language Guide: A Resource for Using Asset-Based Language with Young People](#), asset-based language avoids words and phrases that look at situations or people from a deficit lens that prioritizes what’s missing or what’s wrong. Instead, asset-based language prioritizes language that focuses on students’ strengths and potentials. [Silicon Valley Social Venture Fund](#) further explains that asset-based language expands equitable access to power, resources, and money while a deficit-based approach continues the old paradigm of one group/community being the recipient of charity or in need and the other of saviors who will fix their problems.

Instead of employing our current practice of simply posting the UMBC Senior Degree Completion Grant award to the recipient’s student account and triggering a [short notification](#) that

the award has been posted, UMBC presented recipients of the UIA Degree Completion Grant (as well as recipients of the matching funds) an [award letter](#) that congratulates the student on being named a recipient of this selective award, acknowledges the significant academic accomplishments the student has already achieved and conveys the institutions' confidence in and commitment to their continued success.

The letter, signed by UMBC's Vice Provost and Dean of Undergraduate Academic Affairs, shared a congratulatory and upbeat message emphasizing the student's commitment to their degree and providing encouragement to degree completion.

## **Assessment**

After receiving the grant assistance, students were surveyed in order to obtain a sense of the impact of the financial support. The [survey](#), consisting of 14 multiple choice questions and 1 open ended question, was sent to 88 grant recipients (Aid Year's 2022-2024). [Responses](#) were received from 13 (representing 15 % response rate).

### A Deep Sense of Gratitude

When asked, "When reflecting on your initial receipt of the UMBC Completion Grant Award, please indicate which of the following you experienced", 92% of survey respondents indicated they felt supported by UMBC in their academic endeavors and career aspirations. Similarly, 92% indicated a sense of relief in their financial needs being met.

Students were asked to share financial circumstances that may have impacted their educational financial obligations and almost half of respondents indicated they had lost a job since first enrolling at UMBC. Almost half of respondents also indicated there were times they did not have enough money for school books or supplies.

### An Enrollment Game Changer

When asked questions about the impact of the support, 92% of respondents indicated the grant helped them to stay enrolled at UMBC. Responses also confirmed that over half of the recipients were able to enroll in a higher course load, than without the support. Further, 85% strongly agreed that the award will increase the likelihood of graduating sooner.

### Beyond the Grant: Support Services

While all respondents indicated that being a Degree Completion Grant recipient was essential or very important in their ability to achieve their academic goals, students also affirmed the importance of other institutional support resources.

When asked how resources such as financial aid counseling and financial literacy education, career planning and academic support influenced their ability to stay enrolled, graduate or

achieve post-graduate success, respondents were overwhelmingly in agreement that these resources significantly helped in reaching their academic goals. Almost 85% indicated academic support services were essential or very important, and 84% found financial aid counseling and financial literacy education to be essential or very important.

### The What, Not the Who

When asked to reflect on the impact of the award on their perception of their undergraduate experience at UMBC, almost 85% of respondents shared that the award positively affected their perception. However, when asked to reflect on their experience upon initial receipt of the award only 23% indicated they felt special to have received a letter from the Dean.

### Additional Insights

While the survey questions provided helpful insight to students' perceptions of the grant, it was their write-in comments that provided testimony to the incredible impact of the completion grant. Students shared:

*As a full time worker who was without [a] degree and just 2 classes away- I would have been unable to complete my degree without this Grant and am eternally grateful.*

*It truly helped me immensely to be able to finish my degree at UMBC, it takes the burden of the financial stress of the tuition cost. It truly means the world to be able to finish my degree and be a recipient of the near-completer grant at Umhc. Not having access to funds should not be a hindrance in finishing one's education nor should it be a barrier to someone who is so close to being done with their degree. Thank you so much for this opportunity, I am forever grateful.*

*It has given me hope when I was at my lowest and I am forever grateful that UMBC believed in me.*

*UMBC made me who I am today, I will be going back to get my masters. I could have not graduated without the degree completion grant. Thanks so much.*

### **Summary**

The UIA Completion Grant project provided us an opportunity to extend our support of near-completers in need of financial support while also exploring a new way of communicating the grant to students. Specifically, the \$45,911 grant supported an additional 23 degree completion awards to be made over the course of two academic years.

The awarding strategy leveraged asset based languaging. As opposed to simply posting the award to students' accounts, we leveraged this opportunity to acknowledge students' significant progress and our confidence in their ability to cross the finish line.

Post award surveys affirmed the importance of the award in student’s positive perception of the university as a supportive community. Additionally, the students affirmed the impact of the award on their ability to achieve their academic goals.

While students felt good about the award and believed the award was critical to their success, *who* endorsed the award (signed the award letter) was not as important. Nonetheless, student testimonials spoke to their deep gratitude for and the personal impact of these awards.

The data suggests that institutional investments, in the way of micro-grants, which are presented in a positive and encouraging manner, will yield significant returns as students graduate and become lifelong supporters of the university.

**Next Steps:**

UMBC will continue the tradition of awarding degree completion microgrants. We are encouraged by the feedback we have received from this initiative and therefore will continue to refine the content of the award notification, leveraging asset-based languaging and including, among other enhancements, data that reinforces the academic success (i.e. degree completion rates) of award recipients. Additionally, we will continue to explore the idea of having the award notification be signed by a campus leader (ie Dean of their College) that might better resonate with the students as an honor and increase the prestige of the award. Finally, we will share this evidence-based student success approach with our Development Office to help make the case for continued fund-raising specifically for degree completion funds.

**Appendix**

**Appendix I**

Degree Completion Grant - Award Counts and Min-Max Amounts

Award Description	Aid Year	Min. Offer Amount	Max. Offer Amount	Avg. Offer Amount	Disbursed Amount	Distinct Awardee Count
UMBC Sr Degree Completion Grnt	2014	\$276.00	\$5,512.00	\$2,173.91	\$50,000.00	23
	2015	\$623.00	\$5,000.00	\$2,380.95	\$50,000.00	21
	2016	\$427.00	\$7,661.00	\$2,306.43	\$80,725.00	35
	2017	\$48.00	\$5,500.00	\$2,115.41	\$86,732.00	41
	2018	\$300.00	\$4,234.00	\$1,851.85	\$50,000.00	27
	2019	\$461.00	\$4,496.00	\$2,356.21	\$56,549.00	24
	2020	\$366.00	\$7,805.00	\$2,181.80	\$54,545.00	25
	2021	\$400.00	\$7,571.00	\$2,189.89	\$30,658.50	14
	2022	\$384.00	\$4,878.00	\$2,361.38	\$61,396.00	26
	2023	\$476.00	\$7,757.00	\$2,249.99	\$74,249.58	33
	2024	\$446.58	\$3,300.00	\$1,766.20	\$14,580.99	10
UMBC UIA Completion Grant	2022	\$633.20	\$4,935.00	\$2,209.24	\$11,046.20	5
	2023	\$377.35	\$5,396.20	\$1,936.93	\$34,864.80	18
Grand Total		\$48.00	\$7,805.00	\$2,180.23	\$655,347.07	278

## Appendix II

### Degree Completion Grant - Award Counts and Percent Completers

Award Description	Aid Year	Distinct Awardee Count	Degree Completer Count	Percent Degree Completers
UMBC Sr Degree Completion Grnt	2014	23	22	96%
	2015	21	20	95%
	2016	35	33	94%
	2017	41	38	93%
	2018	27	23	85%
	2019	24	20	83%
	2020	25	21	84%
	2021	14	14	100%
	2022	26	23	88%
	2023	33	20	61%
	2024	10	1	10%
UMBC UIA Completion Grant	2022	5	2	40%
	2023	18	13	72%
<b>Grand Total</b>		<b>278</b>	<b>233</b>	<b>84%</b>

## Appendix III

### Degree Completion Grant - Award Counts and Percent Completers by Demographics

Award Desc..	IPEDS Ethnicity	Gender	Distinct Awardee Count	Degree Completer Count	Percent Degree Completers
UMBC Sr Degree Completion Grnt	American Indian/Alaska N..	Male	2	1	50%
		Female	14	12	86%
	Asian	Male	7	7	100%
		Female	97	82	85%
		Male	45	36	80%
	Black/African American	*	2	2	100%
		Female	17	14	82%
		Male	7	6	86%
	Hispanic/Latino	Female	2	2	100%
		Male	2	2	100%
	International	Male	1	1	100%
		Female	2	1	50%
	Not Specified	Male	2	1	50%
		Female	8	6	75%
	Two or More	Male	3	3	100%
		Female	27	23	85%
	White	Male	24	23	96%
Female		4	1	25%	
UMBC UIA Completion Grant	Black/African American	Male	7	6	86%
		Female	5	4	80%
	Two or More	Female	2	0	0%
	White	Female	2	1	50%
		Male	2	2	100%
<b>Grand Total</b>		<b>278</b>	<b>233</b>	<b>84%</b>	

## Appendix IV

### Degree Completion Grant - Award Counts by Pell Eligibility

Award Description	Pell Eligible Indicator	Distinct Awardee Count	Degree Completer Count	Percent Degree Completers
UMBC Sr Degree Completion Grnt	No	81	77	95%
	Yes	182	146	80%
UMBC UIA Completion Grant	No	4	3	75%
	Yes	18	11	61%
<b>Grand Total</b>		<b>278</b>	<b>233</b>	<b>84%</b>