



#DegreesNYC
COLLECTIVE ACTION TO CLOSE THE GAP

A Blueprint for Collective Action on Postsecondary Access and Success in New York City

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Lead Authors

Jennifer Siaca Curry / Melanie Kruvelis / Judith Lorimer / Marissa Martin / LaKisha Williams

#DegreesNYC Core Team:

Melanie Kruvelis, Young Invincibles / Judith Lorimer, Goddard Riverside Options Center
Marissa Martin, Young Invincibles / LaKisha N. Williams, Goddard Riverside Options Center

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Executive Summary

Introduction

#DegreesNYC aims to achieve equity in postsecondary access and completion in New York City (NYC) through a collective impact approach.¹ Launched in 2015, our vision is that, by 2025, at least 60 percent of each racial, ethnic, and income group in NYC will have a quality postsecondary credential. We envision a New York City where all young people have the necessary supports and the real opportunity to earn a postsecondary credential that equips them with the skills and networks needed to succeed in and enrich our economy, our communities and our city as whole.

From 2015 through 2018 we asked, what would a cross-sector citywide student equity plan look like? We explored existing programs and services that serve low-income students and students of color for their strengths and challenges. Each exploration yielded the same results: the solution lies, not in one program, idea, institution or individual. It takes a village. Overall, the findings and recommendations in this Blueprint indicate that while there have been encouraging developments—increased high school graduation and college enrollment rates—we are still missing the mark. The Equity and Excellence for All initiative rolled out by the NYC Department of Education² and the Connected CUNY³ strategic plan both promise to help get us on track. However, it will take the collective strength and determination of the entire village—including families, community-based organizations, local leaders, government agencies, philanthropy, business leadership and private sector employers—for us to achieve our common goal.

From the perspective of those who daily experience the savage inequalities⁴ and consequences of a leaky education pipeline, our system is a source of great anxiety and concern. The educational experiences for the poor and marginalized of this city remain, by and large, separate and unequal. When challenged by such a great multiplicity of gaps, it becomes evident that they are indeed systemic traps. We must do better to develop lasting solutions. And we must work together across silos and systems. Otherwise, we will continue to perpetuate cycles of miseducation, criminalization and poverty.

Finally, this Blueprint lands at the dawning of Phase II of #DegreesNYC in 2019, where developing Collective Impact theories⁵ are leading #DegreesNYC toward a bigger tent under which there is room to not only change systems but also the ways in which we create and build lasting working relationships with one another. When all students have an equitable opportunity to take challenging classes, engage in work-based learning, receive quality counseling, advising and wrap-around supports, graduate on time, transition from 2 to 4-year institutions, obtain an affordable and quality postsecondary credential, find a living-wage job and contribute to our thriving economy, the village has won.

Our Recommendations

Through a three-year process engaging hundreds of cross-sector stakeholders in discussion and long-term work groups, #DegreesNYC has developed four overarching recommendations for what we need to achieve to win.

Make postsecondary education affordable for all. This will involve:

- Increasing overall funding for postsecondary education and funding for particular populations
- Fixing broken application and disbursement systems (FAFSA & TAP completion, verification, award letters, loss of financial aid)

Build true pathways to 2-year degrees and from 2-year to 4-year degrees. This will involve:

- Reimagining remediation
- Supporting students as they transfer from 2-year to 4-year degree programs

Build support systems for young people from pre-K-through career by integrating high-impact practices throughout the system. This will involve:

- Supporting youth development practices
- Fully engaging New York City's families
- Systematizing ongoing advisement at key junctures
- Supporting and developing peer-to-peer mentorship
- Cultivating culturally responsive educators and advisors
- Universalizing a multiple-pathways approach to postsecondary success
- Defining and implementing student-ready colleges

Identify and jointly use the right data to know that we are collectively on the right track and can continue to learn together until we get it right. This will involve:

- Fostering system-wide agreement on and use of key indicators of progress
- Creating and leveraging data systems to gauge success and provide the foundation for continuous improvement

This Blueprint explores each of these areas and lays out specific goals and recommendations for each.

The Process

Upon its inception in 2015, #DegreesNYC followed closely after the model of collective impact first introduced by John Kania and Mark Kramer⁶ and espoused by collaborative networks in cities and states such as Los Angeles⁷, Chicago⁸, Michigan⁹, and Florida¹⁰. Collective Impact initiatives refers to the commitment of a group of people intentionally working together in a structured way to achieve social change. It begins with a common agenda, establishes a shared measurement system, fosters mutually reinforcing activities, encourages continuous communication and has a strong backbone support organization.¹¹

Following this model, #DegreesNYC hosted meetings throughout the boroughs and a community hearing around the following questions:

1. Why don't more low-income students and students of color enroll in and complete postsecondary education?
2. What is working now to close gaps?
3. What else needs to happen?

We heard from community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, local and national nonprofits, K-12 education, higher education, philanthropy, research, and city government—a mix common throughout #DegreesNYC’s work.

We then convened a citywide summit in November 2016, where we addressed five recurring themes from our community engagement. Following the summit, we organized work groups to conduct a more in-depth analysis of each area. Drawing from group discussions, research, organizing, student focus groups and practitioner experiences, the workgroups met from winter 2017 through spring 2018 to address five areas of critical need: Affordability; Institutional Policies; Data and Accountability; and Support and Accessibility for All.¹² Almost 90 people from over 50 organizations helped craft the recommendations above and throughout the Blueprint and presented them at our second citywide summit in May 2018.

Phase I of #DegreesNYC broke down organizational silos and built strong bonds of trust among groups that had not historically worked together. We connected hundreds of committed stakeholders together to focus, not solely on issues that plague their individual sectors, but on working effectively toward achieving systemic change in our city. We also convened early conversations around “Collective Collective Action” in response to the size and number of collective action groups that exist in New York City. Finally, we developed a new ethos that has inspired many and introduced a complete reimagining of how we can function as a village.

#DegreesNYC Phase II and the Dawning of a New Era

We believe our city urgently needs movement-building work. To that end, #DegreesNYC has embraced the approach of Collective Impact 3.0, developed by the Tamarack Institute, with the hopes of introducing a paradigm shift that will transform systems. “Movement-building leaders bring together a diverse group of stakeholders, including those not in traditional institutions or seats of power, to build a vision of the future based on common values and narratives”.¹³ Movements “open hearts and minds” and “create the receptive climate for new ideas to take hold”.¹⁴

A heavy lift, indeed. But if we all pull together, we can get it right.

We recognize that the work cannot move forward effectively without engaging those most affected. Accessing and understanding student voices and experiences provides critical insights regarding what is equitable, effective and lasting. In addition, their voices provide important evidence for planning and prioritizing policies, holistic programs and wrap around services that promote student success to and through their postsecondary journey and into the workforce.

Our Blueprint has defined the issues. The work ahead is to prioritize the solutions. Strong leadership, a committed village, resources and intentional strategies are necessary to build and sustain this movement. At worst, we will dare to speak unsettling truths to power, while being the change we wish to see in our city. At best, we will audaciously shake the foundations of New York’s inequitable systems and force the powers that be to recalibrate and rebuild from the rubble.

Notes

1. #DegreesNYC was founded in 2015 by Goddard Riverside Options Center (Options), Young Invincibles (YI), and GraduateNYC. Today, #DegreesNYC is managed by the core partnership of Options and YI.
2. NYC Department of Education. (n.d.). Equity & Excellence for all. Retrieved from <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/about-us/vision-and-mission/equity-andexcellence>
3. City University of New York. (2017). Connected CUNY. Retrieved from <http://www1.cuny.edu/sites/connected/>
4. Kozol, J. (1991), *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*. New York, Crown Publishing.
5. Cabaj, M. and Weaver, L. (2016). *Collective Impact 3.0: An Evolving Framework for Community Change*. Tamarack Institute.
6. Kania, J. and Kramer, M. (2011). "Collective Impact" *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 9, no. 1.
7. UNITE-LA <https://www.unitela.com/>
8. Thrive Chicago <http://www.thrivechi.org/approach/collective-impact/>
9. The Michigan College Access Network (MCAN) <http://www.micollegeaccess.org/>
10. The Florida College Access Network (FCAN) <http://floridacollegeaccess.org/>
11. Collective Impact Forum <https://collectiveimpactforum.org/what-collective-impact>
12. Though we had five workgroups, we folded the recommendations for the advising and counseling workgroup throughout the Blueprint; thus, the Blueprint is organized by four main themes: Affordability, Institutional Practices, Data and Accountability and Support and Accessibility for All.
13. Cabaj, M. and Weaver, L. (2016). *Collective Impact 3.0: An Evolving Framework for Community Change*. Tamarack Institute.
14. Ibid.

Our Approach

#DegreesNYC is a collective impact project that aims to achieve equity in postsecondary access and completion in New York City (NYC).¹ Launched in 2015, the partners' vision is that, by 2025, at least 60 percent of each racial, ethnic, and income group in NYC will have a quality postsecondary credential. While this outcome is typically understood as meaning a two- or four-year degree earned, we also recognize the important role of other credentials that result from rigorous training outside the higher education system, and therefore use the NYC Department of Education (NYC DOE)'s definition of a postsecondary credential: enrolling in and graduating from a two- or four-year college, a vocational program, or a public service program, such as City Year.

While the class of 2017 had the highest four-year high school graduation rate and the lowest dropout rate in over a decade,² significant challenges deter NYC's young adults from entering college, or cause them to leave after enrolling. In fact, less than a quarter of students entering City University of New York (CUNY) colleges earn their associate's degree in four years,³ and just over half earn a bachelor's degree in six years.⁴ As alarming as these statistics already are, they incorporate an additional two years to program length – two years that may not be covered by a student's financial aid package.

The foundation of this challenge includes a lack of resources, structural shortcomings, and, perhaps most importantly, equity and inclusion barriers. Young people—particularly young people of color, from low-income communities, of immigrant backgrounds, and other groups historically underrepresented in college – consistently receive both implicit and explicit messages that they do not belong in college or that they won't make it there. All of these themes are explored in our work.

"I want to hear from you about how else we can level the playing field and support you on the path to college – we believe you can do anything, and we'll do everything we can to help you reach your highest potential."

-NYC Department of Education Chancellor Richard Carranza, April 2018

A Community-Driven Vision for Equity

#DegreesNYC began the work with the following community-driven strategies to better understand barriers for college completion:

1. Formed an Advisory Task Force of more than 35 individuals from city agencies, community-based organizations (CBOs), and funding organizations. This group met monthly to provide strategic leadership on the design and content of #DegreesNYC.
2. Held borough-based meetings to open dialogue on critical postsecondary issues, disparities, and potential solutions in communities across the city.
3. Convened stakeholders such as college counselors and advisors, college access

and success professionals, education-advocacy groups, and students themselves, to discuss issues they've experienced in New York's education space.

4. Hosted a community hearing to collect formal testimony from a broad cross-section of stakeholders on college and career access and success in NYC including students, parents, and professionals.
5. Hosted two citywide summits (one in November 2016 and one in May 2018), each bringing together approximately 150 participants to address concerns and ideas to create a collective action agenda.

Following our first summit in 2016, the #DegreesNYC partners then formed five workgroups to study the issues identified at the summit. These issues are (1) college affordability, (2) simplified policies and practices in higher education institutions, (3) counseling and advising, (4) data and accountability, and (5) inclusivity. For each of these topics, the workgroups reviewed current structures and considered the policies, practices, and systems that would lead to improvements in each area, as students prepare for college and work towards degree completion. We triangulated our findings with research from national and local experts in the field, as well as with original data we collected through focus groups and surveys to better understand the lived experiences of young adults. The recommendations we put forth in this blueprint are organized by these priority issue areas.

"Collective Collective" Action

Our #DegreesNYC work is a part of a broader landscape of collective action efforts occurring across the city. Groups such as GraduateNYC, Compact for Career Readiness, Here to Here, and others are all working collaboratively to address systemic issues in areas such as youth employment and career opportunities; some efforts, such as South Bronx Rising Together, use the collective-impact model to tackle issues within specific communities in the city. Recognizing both the distinct charge of each of these collective-action efforts and their areas of overlap, the #DegreesNYC community convened a "collective collective" action group. The intention is to understand the goals, participants, strategies, and geographies behind each other's collective action work; and locate opportunities for alignment. By undertaking this collective-collective action, we hope to synergize efforts across the city through mutually reinforcing activities and continuous communication.

About This Blueprint

Building off of this multi-year collaborative process, we created this blueprint to outline the challenges that we heard from practitioners, students, and the broader community, and opportunities for cross-sector, system-wide change. We organized this blueprint into the following four categories:⁵



Affordability



Institutional Policies



Data & Accountability



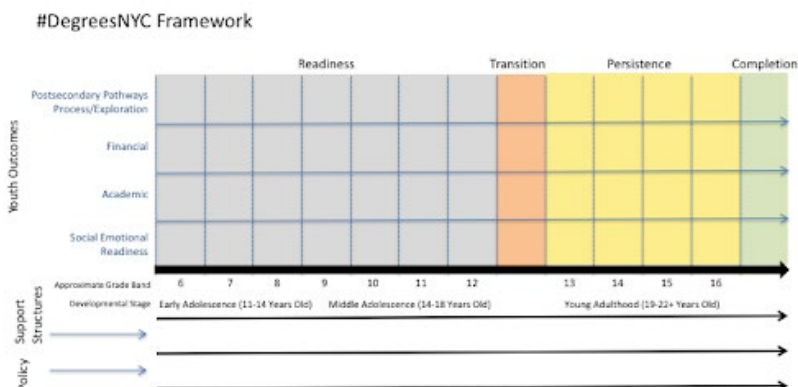
Support & Accessibility for All

We connected the challenges identified in each of these areas with research on the barriers to college and career success, as well as findings on best practices. We then offer recommendations that could move NYC towards equity in postsecondary readiness, persistence, and success. While our work centers on NYC, our recommendations require collaboration not only within the city, but also with decisionmakers at the state and federal levels.

Recognizing that ultimately the responsibility for growing a more equitable public higher education system does not rest with any one organization, but instead requires systemic transformation, the blueprint concludes with a summary of next steps that the partnership will work toward through its collective action efforts. These efforts will continue to pull in a diverse cross-section of stakeholders, including organizational, institutional, and agency leadership and staff; researchers; policymakers; changemakers; and young adults themselves.

Tracking Progress Towards Our Goal

To measure our progress as we work towards our goal of postsecondary equity, the #DegreesNYC team is inviting the wider community to collaboratively develop a framework that outlines measures of success as students prepare for, enter, and complete their postsecondary pathway. These indicators will be placed into the framework below, according to their relevant category and time-point in the postsecondary process. At our second summit held on May 7, 2018, we presented our first framework draft, and received suggestions for potential indicators we might consider, including measures typically used in the field (such as scores on the Regents Examination in English Language Arts and Math), as well as emerging metrics on social and emotional readiness, including academic self-advocacy and developing a sense of belonging. We also discussed indicators related to college persistence, such as the share of students maintaining financial aid eligibility and the percentage of credits transferred as students move from two- to four-year institutions. As the #DegreesNYC community works to finalize these indicators, we are committed to expanding our framework to reflect labor market outcomes, college and career readiness, and the non-linear path that so many students take to and through their postsecondary education and careers.



To the left is a framework the #DegreesNYC community developed to organize and orient our work. Using this framework, we will work with the field to identify indicators that can be placed within this framework. This will help the community in several ways: by developing a common understanding of metrics among stakeholders; by creating clarity about which data are available; and by identifying indicators that can support equity advancement.

Our Context: A Watershed Moment for Postsecondary Readiness and Completion

New York – and the nation at large – is at a watershed moment when it comes to supporting higher education. After decades of state disinvestment in higher education, conversations around free community college or “tuition-free” college systems are percolating in several state capitols.⁶ In New York, the Excelsior Scholarship, launched in 2016, opened conversations about New York State’s investment in its students and public institutions by providing a tuition-free CUNY or State University of New York (SUNY) education to residents with a household income of less than \$110,000.⁷ In NYC, NYC DOE’s continues to partner with agencies and CBOs across the city to enact its Equity & Excellence agenda. Announced by Mayor Bill de Blasio and then NYC DOE Chancellor Carmen Fariña in 2015, the agenda envisions “[e]very student will graduate from high school with an individual college and career plan and have access to resources that will support them in pursuing that plan.”⁸ On the federal level, legislation such as Senator Bernie Sanders’ (D-VT) College for All Act and Senator Brian Schatz (D-HI) Debt-Free College Act offer national plans for tuition-free and debt-free college, respectively. Meanwhile, the federal Department of Education (U.S. DOE), overseen by Secretary Betsy DeVos, continues to roll back protections for college students, particularly for borrowers saddled with student debt.⁹ How cities and states respond to withdrawn federal oversight and reduced accountability will be crucial for ensuring student success in preparing, enrolling, and completing college, as well as entering meaningful career and life pathways after graduation.

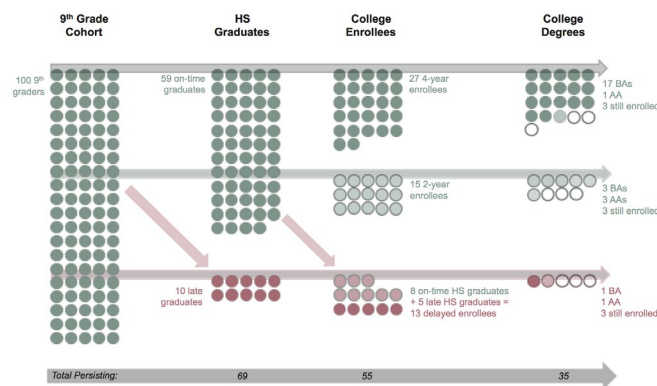
Yet, while local, state, and national plans for minimizing the high cost of college are becoming increasingly common, these programs do not always encapsulate the full range of costs associated with attending college. Other factors, such as eligibility rules and program requirements, can also prevent students from fully accessing and benefitting from available supports. For instance, the Excelsior Scholarship requires students enroll full-time, limiting access for students who enroll part-time due to work and family circumstances.¹⁰ Strict requirements like these limit the uptake of such programs: analysis of the scholarship’s first year show that just three percent of New York State’s undergraduates, and less than two percent of CUNY students, received support from Excelsior.¹¹ Finally, efforts to improve college completion can be limited in scope, with more attention focused on affordability, for example, and less on connecting K-12 and postsecondary systems, improving institutional policies, building accessible and inclusive campuses, and leveraging data to improve student outcomes. Supporting and aligning efforts that touch on all these elements is crucial to supporting student success, and directs the efforts of #DegreesNYC.

College Entrance, Completion, and Success in NYC

Here in NYC, while high school graduation rates are at an all-time high, increasing from just 50 percent in 2000 to 76 percent in 2016,¹² many of the city’s young adults are not yet thriving in college. Similar to the growth in high school graduation rates, college graduation rates have also steadily increased in recent years—but much work remains to be done. As documented in the Center for an Urban Future’s 2017 report, *Degrees of Difficulty: Boosting College Success in NYC*,

the share of adults with college degrees is lower than that of Boston, Washington, D.C., and other major cities across the country.¹³ Within the city itself, degree attainment can vary drastically; while 60 percent of Manhattan residents have a bachelor’s degree or higher, only 19 percent of Bronx residents have such credentials, giving it the second-lowest degree attainment rate among the largest counties across the country. At the same time, for students in NYC who do enroll and persist in postsecondary institutions, colleges such as CUNY can propel economic mobility. Research shows that CUNY moves almost six times as many low-income students into the middle class when compared to all eight Ivy League schools, Duke, M.I.T., Stanford, and University of Chicago – combined.¹⁴

To further illustrate the state of degree attainment in NYC, Figure 2 depicts data analyzed by the Research Alliance for NYC Schools on NYC’s public school students who started high school in fall 2003, and provides a visualization of the challenges of both enrollment and persistence, with only 35 percent of NYC’s 9th graders being on track to achieve a college degree.¹⁵



The figure above tracks the college pathways for NYC public school students who entered high school in 2003. Source: The Research Alliance for NYC Schools, 2017.

The challenge of degree attainment is undeniably a matter of equity. More than three-quarters of CUNY’s undergraduates are students of color, including 85 percent of its community college students.¹⁶ Even when controlling for income, there is a college completion gap between Asian and white students (48 percent and 41 percent, respectively, of the 2003 cohort of 9th graders) and their Black and Hispanic peers (20 percent and 18 percent, respectively, of the same cohort).¹⁷ This mirrors national trends: across the country, the racial/ethnic gap in degree attainment is increasing.¹⁸ Moreover, 60 percent of all CUNY students live in households earning less than \$30,000 annually; for CUNY’s community college students, that number rises to 71 percent.¹⁹ For these students, college affordability, especially when coupled with the high cost of living in NYC and competing family responsibility, can make college completion feel nearly impossible.

The challenges we discuss in this blueprint arise in distinct ways as students transition from preparing for postsecondary education, to enrolling and persisting in their program of choice:

- Postsecondary readiness and transitions: The process of transitioning from K-12 to a postsecondary program can be costly – from test preparation costs and campus visits, to fees associated with the financial aid verification process. Beyond these affordability

issues, students may also lack adequate personal support to navigate the postsecondary system. For instance, while some students are able to access high-quality counseling from school and college counselors, many are not, due to several issues including large caseloads, and fragmented community-based supports. Though most students express college and career aspirations, many do not understand the path to college completion and workforce/career readiness, which can lead to abandoned goals.

- **Postsecondary persistence and completion:** Students leave college without a degree at alarming rates. Issues of affordability, of course, continue to impact students' success once they are enrolled in a postsecondary program: from confusion over reapplying for aid, to losing aid all together. Students also need wrap-around supports to mitigate challenges in college and in their personal lives. College transfer students, in particular, need supports designed for them to ensure a smooth transition that results in college completion. Furthermore, if students do not believe jobs await them after graduation, they will be less likely to pursue their degrees. Yet, across the city, job training and career counseling opportunities are difficult to locate and access during and after high school and college.

Hearing from NYC's Young Adults

To learn more about the experiences of young adults in NYC with postsecondary education, we surveyed 200 young adults, primarily between the ages of 15 and 25, in the winter of 2018. By surveying young adults at various stages of their education – some still in high school, others in college, others graduating, and those who attended but did not complete – we hoped to capture students' experiences as they prepared for their postsecondary education, as they worked towards their credential, and after leaving school. We administered this survey online, and #DegreesNYC member organizations, as well as networks such as the College Access Consortium of New York, Inc. (CACNY), distributed the survey to their programs' participants and other young adults in their networks.

Gender Identity	
Woman	75 percent
Man	24 percent
Non-Binary	1 percent

Racial/Ethnic Identity	
Hispanic/Latinx	53 percent
Black/African American	30 percent
Asian/Pacific Islander	13 percent
White	8 percent

Age	
14-18 years-old	48.5 percent
19-24 years-old	47 percent
25-29 years-old	3 percent
30 years or older	0.5 percent
Age not listed/not available	1 percent

Highest Level of Education	
High school student	35 percent
High school degree or equivalent	23 percent
Some college	24 percent
Associate's degree	7 percent
Bachelor's degree	9 percent
Graduate degree	2 percent

Above is descriptive data on the young adults who participated in our survey. The survey was administered December 2017-March 2018, N = 200.

Results by Race and Ethnicity: We asked participants about their general feelings related to college admissions, success in and out of college, and advising and support. Perspectives on college admissions varied by race: 56 percent of African-American students, 53 percent of Latinx students, 43 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander students, and 33 percent of white students felt they could get into college. However, perspectives on success in and after college were very different. White respondents had the highest perception of potential success in college (89 percent), while all other races fell to between 70 percent and 75 percent. While our findings on this survey warrant further research, this last result in particular suggests that students may be exposed to different messages about college success at different junctures in their postsecondary planning - and perhaps, efforts to encourage students of color to explore college is not met with equal efforts to support their success once enrolled.

When it came to academic advising, white students were most likely to indicate they spoke to adults “a lot” about college and careers (56 percent), yet also felt they received the least support to plan for education (44 percent). At the same time, Latinx students (70 percent) and black students (61 percent) felt they had significant support planning, yet only 30-40 percent felt they communicated often with adults about college and careers. Through questions about financial aid, we learned that black students were least comfortable taking out loans (44 percent) and Asian students were most comfortable (88 percent).

Results By Gender: Overall, while more women who took the survey felt they could get into college (56 percent) when compared with men (40 percent), men were more confident in their success in college (79 percent of men; 73 percent of women), their ability to fit in at college (47 percent

of men; 35 percent of women), and their potential to have a great career (72 percent of men; 58 percent of women). At the same time, more men felt they should focus on getting a job after high school rather than focusing on additional education (15 percent of men; 8 percent of women). Men in our survey received the most support in career and college planning at 74 percent, with 59 percent of women receiving support.

Aligning to Support Postsecondary Success in the City

The seeds of postsecondary success are planted long before students take their first steps onto college campuses. A national study conducted by The Education Trust found that only 8 percent of high school graduates experienced a curriculum that fully prepared them for college (with 9 percent of white students, 9 percent of black students, and 7 percent of Latinx students finishing an adequate curriculum).²⁰ This indicates a substantial disconnect between high school graduation requirements and postsecondary and career readiness.

Moreover, the journey to postsecondary success does not end with college enrollment. There are many ways in which systems and stakeholders can better support students as they work toward graduation. For some young people, including students of color, low-income students, and transfer students, the college experience can bring a new set of challenges. While projects such as the College Completion Innovation Fund have sparked new approaches and opportunities to scale college- and community-based interventions,²¹ college completion rates across the city suggest continued work is needed.²²

Building from young adults' lived experiences, the experience and work of practitioners across the field, and our own research, the following sections of this blueprint review these issues in depth to examine challenges, explore promising practices, and put forth recommendations to improve postsecondary education for all.

Our Recommendations

The following section outlines recommendations for improving equity in NYC's postsecondary system. Developed by the #DegreesNYC community, these recommendations are divided into four areas: affordability, institutional policies, data and accountability, and support and accessibility for all students.



Affordability

The financial journey to college graduation is a long and difficult one for students, one that holds a variety of affordability challenges that span from high school through college. The difficulty of understanding and successfully funding a postsecondary education is further compounded by larger national and state trends, such as the ongoing college debt crisis, rising tuition, and flat state and federal grants. The affordability workgroup was formed to identify specific challenges students face when seeking financial support for college, and to develop recommendations to ensure students in NYC have access to an affordable higher education and the support needed to navigate complex financial aid systems.

Challenges

At each step of the process—applying for aid, understanding aid offered, and maintaining aid— young adults and their families are faced with critical decisions that impact their ability to pursue postsecondary credentials.

Financial Aid Awareness and Completion: Studies estimate that millions of low-income young adults fail to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) each year, and that approximately one-third of those who don't fill it out would have been eligible for a Pell Grant.²³ Moreover, a study of first-year college students found that students who filed a FAFSA were nearly 80 percent more likely to persist when compared with their peers who did not file a FAFSA.²⁴ In NYC, FAFSA completion rates vary widely by community; in about half of the city's school districts, more than 80 percent of students complete the FAFSA – 10-15 percent higher than FAFSA completion rates in the Bronx's District 11 and Brooklyn's District 20.²⁵

The NYS Higher Education Services Corporation (HESC) created the FAFSA data portal, which allows school staff to see real-time data on FAFSA completion. This information, combined with concerted efforts from the NYC Department of Education, including the launch of Financial Aid Awareness Month, citywide distribution of FAFSA guides,²⁶ and the College Access for All initiative, provide tools for school staff members to understand the importance of FAFSA and encourage its completion. However, these efforts must be strengthened and expanded to meet the need for information and encouragement among NYC's high school students. Furthermore, the lack of a central, accessible repository of information on both aid and scholarships poses a challenge for school- and community-based advisors as they help students navigate financial aid with limited time and resources.

Understanding Financial Aid: Once a student has completed the financial aid application process, navigating complicated, sometimes confusing information about the cost of attendance poses a new challenge. Roughly 40 percent of students who turn down their first-choice school do so because of cost and perceived value, and a third of these students experienced a misunderstanding of costs during the process.²⁷

Students and their families often use award letters for cost information, with many students and families relying solely on a single document to make their enrollment decisions. In a breakthrough study, New America and uAspire analyzed over 11,000 award letters in a sample made up predominantly of low-income students.²⁸ They found that more than a third of the letters did not include any cost information with the financial aid details, and nearly half only included fees paid to the institution without reference to other expenses, such as books and transportation.²⁹ The study also found the letters use confusing terminology (there were 143 terms used to describe the same type of federal loan) and fail to distinguish between aid types (for instance, specifying the portion of aid that is provided through grant or scholarship, and parts of the package that are loans that must be repaid).³⁰

As more students take on debt to finance their education, it is critical to increase consumer knowledge on the impact of loans. Today, 15 percent of adults living in NYC have a student loan

- slightly lower than the national average (18 percent of U.S. adults have educational debt).³¹ A December 2017 study from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York and the NYC Department of Consumer Affairs (NYC DCA) found that borrowers' experiences with debt vary across the boroughs. For instance, while residents in Manhattan tend to have higher balances on their loans than borrowers in the other four boroughs, the Bronx had highest rates of delinquency and default.³² Following the release of this report, the NYC DCA launched targeted student-loan clinics in neighborhoods particularly impacted by student debt, along with other consumer-education initiatives.³³ It is crucial that these efforts are supplemented with more honest conversations in schools, CBOs, and with families about student debt and its impact on a student's aspirations.

Delays in Aid Due to Verification: Approximately one-third of students receiving financial aid are selected for a process called verification, which requires colleges to audit the accuracy of information presented in the FAFSA.³⁴ Selected students are required to submit documentation to their college, including information on income, tax returns, and household size. A student can be selected for verification by the federal government or by their college, and colleges can determine how to reach out to a student to request information. The verification process can be burdensome, requiring students and their families to track down and send sensitive documents, such as IRS tax transcripts, information about public benefits received, monthly expenses, and other delicate items that can often be inaccessible or costly for poorer families to obtain. This is particularly problematic, as the vast majority of students selected for verification are from low-income households.³⁵ Moreover, if a student identified for verification does not or cannot complete the process, their college cannot disburse financial aid, preventing students from accessing Pell grants, federal loans, state funding, and other forms of federal aid. Students must then find other sources of funding or put higher education on hold.

In Their Words: Counselors and Students Navigating the Verification Process

"There were so many challenges and struggles that [one of my students] endured through the college application process, but obtaining the notarized letter [needed for verification] was the one that took the greatest toll on him. It was out of his control and the emotional wear and tear was heartbreaking... If colleges took a hard look at the policies and requirements, they would realize how unjust they are to students from low-income families."

-Amy Kirschenbaum,
College Access Counselor at Goddard Riverside Options Center

Availability and Amount of Financial Aid: College costs have been increasing at a far faster rate than financial aid support: increases in both federal aid³⁶ and TAP awards³⁷ have not kept up with cost of attendance, and are therefore insufficient in covering student need.³⁸ In 2006, the average TAP award accounted for 65 percent of tuition at a CUNY senior college; during the 2015-2016 school year, the average award only accounted for 30 percent of tuition costs.³⁹ Furthermore, financial aid is not available to all populations who need it. Notably, New Yorkers without U.S. citizenship

(including Dreamers) are not eligible for any TAP funding (on top of being barred from any federal financial aid). Additionally, part-time students, married students and students taking summer coursework receive less support from TAP.⁴⁰

Supporting Students to Cover Costs Above Tuition: Covering the cost of tuition is just one element of supporting students' financial needs while in college. As work from researchers like Dr. Sara Goldrick-Rab and others demonstrate, paying for basic needs is a significant barrier to completion for students across the country, and particularly for underserved students, such as students of color, parenting students, and students experiencing food insecurity or homelessness.⁴¹ In New York City, the high cost of living can particularly impact college affordability. A 2011 study from CUNY revealed nearly 42 percent of the system's students experience housing insecurity while enrolled; the researchers also found that CUNY students access NYC's shelter and public housing systems at rates higher than the city's average.⁴² CUNY researchers also found nearly two-in-five CUNY students deal with food or hunger problems each year.⁴³ CUNY and the state have taken steps to address the real impact of low-income students managing costs beyond tuition. In 2018, New York became the first state in the country to require food pantries on all public-college campuses.⁴⁴ At CUNY, many of these pantries are located in Single Stop offices. Single Stop centralizes key student supports by helping eligible students access Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits (SNAP, also known as food stamps), health insurance, financial counseling, tax preparation, and food – all in one place. But these services are needed by students across the CUNY system; moreover, basic costs must be understood as a necessary component to the cost of attendance.

Loss of Financial Aid: Even once students are enrolled in college, many continue to face challenges related to financial aid disbursements or loss of financial aid, both of which can cause a student to delay college completion or cause them to drop out. Students often lose some or all of their financial aid due to changes in their economic eligibility. Because applicants must file FAFSA forms and TAP applications annually, changes to employment status, parents' earnings, and other factors can trigger a loss of aid. While students in this situation may still qualify for loans and scholarships, losing core financial aid can present a significant challenge for a student who was not prepared to take on debt or pay out of pocket.

Students can also lose financial aid due to academic performance. In order to continue receiving federal assistance, students must make Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP). Colleges set SAP policies and students must meet both qualitative and quantitative standards to maintain their aid, which typically include grade point average and pace of progression (e.g., taking an appropriate course load and passing a significant percentage of courses attempted).

TAP provides an important source of financial aid for many students statewide. However, researchers estimate that tens of thousands of students each year lose eligibility because they require more than the allowed time to complete their degrees (three years for an associate's degree; four years for a bachelor's degree).⁴⁵ In comparison, the Pell Grant program has a lifetime limit of six years, and even then, more than 40 percent of students take longer than six years to graduate and lose access to Pell funding before they finish their program.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the TAP program requires all coursework to be aligned with a student's major. While this requirement could theoretically help students focus on their major and finish their degree on time, these course and

credit requirements are often confusing to students, unclear to many academic advisors, and are subject to differing interpretations by financial aid officers and state representatives.

Recommendations

Increase FAFSA and NYS Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) completion. In order to increase FAFSA and TAP completion in New York State, all schools need support in accessing the FAFSA completion data portal and using it effectively. Throughout the state, setting local community-wide completion goals could also increase completion. Additionally, community-based postsecondary readiness programs should have access to and be trained on the FAFSA data completion portal to increase its use outside of schools. Finally, if HESC were to continue reporting on students once they have enrolled in college, community-based providers and colleges would be able to continue case management of students beyond high school. This data could be used to ensure annual filings are completed and submitted on time.

Expand access to, and increase the amount of TAP grants. As TAP is New York's largest student financial aid grant program, a raise in the maximum TAP grant, and indexing TAP grants to public college tuition in New York State to ensure that the grant covers full tuition costs would greatly benefit New Yorkers. Awards should be fixed, so students are secured a certain floor of aid if their circumstances change. Finally, TAP should expand to include undocumented students, students taking courses part-time or in the summer, and those who require additional time to complete their degrees.

Comprehensively strengthen TAP to support persistence and completion. While TAP's requirement that a student must enroll in classes that align with their major may have been designed to encourage timely completion, this requirement confuses students and advisors alike, and contributes to students losing their TAP funding. If NYS HESC eliminated "TAPable" credits, costly confusion could be cut down. In addition, paperwork requirements for TAP should be streamlined to help more students successfully submit applications, including paperwork required for the financial aid verification process.

Standardize financial aid award letters across New York State. Students need award letters well before committing to a college (which colleges generally require by May 1st) and in each continuing year of study upon a student's submission of FAFSA. Easy-to-understand information on the full cost of attendance should accompany all financial aid and loan options. This requires examination of costs across living circumstances (e.g., with parents, on-campus, etc.) and carefully outlining costs such as transportation and books. Additionally, if schools include loan options in a single financial aid package that comes with this detailed, comprehensive award letter, this will better prepare students in understanding the financial aid they are receiving.

Improve the financial aid verification process. The process requires financial aid administrators to ask students and their families to explicitly indicate every source of income and detail their familial expenses; essentially asking students from the lowest-income families to enter a burdensome process to prove how poor they are. Even for higher-income students who may face less difficulty in accessing the documents required for verification, the process can be overwhelming, and leaves them vulnerable to delayed or the loss of aid for which they were otherwise eligible. In order to

improve the verification process, New York should adopt a statewide verification form and process that is used by all colleges. This would allow a student to complete one set of forms that could be submitted to any number of colleges during their aid application and decision-making process. Furthermore, when a student is selected for verification, they should be notified using multiple modalities, including mail, e-mail, phone calls, and text messaging.

Support students to cover costs above tuition. It is important to standardize the process for estimating costs above tuition based on real-living costs and living situations (off campus vs. parent changes) of young people. Estimating such costs should take into account new research on housing and food insecurity among college students. One key way colleges can support students in covering these costs is to expand existing campus-based anti-poverty programs, such as Single Stop, food pantries, and emergency grants. In addition, it is also critical to examine and adjust colleges' cost of attendance (COA) when they do not represent true costs. The COAs that colleges report often fail to account for the real cost of college, leaving students scrambling for last-minute financial solutions.⁴⁷

Intervene when a student is at risk of losing financial aid. Colleges have data on the number of students losing financial aid, reasons for loss of aid, and the average and median amounts of aid lost. Colleges must have staff capacity to counsel students about the risk of losing financial aid if their grades are slipping, or if they are not making adequate progress. This intervention must happen early enough for course correction to occur to avoid students feeling threatened or disheartened about their economic ability to complete their degree. Adopting early-warning data systems to alert staff when a student might be at risk of losing aid will support this process.

Adopt a comprehensive curriculum for students and families to boost both financial and financial aid literacy. This curriculum would use a common framework for counseling students and their families on financial planning and financial aid options. School- and CBO-based counselors and advisors would receive training on the curriculum. This curriculum should include resources such as college matching based on financial profile, preferences, and needs, as well as support navigating the FAFSA and NYS TAP (TAP) application. Families and students should also receive guidance on hidden costs of college, such as computers, major-specific materials, and even food. While this financial-literacy curriculum would be valuable to all students, special attention should be made for immigrant families and those who primarily work in the informal sector, given the challenges and anxieties they may face when producing required documents for financial aid.



Institutional Policies

In our research and our conversations across the city, we heard from students, families, and staff that institutional policies – from those governing enrollment and course selection, to advising and financial aid policies – must be simplified to ensure a more diverse student body will enroll and persist in college. Here, we focus on two key institutional policy areas that we believe are particularly critical to improving access and completion, and feasible to take action on: the system of placing students in remediation, and supporting transfer students. We also discuss the fundamental issue of increasing availability of advising and counseling, which will be crucial to successfully addressing the issues we outline in

this section.

Challenges

The Challenge of Remediation: Remediation reform has become a top priority across the country, and for good reason. Enrollment in remediation courses serves as one of the greatest barriers to degree attainment across the country and here in New York – especially for underrepresented and vulnerable college populations.⁴⁸ Nationwide, almost half of all undergraduates and 70 percent of community college students enroll in remedial coursework.⁴⁹ At CUNY, nearly two-in-five freshman (39 percent) are placed into developmental education courses upon matriculation.⁵⁰ In fall 2017, this number included nearly 60 percent of all freshmen enrolled in CUNY’s associate’s degree programs,⁵¹ down from about 80 percent the year before.⁵² Moreover, CUNY’s black and Hispanic students are placed in remedial education at a rate nearly twice that of the system’s white and Asian students.⁵³

Nationally, the current system of remediation costs students an additional \$380 million in loans annually to take high-school level courses in college.⁵⁴ Furthermore, national data and data from CUNY both suggest that remedial placements do little to improve student outcomes: at CUNY, only 26 percent of students in remedial classes graduate in six years, compared to 40 percent of their peers who did not enroll in remedial coursework.⁵⁵

Noting these disparities, CUNY is moving to reshape its policies on remedial education and support.⁵⁶ CUNY is moving forward four important strategies regarding how remedial needs are met:

1. A plan to eliminate remedial placement tests by Spring 2020, and replace them with an index based on high school grade point average, Regents Exam scores and SAT scores to better identify students with a high probability of passing a credit-bearing course without remedial support.
2. A move to institute co-requisite courses, rather than standalone remedial courses. This allows students to enroll in credit-bearing classes while simultaneously receiving support around remedial needs.⁵⁷ In May 2018, CUNY released guidance to colleges on the development of corequisite remediation.⁵⁸
3. Plans to support and better target pre-college college readiness efforts such as CUNY Lessons in Navigating College Transition (LINCT) to Success, the University Skills Immersion Program (USIP), Math Start and CUNY Start.
4. Plans to offer a range of co-requisite courses that align with the types of math required in different majors (e.g., statistics for social sciences, quantitative reasoning for humanities, and algebra-based courses for STEM and economics).

Another critical aspect of the remediation system is communication between the university and its prospective and new students. Under the current system of placement tests and stand-alone remedial coursework, ensuring that young people are fully informed about the testing and placement processes, their obligations, and the meaning of test results has been a struggle across the city. For example, counselors spoke about the issues with a snail-mail-based system of notifying students about testing - many students never receive or misplace notifications for a variety of

reasons. They also discussed students' lack of understanding of the importance of the CAT and confusion around how to find resources to prepare for it. While the need to communicate around these particular issues will end when CUNY's policies shift, the need to ensure that the university – and every campus at the university – is communicating effectively with students will remain.

Policies and Structures in the Transfer Student Experience: Transfer students comprise approximately half of incoming students at CUNY's four-year colleges.⁵⁹ These students have unique needs and require different services than entering freshmen. Research shows that students who began in community college are less likely to obtain a bachelor's degree than comparable students who started in four-year colleges.⁶⁰ Data reviewed internally at CUNY in 2011 found that transfer students were not accumulating credits at the same rate as non-transfer students, due to a combination of factors including credits not transferring between schools, changing majors, and needing to take additional courses to meet unfilled requirements.⁶¹ While transfer students face substantial roadblocks to their completion, research from CUNY found that their transfer students were actually more focused on degree attainment than their non-transfer student peers, underscoring the need to better align transfer policies with students' commitment.⁶²

From 2010-2013, CUNY set out to better support transfer students. This effort resulted in the Pathways Initiative, which created a set of general education courses required across schools; led to CUNY establishing a policy to ensure that once a course is fulfilled at one school, it meets the requirements across other schools; and that credit can be transferred.⁶³ Despite this important step, the availability and timing of information for transfer students remains a challenge. Deadlines for transferring into a school are not always obvious, and students may miss the chance to register for required classes if they do not begin the process early enough. In fact, a review of institutions nationwide estimated that only 25 percent of colleges outlined general credit transfer information on a single, centralized website or document.⁶⁴

In Their Words: Struggling Through the Transfer Process

"I think [transfer students'] experience is vastly different than students who start in their freshman year. I have a cousin that has been here since her freshman year, and she absolutely loves it. But coming in as a transfer, I found that the student services were not at all helpful... As a transfer student, I think that senior colleges should make more of an effort to get in contact with the students that are entering their school. I was never notified about a transfer orientation, but my friend was. They need to send out constant emails and reminders of what needs to be done next, so that the students entering the school won't have to go through the hassles that I went through."

--Josue Pierette,
Lehman College student

Recommendations

Use a broader range of measures to place students in remedial coursework. We commend CUNY for moving to a broader range of measures to place students into remedial coursework. As CUNY moves to a new system to place students into remediation, we should understand the research and support for such a move. Research from Columbia University's Teachers College found that up to a third of students who tested into remediation would have passed college-level courses based on their knowledge and ability.⁶⁵ New research on math remediation suggests that using multiple metrics, such as a student's high-school grade point average and high-school math grades, can help schools more accurately place students into remedial or college-level coursework.⁶⁶ Researchers at the Community College Research Center at Columbia University have found that metrics such as a student's high school grade point average are better predictors of success in college-level math than placement tests.⁶⁷ Research and pilots conducted in California found that students' performance in high school courses was a far better predictor of college performance than were placement test scores. This led to the development of an algorithm that increased college-level placement from 15 percent to almost 60 percent in English, and from 10 percent to over 30 percent in math.⁶⁸ These promising findings open the door to reduce remedial placements for incoming students. Importantly, as CUNY continues to revamp its remediation policy to include Regents exam scores and other additional measures for placement, we urge the university to consider how these policies will work for students who might not take all the Regents exams, such as students enrolled in a New York Performance Standards Consortium school.

Support students to enter college with as few remedial needs as possible. We commend CUNY for developing and supporting the expansion of programs like CUNY Start, Math Start, and LINCT. CUNY Start and Math Start provide intensive academic preparation as well as "college success" advisement at low cost to students. Research has shown that CUNY Start students are significantly more likely to fully eliminate remedial need than similar students who participate in CUNY's traditional remedial course offerings and, once they matriculate, CUNY Start students enroll in more college credits and pass gateway math and English courses at higher rates than similar students within one year; impacts are especially strong in math and for students who entered with the greatest remedial needs.⁶⁹ LINCT is a collaboration between CUNY and NYC DOE, which serves 12th grade students who are on track to graduate, but will likely need remediation once enrolled in college. The LINCT curriculum, taught by DOE teachers who are supported by CUNY instructional staff, offers an opportunity to address students' remedial needs while they're still in high school. Nearly half the students who participate in LINCT courses are able to start college free of remedial need.⁷⁰

Move to corequisite remediation. We also commend CUNY for moving to co-requisite remediation. Bruce Vandal, Senior Vice President of Complete College America, recently wrote in a Strategy in Focus e-mail newsletter that "The case is closed on traditional remediation. We know - beyond a shadow of a doubt - that [offering co-requisite courses] works. And now it is time for us all to work together to ensure that every student has the opportunity to benefit from this reform."⁷¹ Researchers at CUNY conducted an experiment to randomly assign students to co-requisite or traditional remedial courses and found that students assigned to the co-requisite course not only passed it at higher rates than those assigned to traditional remediation, but were much more likely

to graduate three years later.⁷² Guttman Community College, which offers only co-requisite courses and no traditional remedial courses, has achieved 3-year associate graduation rates of 44 to 49 percent for each of its three cohorts of students.⁷³

Ensure timely, accurate, effective communication with prospective and current students around placement, progress, and policies aimed at supporting their remedial needs. As a full cross-sector community, there is great potential for us to get this right. CUNY, as our largest institution serving students with remedial needs in the city, clearly has a leadership role in this. That said, school and community-based counselors and programs can greatly support effective communication by sharing feedback about what young people hear and understand based on communications. We recommend continued cross-sector collaboration to work on current communication issues as well as to offer proactive support to CUNY as they shift their policies.

Ensure all transfer students have the needed academic and financial advising to succeed. By providing standard information to transfer and potential transfer students as early as when they are applying to college, colleges with two-year programs—particularly community colleges—can ensure they are prepared for the process. This includes providing information on when to apply to four-year schools, how to transfer credits, declaring majors, and related topics. This information should include the process of reapplying for NYS TAP (TAP) aid, as declaring a major triggers a requirement to resubmit paperwork that many transfer students are unaware of. Additionally, increasing staffing dedicated to transfer students will be key to ensuring that this information reaches students.

Extend CUNY ASAP supports to CUNY's four-year colleges and for students who transfer to senior colleges. CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate's Programs (ASAP) provide supports to eligible CUNY community-college students, ranging from personalized advising, to tuition waivers, to help with transportation costs. These supports disappear, however, if an ASAP student decides to transfer to a four-year degree program; additionally, aside from a pilot program at John Jay College, students enrolled in CUNY's senior colleges cannot access the ASAP program. Extending ASAP to senior colleges will support students already enrolled in four-year programs, while helping to ensure smoother transition for ASAP transfer students.

Build more strategies to support and increase two and four year joint initiatives. Beyond expanding ASAP, integrating programming between college campuses and partner institutions could greatly benefit students. Increasing clear and understandable pathways between majors at two- and four-year colleges, for instance, will reduce students' confusion in the transfer process. There are many transfer agreements between institutions and yet students often don't learn about them, especially early on in their college education. There is a need to increase students awareness of agreements and their requirements and how to access them. There is also a need to learn more about the effectiveness of transfer agreements, as successful programs could serve as a model for expanding joint initiatives. In addition, establishing common course numbering across campuses can also support students as they look to transfer their credits across institutions. Finally, this alignment should provide students with information about employer demand for these higher credentials and well-articulated pathways from their degree to career.



Data and Accountability

Collecting data on student outcomes is key to understanding which investments are working, and which are not effectively serving students. Data on student outcomes is also key to aligning our systemwide work to address lagging or inequitable outcomes. Yet, gathering, analyzing, and making best use of data can be daunting, especially in a complex urban environment, where students are served by many schools, colleges, and CBOs.

Recommendations related to data are available throughout our #DegreesNYC work and this blueprint, as data needs cut across multiple goals, policies, and structures. Here, we focus on two specific ideas: 1) how to come to agreement on the key indicators of student success and progress to and through their postsecondary pathways, and 2) how NYC can build a data system that encompasses data from K-12 education, CBOs, higher education, and the labor force to deeply examine how we support young people all the way to success postsecondary pathways.

Challenges

Supporting and Leveraging Data from CBOs: CBOs support thousands of youth and young adults each year as they prepare for and enter college and other postsecondary pathways. While these organizations try to capture data, and may have some reporting requirements to their funders, we know little about the work they do to provide counseling, test preparation, financial planning, and other services. We know even less about the results of these efforts – though we hear from community members and students about how critical they can be for young adults citywide, and especially those in underserved communities. CBOs often have limited budgets, which create limited capacity—and time spent documenting and sharing data is time not spent working with students.

For CBO providers in particular, there is currently no systematic method of tracking students' persistence through college, their career placements or earnings, other than following up with individual students. This is a common challenge across cities as many collective impact efforts related to college stop with college enrollment. Others, like the L.A. Compact, acknowledge the importance of persistence but have to rely on macro-level U.S. census data to assess progress.⁷⁴

Siloed data efforts across the city means our understanding is likewise siloed. NYC has many strengths where data collection and analysis are concerned. Our two largest educational institutions, NYC Department of Education (NYC DOE) and City University of New York (CUNY), have existing data sharing agreements and practices. Through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, the Research Alliance for NYC Schools has linked these two institutions' data at the student level and has created a partnership between the institutions to discuss potential uses of the shared data. There is a strong willingness and commitment at educational institutions and among many non-profit and CBOs to build their data capacity, share data, and participate in research and advocacy efforts around that data. Organizations supporting career pathways have shown interest in joining the collective effort.

There are several challenges to using data to support collective systems change in NYC: Data and conversations around data means are disjointed and siloed across institutions and organizations in NYC. They are also disconnected across service areas like “postsecondary education access and success” and “career pathways.” Little is known about the impact of the very large non-profit and community-based sector in NYC, largely due to the lack of capacity of this sector to collect, analyze and report on outcomes. There is little to no measurement of common indicators across organizations and across public and private sectors in NYC.

Recommendations

Develop a Data Framework to Guide Our Collective Action Toward Equity. Here in NYC, home to the largest K-12 District in the country and the 7th largest public university system, we have been watching other communities across the country successfully improve equitable outcomes for young people by working together in new more collaborative ways and have been inspired to seek new ways to collaborate ourselves. From what we have learned, there are two keys to change: (1) developing a common understanding of young people’s experiences accessing and succeeding in postsecondary pathways through data and (2) using that data to help us align efforts across sectors to alleviate barriers and support success.

We recommend collaboratively developing a framework that identifies key indicators to demonstrate that young people are moving to and through postsecondary pathways successfully. This framework would address at least four key areas: 1) College and Career Readiness, Exploration and Process; 2) Financial Readiness; 3) Academic Readiness; and 4) Social and Emotional Readiness.

Building this framework will help us create cross-sector agreement and commitment to align work around a common set of measurable indicators of success in postsecondary education and career pathways. Such a framework will help give measurable direction to cross-program and cross-sector collaborations, and systems-change efforts. It will act as a guide for aligned action, a coordinated agenda, and further inquiry.

Create a centralized data co-operative and learning network for college access and success organizations in NYC. We propose creating a Data Co-op housed at the Research Alliance to support CBOs to measure key indicators from the Framework mentioned in the recommendation above, empirically test the relationship between those indicators and postsecondary outcomes, and use those measures to improve practice. If linked to other data sources, practitioners could use the database as a source of information as they counsel students, track progress and milestones, and engage in case management. The Research Alliance for NYC Schools, NYC DOE, the NYC Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), CUNY, other public institutions and community organizations would be able to better understand the services being provided to students in their systems, and could make more informed decisions about which interventions and services are most effective.

The Co-op would consist of:

- a. A Research Center to leverage practitioner and researcher expertise to build knowledge about critical predictive indicators of college success for all students.
- b. A Data-Informed Learning Community to support members in analyzing their own data for program improvement and sharing what they have learned.
- c. An Analytics Hub to streamline data collection and maintenance processes and provide an infrastructure to support the indicator development and learning community work. The Hub would link The Research Alliance’s existing student-level relational administrative database (which contains information from NYC DOE, CUNY and the National Student Clearinghouse) with participating CBO student-level programmatic data.

Our end goal would be a common data system that links information at the student level among NYC Department of Education, City University of NY, and community-based college access and success programs across these key indicators. This dataset would enable organizations to share their progress on key indicators and outcomes to improve practice. It will also enable us to test the key indicators of postsecondary success and engage in deeper research questions about how young people are faring and what helps them. Overtime it may also help us understand the scope and contribution of the array of 100+ community-based and non-profit organizations that support young people around postsecondary pathways currently in NYC.



Support and Accessibility for All

Currently, young people – particularly young people of color, young people from low-income communities, and other groups traditionally underrepresented in college – consistently receive both implicit and explicit messages that they do not belong in college or that they won’t make it through college. While all of the #DegreesNYC workgroups considered accessibility and inclusivity within their research, recent efforts to counteract these messages encouraged us to form a workgroup specifically examining inclusivity and its role in promoting postsecondary equity. In New York and across the country, colleges, government agencies, and CBOs are building programs that work to improve supports for marginalized students before they enter college, once enrolled, and when looking for job and other opportunities after completion.⁷⁵ Yet, these services are fragmented, making it challenging for students to access them. There is more work to be done to ensure postsecondary experiences are truly inclusive to all.

Challenges

Student perceptions: Given the range of initiatives underway throughout the city, #DegreesNYC held focus groups across NYC in 2017 and 2018, hoping to better understand the challenges of accessibility and inclusivity faced by young people of color and low-income young adults who are preparing for postsecondary education. Several themes emerged:

- Stereotypes about minorities and the message “there is no place for you in college” are

pervasive both before and during college.

- There are often low expectations for students of color and other underrepresented groups that impact their preparedness for higher education.
- Young people perceive that many colleges have a culture that does not welcome diversity, and colleges are often perceived and experienced as “white spaces.”

Until these realities are tackled, postsecondary education will never achieve full inclusivity or equity. Decades of research suggests that positive youth development experiences in safe, supportive environments can provide the foundation needed to see oneself as worthy of higher education, and to develop the grit needed to apply, enroll, and continue in school.⁷⁶ This approach can be summarized by the “5C model,” a guideline for positive youth development which argues that competence, confidence, connection, character, and compassion lead to positive outcomes in adulthood.⁷⁷

Rise in First-Generation College Students: According to a 2014 U.S. Department of Education report, one-in-three college students in the United States are the first in their family to enter higher education.⁷⁸ The overwhelming majority of these students are either students of color, from low-income backgrounds, or both.⁷⁹ Being a first-generation college student (FGCS) brings unique challenges that can impact a student’s success even before they reach campus. For FGCS parents, a “lack of familiarity with the importance of high school curriculum and how it relates to college preparation” can cause them to focus less on grades or advanced placement coursework than parents who understand the connection between high school and college success.⁸⁰ Research also suggests that FGCS are less likely to engage in extracurricular, volunteer, or other non-academic activities than their continuing-generation peers.⁸¹ This may cut students off from key social engagements that not only help secure a sense of belonging on campus, but also build social capital and valuable connections for their careers.

Changing Nature of Work: Some young adults will seek support in finding a job rather than pursuing higher education immediately after high school graduation. Recent research finds that fewer young adults are out of school and out of work, and more young adults who wanted to work had jobs in 2015 than in 2010.⁸² While this is good news in most respects, the data also shows that more young adults were in part-time jobs, which are less likely to pay a living wage and may not present opportunities for growth.⁸³ Given anticipated changes in the workforce due to forces such as automation and the rise of freelancing and the gig economy, the nature of career counseling may be poised for a transformation, with a need to shift away from putting young adults on pathways to jobs that are disappearing.

College and Career Preparation in NYC Public Schools: Recent mayoral administrations have taken steps to improve postsecondary readiness in NYC. Established in 2005 by the Bloomberg administration, the Office of Postsecondary Readiness (OPSR) designs program models, offers professional development, and partners with CUNY on a number of college access initiatives. Moreover, the City’s Equity and Excellence for All agenda, launched in 2015 under Mayor Bill de Blasio, included several initiatives aimed at improving postsecondary readiness at both the middle

school and high school levels. As part of this agenda, the de Blasio administration initiated College Access for All, a multi-year initiative with a goal of all high school students graduating with an individualized college and career plan and the resources needed to pursue it.⁸⁴ Furthermore, the de Blasio administration has advanced career preparation through the expansion of programs such as the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP).⁸⁵

Despite these efforts, OPSR does not directly oversee schools and therefore relies on incentives to influence how high schools deliver advising, financial aid counseling, and other postsecondary readiness supports. Moreover, for the outside observer, college and career readiness programs seem fragmented across several DOE offices. For example, the Office of Counseling Support Programs (OCSP) oversees Single Shepherd—an initiative stemming from the Equity and Excellence for All agenda that provides mentoring support as students move from middle school to college. Another program aimed at middle school students (known as “Middle School - College Access for All”) is run out of the Office of Equity and Access (OEA). Like OPSR, these two offices must also use incentives to shift priorities in schools, meaning the visions of their program can be implemented piecemeal or fragmentally throughout the city’s public school system. Moreover, OCSP and OEA report to a different deputy chancellor than does OPSR, further complicating alignment between these efforts—all aimed at improving postsecondary preparedness.

In addition to the support students receive before applying and entering into a postsecondary pathway, students also receive messaging once in college on what it takes to make progress and graduate. As outlined below, campus inclusivity, advising services, and opportunities to succeed are critical to positive college experiences.

Persistence and Completion for First-Generation, Working Class, and/or Students of Color: As described in the previous section, tailored support for low-income and minority students is critical not only prior to college enrollment, but during the college experience. Just 11 percent of low-income, first-generation college students leave within six years with a bachelor’s degree, compared with 54 percent of their continuing-generation peers who are not from low-income households.⁸⁶ Graduation rates are also low among other under-supported student groups, including part-time students,⁸⁷ parenting students,⁸⁸ students of color⁸⁹, and students with disabilities.⁹⁰

Campus cultures are increasingly under scrutiny with regard to inclusion, and the issue is certainly not unique to public colleges. For example, although Columbia University has one of the most racially diverse undergraduate populations of the Ivy Leagues – 59 percent of the university’s class of 2020 are students of color⁹¹ – students report experiencing microaggressions and feeling burdened to lead conversations about race and inclusion.⁹² In this case, the university decided to create a taskforce to address these issues. More schools may see the need to follow suit as conversations about diversity become increasingly relevant and expected among students.⁹³

Youth living in foster care face an additional set of barriers. Nationally, only half of youth living in foster care complete high school, and just 3 percent graduate from a four-year college.⁹⁴ To reverse these staggering numbers, CUNY has partnered with the NYC Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) to implement the Fostering College Success Initiative with The New York Foundling, a community-based support service organization serving vulnerable children and families in the

city. This program provides tuition, housing, daily stipends, transportation, clothing, and money for food, books, and a phone. Through the Dormitory Project, foster care youth have the option of year-round housing on three CUNY campuses and have live-in tutors and on-site social workers.⁹⁵ The successes foster youth and their advocates have had in ushering these programs offer an encouraging model for other groups whose lived experiences might impede their ability to succeed in college, such as students experiencing housing insecurity and/or homelessness.

The Role of Advising: Most colleges have advising goals that drive their approach to supporting college students. However, only 30-35 percent of higher education staff nationally report that their school provides ideal student advising.⁹⁶ Within the CUNY system, student-to-advisor ratios vary widely by campus, major, and year of study. CUNY's Student Experience Survey indicates that only half of CUNY students are satisfied with their academic advising services.⁹⁷ The results of a survey of CUNY advisors suggest they believe advising should be made mandatory, but also that schools would need increased staff capacity to implement such a requirement.⁹⁸ The survey also indicates that advisors would benefit from professional development, including training on serving at-risk students (including students with social, emotional, and learning challenges) and supporting students with financial aid.

In Their Words: Building Positive Relationships for Student Success

"Guttman Community College at CUNY is always our number-one choice for our high school students. The school models the ASAP program and our transfer high school model, with counselors monitoring students' academic progress and well-being throughout their education experience. In addition, they offer wraparound services for mental health, Single Stop programs for homeless young adults, a food pantry, summer bridge programs, and remedial courses are credited..."

"Hopefully, all CUNY schools will implement this school's academic support services model... Our population of students needs a permanent caring adult throughout their college experience while transitioning into adulthood for stronger college achievement."

-Darlene Jackson,
Advocate Counselor, Brooklyn High School for Leadership & Community Service

Recommendations

Increase access to positive youth development experiences. Positive youth development occurs through services, opportunities, and supports that help young people build skills and competencies needed to thrive. These experiences can happen in school, community, and home settings, and should be personalized based on a young person's needs (e.g., trauma-informed counseling or restorative justice programming). These opportunities must be available early in life and consistently throughout a child's upbringing. Therefore, in order to improve postsecondary readiness, public funds must be available for early learning programs, building positive school

climates, after-school and summer programs, and other healthy development experiences for children and young adults. Funds should meet the needs to offer programs to all children citywide, and to ensure consistent high-quality across both school- and community-based programs.

Fully engage families in postsecondary knowledge-development and planning. Through focus groups conducted by #DegreesNYC, students proposed a number of ways in which public systems can better support them. One important theme that emerged was the need for families to understand the college enrollment and transition process better, particularly for FGCS students. This means engaging families during college counseling sessions in schools, hosting accessible events in communities at times when parents and caregivers can attend, and providing information in a variety of languages and modalities early enough for families to take action, both in middle school and in early high school. This work also requires expanding our understanding of “family.” As we heard in conversations across the city, many young adults’ support networks go beyond a narrow definition of family and include extended relatives, mentors, friends, and other supporters. To engage and educate families means to engage and educate communities.

Train educators and advisors in culturally-responsive practices. As is the case for all aspects of students’ schooling, culturally-responsive practice is particularly important to postsecondary readiness. Culturally-responsive practices build a bridge between students’ “cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles” to academic knowledge and practices.⁹⁹ This creates spaces where students are valued for who they are, and allows them to explore issues of race, privilege, and injustice. In August 2018, NYC DOE Chancellor Richard Carranza announced that anti-bias training will now be required for all DOE employees who work with students.¹⁰⁰ In order to align these efforts with the postsecondary space, it is mission-critical for college counselors, advisors, and non-profit staff who support students transitioning to college to receive complementary anti-bias training. Such training should focus on developing a more nuanced, culturally-responsive approach to advising students.

Offer more opportunities for peer-to-peer mentorship. Research has shown that a strong predictor of four-year college enrollment for low-income, minority students is what their friends’ plans are.¹⁰¹ Based on the “each one teach one” proverb, a model of mentorship that emphasizes student-led learning, school- and community-based providers should offer more ways for young adults to collaborate, challenge and support each other on their postsecondary plans.

Support multiple pathways to postsecondary success, including training programs. Because college may not be the right path for every student, college and career counselors in schools and community-based settings should be equipped to support young adults who are ready to enter the workforce immediately after high school. Counselors and advisors should have access to up-to-date databases of job training programs and help students select options based on their skills and interests, with consideration for a livable wage, high-growth jobs and industries that align with a student’s stated interests and goals.

Focus on strong advising and support for students and young adults at key junctures of their postsecondary pathways. Advising must be consistent throughout K-12, particularly in middle school, high school, and in college. On the K-12 side, stakeholders must continue the cross-sector

work of examining counseling practices and advising on postsecondary pathways available during middle and high school. This will involve partnering with the NYC DOE and all its programs to support and increase institutional supports for college and career readiness. Representatives from all the offices overseeing major work as well as community-based and non-profit partners supporting counseling and advising, and colleagues from colleges themselves should be present for these conversations.

For college students, advising must be aligned with key points in their academic progress, including the start of their first and second years of college, upon the selection of a major, and prior to graduation. Advising approaches must be holistic and include culturally responsive efforts. This will require sustained, comprehensive professional development for advisors, including training on helping students navigate financial aid, serving at-risk students, connecting students' internships to major exploration, and leveraging technology in advising.

Ensure campuses are student-ready. While much work in the field focuses on what prepares a student for a higher education institution, we recommend that institutions invest in becoming student-ready campuses. We together must be ready to support students through culture shock, homesickness, financial difficulties, academic hurdles, and social/emotional challenges to reinforce a sense of inclusivity, community, belonging, and success. This will involve educating all stakeholders to understand and address the unique challenges and strengths students bring to campuses with them. On the institutional side, it will require institutions championing the development of effective equitable strategies to ensure all students obtain their degrees. Creating a clear definition of student-ready colleges could support this process, which would provide institutional leadership with guidance on assessing policies, programs, and practices from a student-success lens.

Pilot models that strengthen bridges between two-year and four-year campuses. As recommended previously, the counseling group felt strongly that Colleges should explore a number of strategies to bridge two- and four-year programs. For example, community college students might receive counseling to map out an academic pathway to a bachelor's degree, even prior to formal enrollment in a four-year school. Students working toward a bachelor's degree could be allowed to take some courses at a four-year school, giving them experience on campus and opportunities to build relationships with faculty and staff. Colleges should also explore expanding "three-plus-one" structures, which allow a student to complete three years of study in a community college and complete coursework in a single year at a senior college.

Conclusion

In 1998, Lauryn Hill released her chart-topping debut album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. It legitimized her as a solo artist and catapulted her to international stardom while harkening back to Carter G. Woodson's 1933 text, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*.¹⁰² For Woodson, education for those on the margins of American society was a means of indoctrination, colonization and control. The education of any people, he argued, should begin with the people themselves—with their own cultural knowledge. Hill's *Miseducation* helped to open a generation to emancipatory

consciousness. Four years later, in 2002, Hip-Hop icon Nas would continue to speak to that generation with the release of “I Can”—a song with a chorus of young voices singing, “I know I can be what I wanna be; if I work hard at it, I’ll be where I wanna be.”

We believe in this vision and appreciate the power Nas’ words gave to a generation of young adults against a system that was crippling them. Some eighty-five years after Woodson, twenty years after Lauryn Hill and sixteen years after Nas, these systems and structures are still inequitable. We are heartened by progress made with high school graduation rates and the specialized programs offered for low-income, minority students across the city. And yet, much work remains to be done. The recommendations in this blueprint aim to change systems and structures to create a context in which all children have the supports, information, and tools needed to achieve postsecondary success.

Summary of Recommendations

Below are our recommendations for transforming higher education in New York, which our partnership will work toward through collective impact.

Affordability

- Increase FAFSA and NYS TAP (TAP) completion.
- Expand access to, and increase the amount of, TAP grants.
- Comprehensively strengthen TAP to support persistence and completion.
- Standardize financial aid award letters across New York State.
- Improve the financial aid verification process.
- Support students by covering the cost above tuition.
- Intervene when a student is at risk of losing financial aid.
- Adopt a comprehensive curriculum for students and families to boost both financial and financial aid literacy.

Institutional Policies

- Use a broader range of measures to place students in remedial coursework.
- Support students to enter college with as few remedial needs as possible.
- Move to corequisite remediation.
- Ensure timely, accurate, effective communication with prospective and current students around placement, progress, and policies aimed at supporting their remedial needs.
- Extend CUNY ASAP supports to CUNY’s four-year colleges and for students who transfer to senior colleges.
- Build more strategies to support and increase two and four year joint initiatives.

Data and Accountability

- Create a centralized data co-operative and learning network for college access and success organizations in NYC.
- Develop a Data Framework.

Support and Accessibility for All

- Increase access to positive youth development experiences.

- Fully engage families in postsecondary knowledge-development and planning.
- Train educators and advisors in culturally-responsive practices.
- Offer opportunities for peer-to-peer mentoring.
- Support multiple pathways to postsecondary success, including training programs.
- Focus on strong advising and support for students and young adults at key junctures of their postsecondary pathways.
- Ensure campuses are student-ready.
- Pilot models that strengthen bridges between two-year and four-year campuses.

End Notes

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