



**#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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## Executive Summary

### Introduction

#DegreesNYC aims to achieve equity in postsecondary access and completion in New York City (NYC) through a collective impact approach.<sup>1</sup> 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 Education<sup>2</sup> and the Connected CUNY<sup>3</sup> 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 inequalities<sup>4</sup> 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 theories<sup>5</sup> 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 Kramer<sup>6</sup> and espoused by collaborative networks in cities and states such as Los Angeles<sup>7</sup>, Chicago<sup>8</sup>, Michigan<sup>9</sup>, and Florida<sup>10</sup>. 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.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> 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”.<sup>13</sup> Movements “open hearts and minds” and “create the receptive climate for new ideas to take hold”.<sup>14</sup>

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.

## End 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.

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For more information on #DegreesNYC, please visit [degreesnyc.wordpress.com](https://degreesnyc.wordpress.com).