The Role of Community-Based Organizations in the College Access and Success Movement

In recent years, leaders of American cities have become progressively concerned about increasing the college-going and completion rate of their residents. Mayors and other community leaders in Memphis, Boston, Louisville, San Francisco and other cities have launched initiatives to increase college completion rates, mobilizing stakeholders from the education, non-profit, and corporate sectors to share responsibility for achieving these goals. To a large extent, efforts to increase college-going and completion rates have focused on making changes in K-12 and higher education systems to ensure that young people finish high school ready for college and complete degrees in a timely manner. But, today there is growing recognition of the important role that community-based organizations (CBOs) can play in supporting young people's postsecondary aspirations and success.

This brief highlights research focused on the role and impact of community-based organizations in the college access and success movement and the implications of this research for improving practice. It also describes the experiences of one CBO in helping students access and succeed in college.

CBOs play an important role in the education pathways for many students. A useful model for understanding these pathways and where CBOs can assist is the Insulated Education Pipeline, created by the Forum for Youth Investment.[1] The pipeline illustrates the various ways community organizations provide support to young people along the education continuum from early childhood through postsecondary completion and successful entry into the workforce.

The Ready by 21 Insulated Education Pipeline
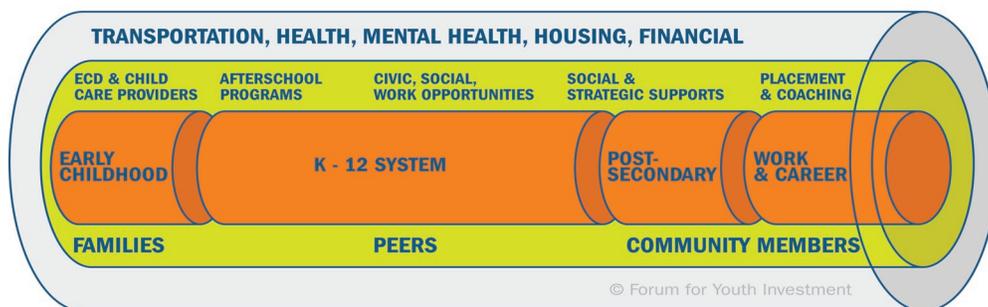
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[1]Yohalem, Nicole, Nalini Ravindranath, Karen Pittman, and Danielle Evennou. 2010. Insulating the Education Pipeline to Increase Postsecondary Success, Ready by 21 Credentialed by 26 Issue Brief Series. Washington, DC: Forum for Youth Investment.

Family members and peers serve as the core of a student's education pipeline. In addition, the inner layer of insulation consists of organizations that provide students with developmental opportunities and social support services that are essential to their academic success. It illustrates how community-based organizations share responsibility for helping young people develop socially, emotionally, and physically, become motivated and engaged in learning and prepare for productive adult lives.[2]

Underpinning the Pipeline is research indicating that integrated community-based support services for youth reduce the risk of them doing poorly in school.[3] Other evidence indicating a need for CBOs to assist with college access is found in research documenting the limited college preparation and planning resources available at high schools serving low-income students, especially when compared with the resources available to high schools in middle- and upper-income communities.[4] In addition, students whose families lack the experience and knowledge to support their college aspirations and whose schools lack the capacity to assist them with college planning have a particular need for assistance from community-based organizations.

What are community-based organizations and why are they important?

CBOs are public or private, nonprofit organizations engaged in addressing the social and economic needs of individuals and groups in a defined geographic area, usually no larger than a county. The college access and success efforts of CBOs vary, depending on their mission and vision. For example, *direct service organizations* provide college information, advice, and application assistance to individual students and families; organize college awareness workshops, financial aid nights, and college fairs; and support students in high school through their college years. *Youth development organizations* often offer extended learning opportunities such as traditional after-school activities with an academic focus, apprenticeships and internships, summer enrichment and travel, and activities on college campuses. *Integrated student services organizations* work with schools to identify and assist individual students needing support with academic issues and non-academic problems that interfere with their school achievement by

leveraging resources from appropriate agencies, including health care, social services, and counseling. Finally, *community mobilization coalitions* consist of public and private entities focused on systemic change to achieve an overarching community-wide goal such as doubling the number of high school graduates or improving college completion within a specified time period.

Why are CBOs well-positioned to help students plan/prepare for college?

CBOs have a number of attributes that put them in a strong position to help students get ready for college and succeed. For example:

Comprehensive services: Many CBOs function as multi-service agencies, offering health care, housing, and food assistance as well as counseling and crisis intervention. As such, they can address the non-academic needs of students that affect their school achievement.

Youth development focus: Youth-serving CBOs embed youth development principles throughout their programming, and by doing so, encourage and support the positive growth of young people. They often supplement the learning that takes place during the school day by offering skill development activities (e.g., training, visual and performing arts, web site design) that students want and need, but schools do not have time to provide.[5]

Flexibility: CBOs can respond more quickly to individual student needs than schools typically can because they do not function under restrictive government or district policies such as FERPA or require signed parent permission forms to take students to visit colleges or attend cultural events.[6]

Trusted source of information and advice: CBO staff members typically understand the cultural and social context of the young people and families with whom they work, and are able to provide advice that is sensitive to students' and parents' particular concerns. Also, because staff do not have preconceived notions of whether a student is 'college material,' students may view their advice as more trustworthy than that of school teachers and counselors.[7]

[2]Blank, M.J., Jacobson, R., & Melaville, A. (2012). Achieving results through community school partnerships: How district and community leaders are building effective, sustainable relationships. *Center for American Progress.* Retrieved from

[3]Lauer, P. A., M. Akiva, S.B. Wilkerson, H.S. Apthorp, D. Snow, and M. Martin-Green. 2006. Out-of-school Time Programs: Meta-analysis of effects for at-risk students. Review of Educational Research, 76, 275-313; Kane, T.J. 2003. The Impact of After-school Programs: Interpreting the Results from Four Evaluations. New York, NY: W.T. Grant Foundation.

[4]McDonough, Patricia. 1997. Choosing Colleges: How Social Class and Schools Structure Opportunity. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press; Bergerson, Amy. 2009. College Choice and Access to College: Moving Policy, Research, and Practice to the 21st Century. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Publications, Inc.

[5]Bowles, Anne and Betsy Brand. 2009. Learning Around the Clock: Benefits of Expanded Learning Opportunities for Older Youth. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum.

[6]Ibid; Coles, Ann and Cathy Engstrom. 2012. Changing Syracuse Degree by Degree: How On Point for College is Transforming the Lives of Under-served Young Adults. Dallas, TX: TG Foundation.

[7]McLain, Laura. 2006. Admission Possible 2004-2005 Program Results Summary. Minneapolis, MN: Wilder Research.; Coles, Ann and Cathy Engstrom. 2012. Changing Syracuse Degree by Degree: How On Point for College is Transforming the Lives of Under-served Young Adults. Dallas, TX: TG Foundation.

Impact on Students

It is important to look not only at the *capacity* of CBOs to assist with college access but also the tangible *benefits* and direct *impact* many of these organizations have on improving college access for under-served students. Although it is often difficult to assess the impact of CBO efforts, there are a few studies that have attempted to draw some core themes based on the examination of select programs.

For example, in 2009 the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) published a compendium of findings from the rigorous evaluation studies of 23 direct service programs that help middle school and high school students prepare for college and career success, seven of which were programs offered by CBOs. Collectively, these programs produced a range of positive outcomes for students. Overall, AYPF found the students who participated in the programs were "more likely to be engaged in school, take advanced courses, apply for financial aid, enroll in college, earn postsecondary degrees, and find employment."[8] Specific CBO outcomes identified across programs fell into four categories (figure 2).

Figure 2: Impact of Community-Based Organizations on Students

Category	Outcomes
Secondary school academic	• Increased high school attendance, graduation and GED attainment rates • Greater likelihood of passing end-of-course examinations, and improved grades • Increased numbers of students completing a rigorous college prep curriculum, taking advanced courses, and taking SAT, ACT, AP, and IB examinations
Planning for colleges and careers	• Increased interest and engagement in school • Students more likely to feel supported by their teachers • Increased self efficacy
Personal resource development	• Higher rates of completed financial aid applications • Increased college aspirations and knowledge • Increased numbers of students planning to attend college immediately after high school
Postsecondary academic	• College enrollment • Greater likelihood of attending selective colleges and pursuing a bachelor's degree • Positive impact on college grades, and credit accumulation

Source: Hooker and Brand, 2009.

Research on the impact of community mobilization efforts is limited. However, one study of a project focused on building community support for increasing college access and success identified several positive outcomes from these efforts, including more and new partners committed to increasing completion rates; stronger connections between K12 and postsecondary education systems; increased familiarity of coalition leaders with education resources; and increasing use of data on student progress. In addition, as a result of the mobilization efforts, several communities extended their goals from increasing high school graduation to focusing on college completion.[9]

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[8]Hooker, Sara and Betsy Brand. 2009. Success at Every Step: How 23 Programs Support Youth on the Path to College and Beyond. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum, p. 69.
[9]Yohalem, Nicole and Emily Jensen. 2012. Raising the Bar from Ready by 21 to Credentialed by 26: Highlights from Community and State Efforts. Washington, DC: Forum for Youth Investment. Youth Policy Forum.

Features of Effective CBO Programs

The studies reviewed by AYPF also provided valuable information on many characteristics of effective CBO college access and success initiatives.[10] An analysis of the findings identified both programmatic features and structural features (figure 3). For example, effective CBO programs might include a focus on academic support and instruction as well as college knowledge, among other activities. Effective CBOs also frequently collaborate with partners and use data analyses to drive decisions.

Several other studies have uncovered similar features that appear to contribute to the effectiveness of community-based college access programs. For example:

- A study of CBO-college partnerships in New York City found that offering students academic and social experiences on campuses, providing course content relevant to their experiences and interests, and helping them develop and apply critical reading, self-management, and study skills produced positive outcomes such as a better understanding of the academic requirements for college-level courses, how to access campus resources, and increased interest in learning about new ideas. [11]

- Through an extensive review of research literature, the non-profit organization Root Cause[12] identified three key features of effective college access programs – academic preparation and enrichment, college aspiration and knowledge, and financial aid and planning.[13]

- Research on effective community mobilization coalitions to reduce school dropout rates found that successful coalitions had the following elements, which may also contribute to the effectiveness of college access coalitions: focus on a common mission; an established process of mutual accountability for partnership goals; the use of data to inform decision-making, drive action, and rally public support; work on coalition activities embedded across the partners at multiple levels; and a long-term strategy for achieving coalition goals linked to likely early success as a means of building momentum.[14]

Figure 3: Features of Effective CBO Initiatives

Programmatic Features

Rigor and academic support: high expectations for all students; tutoring and academic skill-building; self-management skills development.

Relationships: personal relationships with caring and knowledgeable adults; peer and adult role models; family involvement.

College knowledge and access: exposure to what college is like; college exploration; admission and financial aid application assistance.

Relevance: helping students understand the link between schooling and their "real world" interests through project based learning, career exploration, and jobs.

Youth-centered programs: activities that value the backgrounds and perspectives of students; opportunities for students to make choices, assume leadership roles, and build self-esteem.

Instruction: well-equipped staff to facilitate students' learning; planning time for staff to work together developing rich and coherent learning experiences.

Structural Features

Partnerships and cross-systems collaboration: work with schools, higher education institutions, families, and other community organizations to address students' diverse needs and smooth the transition from high school to college.

Strategic use of time: using after-school, weekend, and summer time for experiences that will expand students' sense of possibilities, accelerate learning in core subject areas, and keep them on track toward reaching college goals.

Leadership and autonomy: competent and tenacious leaders and the independence to act quickly and strategically to meet students' needs.

Effective assessment and use of data: continually compiling and using information on students' backgrounds, participation and progress to determine program effectiveness and make changes as needed.

Source: Root Cause

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[10]Hooker, Sara and Betsy Brand. 2009. Success at Every Step: How 23 Programs Support Youth on the Path to College and Beyond. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum.
[11]Aulicino, Claire and Donna Tapper. 2008. The College-Community Connections Program: Implementation and Influence of Unique Pre-College Experiences for New York City Youth. New York, NY: Metis Associates.
[12]http://rootcause.org/college-access
[13]Social Issue Report. 2010. College Access and Success: Education and Youth Development. Cambridge, MA: Root Cause.
[14]Allen, Lili. 2010. Mobilizing a Cross-Sector Collaborative for Systemic Change. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future.

Implications for Practitioners

The research on the impact and effectiveness of CBO programs helps provide context for practitioners who are helping students prepare for and succeed in college. Some of the important lessons from the experiences of CBOs are reflected in the following:

1. Emphasize academic support and mentoring provided by a caring adult for every student. If your program does not provide this support, refer students to organizations in your community that do.

2. Help students develop academic behaviors that they need in order to do well in rigorous college preparatory courses. Such behaviors, also known as self-regulatory skills, include time management, study skills, how to communicate effectively with high school teachers and college faculty, and how to seek help from others.

3. Provide students with activities that value their social and cultural backgrounds and empower them to make informed choices related to their education goals.

4. Expose students to new experiences and careers related to their interests and goals. Such experiences play a critical role in expanding students' sense of possibilities and their understanding of the connection between school and their future aspirations.

5. Compile and analyze data on students' needs and achievement to determine strategic ways to use out-of-class/school time to engage students in activities that will advance their postsecondary goals.

6. Place a high priority on in-service training to equip program staff with the knowledge and skills they need to facilitate students' learning and build their self-confidence.

7. Work closely with other key players in students' lives—the high schools or postsecondary institutions they attend, their families, and community organizations—to support students in making successful transitions from high school to and through college.

Although research on CBOs that facilitate college access and success for under-served students is limited, the evidence we have suggests CBOs play an important role in this process. Community-based organizations meet student needs for support with preparing for college and persisting to degree completion in a way that high schools and postsecondary institutions do not always have the capacity to address. The knowledge CBO staff have of the issues students and their families face in their daily lives enables them to help students overcome barriers to their college goals that otherwise might seem insurmountable.

This R2P brief highlights research on the role of CBOs in college-going for underserved students. Research suggests that CBOs can be an integral partner in supporting students on their path. To bridge research with practice, we interviewed the Executive Director of College Bound St. Louis, Lisa Zarin, to discuss not only the importance of partnerships with community-based organizations in support of underserved students, but also the day-to-day work of practitioners who work with these students and the importance of —aligning this work with changes in the field. From this, we hope to gain a better understanding of the specific actions that can be taken to support students, including activities focused on counseling, financial literacy, and family and peer support that are set within the broader context of college access.

Lessons from the Field:
College Bound St. Louis

Founded in 2006, College Bound St. Louis provides promising high school students from low-income backgrounds with the academic enrichment, social supports and life skills needed to apply, matriculate and to achieve high-quality postsecondary degrees that prepare students for careers yielding family-sustaining incomes. It has a year-round curriculum that includes career exposure, community engagement, test preparation and academic enrichment so that students not only *get* to college, they *graduate* from college. Lisa Zarin, founder and Executive Director of College Bound St. Louis, has been a force in starting up the organization and overseeing its transformation over time.

1. What are the main reasons that you decided to start a college access program? Who else was involved in the startup?

College Bound St. Louis started when Lisa Zarin recognized the resources available to her son attending a privileged private school. Reflecting on her modest upbringing, Lisa asked herself, "what is happening to the student who grew up the way I grew up?" This led her to research showing the high ratios of students to college counselors and the low college success rates of many students from St. Louis. This research, along with research on the student pipeline and the interventions needed to help students succeed, helped frame the program from its beginning. In particular, they started with the concept of college success, challenging themselves to not only get the students into college but also to be sure that they graduated. Their approach to help the students succeed was to support the whole child, looking at culture and home life—including basic concepts such as whether the students were getting enough food—in addition to academics and knowledge about the college going process.

2. How did you determine the most crucial interventions for your first students?

College Bound St. Louis started a focus on ACT preparation taught by experts, tutoring for students beyond what they were learning in high school, and guidance through an intensive college application process that focused on "Aptitude, finance, and interest"—very similar to the college match-and-fit process that many college access programs use today. The approach started here because the program looked at what students of privilege had access to and strove to replicate it.

3. Have you added, subtracted, or modified these interventions over time?

Many of the interventions have evolved over time. In particular, College Bound St. Louis learned how to work with students from low-income families who are more interdependent with their families than their high-income peers. The program adapted to help the students feel comfortable asking for help from adults outside of their family. One example is the change in approach to ACT preparation. Originally, students were given waivers to attend prep classes, but only increased their scores 8 percent because the instructors assumed the students received a certain level of instruction in their schools and were not accustomed to connecting with students on a personal level. Today, students attend prep courses in a group with a College Bound coach who knows each individual student. With the new approach, students now increase their scores by about 20 percent. Parents and families volunteer to grade ACT practice tests, which helps introduce them to the program and understand why their students need to prepare, study, rest the night before, and eat before the exam.

4. Research shows three key indicators: academic, social, and financial awareness and preparedness. Does College Bound focus on all three? How so?

College Bound is constantly examining the new literature in the field, and expanding or evolving its program. Lisa Zarin points out that "what you knew in 2008 may no longer hold true today." As such, the program has expanded to help its students in all three areas highlighted in the research. For example, summer academic programs have been added to supplement high school courses in mathematics and language arts. A financial literacy curriculum runs from 10th-12th grades to teach students not only about the financial aid process but also how to manage their personal finances, as the outside scholarships or loans are often the first time these students will manage money on their own. Finally, College Bound is contracting with the Teen Outreach Program (TOP) to help students learn about self-efficacy, service learning and other areas of social/emotional development and non-cognitive learning that are important to success in higher education.

5. Your current college students are on track to graduate far above the national averages for low-income students. How do you track this information? What to attribute to this success?

College Bound St. Louis' first cohort, the high school class of 2008 (which joined the program in 2006 at the end of 9th grade), graduated from college in spring of 2012. The program uses only external sources of information to track students, including FERPA forms signed with schools, direct college records, and the National Student Clearinghouse. The program attributes the success of the students to the preparation they receive before arriving at college and also the relationships and resources that College Bound is able to connect students with once they have arrived. College Bound is already a trusted resource for these students, and so when they turn to College Bound, the program helps connect them to campus resources, and follows up with campus partners to confirm that the student has followed through. College Bound believes in "building a safety net for students who didn't previously have" one as well as giving them the support and encouragement needed to succeed.

6. How did you expand from serving 36 students in 2006 to 1,500 students in 2011?

College Bound St. Louis operates two different programs. One is the full wrap-around program where the student is involved for 7-9 years. They apply to join at the end of 9th grade and stay with the program through college graduation. This program originally started in two and then four high schools. A generous funder provided for College Bound to build a center for all St. Louis students, which allows students from 35 high schools to apply to participate in the full program given the availability of after-school courses in the center and on the Washington University campus. The second program is an early college awareness program for the 1,000 freshman in four high schools. All 9th graders in these schools attend the college awareness course, which is paid for through the Missouri Department of Higher Education using federal College Access Challenge Grant funds. The students in this program then have the opportunity to join the full wrap-around program if they desire to do so.

7. How are you partnering with high schools?

It can be challenging. Some high school principals, counselors, and teachers are incredibly supportive. For others, it takes time for the relationship to develop as they realize that College Bound is working to supplement their services and not supplant their work. Now that they have been working together for more years, Ms. Zarin has observed that, "By and large, what we are able to bring the schools and the ways we are able to help the partners in the school take the information and resources we have and then spread them more broadly through the students they touch has been equally welcome." Another way College Bound has worked to build these relationships is through sharing documentation of the progress of the students who have graduated from those high schools. Frequently teachers and counselors do not know whether or not their students have succeeded and this gives them the opportunity to see that they have.

8. What guidance would you offer to those who are looking to start a program?

The first response immediately is "start with the data." It is important to really understand what supports students need to be able to complete college, as well as the population the program is working to serve, including disaggregated data about specific groups. The program suggests starting with the end goal and researching how to "reverse engineer" the program step-by-step to help students reach that goal. Also, it is important to measure and track the indicators and levers along the way to completion. Ms. Zarin points out that nothing has been more important than following these indicators and using them to determine the adjustments needed to improve the program. At College Bound, they plan based on a close look at the data, asking again "what is necessary and what is sufficient?"

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About Pathways and NCAN

About the Pathways to College Network
The Pathways to College Network (Pathways) is an alliance of national organizations that advances college opportunity for underserved students by raising public awareness, supporting innovative research, and promoting evidence-based policies and practices across the K–12 and higher education sectors. Pathways promotes the use of research-based policies and practices, the development of new research that is both rigorous and actionable, and the alignment of efforts across middle school, high school, and higher education in order to promote college access and success for underserved students. To learn more about Pathways, please visit www.ihep.org.

About the National College Access Network
The National College Access Network (NCAN) is a partner organization of the Pathways to College Network. Incorporated in 1995, the mission of the NCAN is to build, strengthen, and empower communities committed to college access and success so that all students, especially those under-represented in postsecondary education, can achieve their educational dreams. Through advising and financial assistance, our members share a commitment to encourage and enable students to set and achieve educational goals. For more about NCAN, please visit www.collegeaccess.org