# THE ROLE OF SOCIAL SUPPORTS AND SELF-EFFICACY IN COLLEGE SUCCESS

**With an increased national focus on postsecondary degree completion, this Research to Practice brief highlights the roles of social supports and self-efficacy in the academic success of students and features advice from college access and success practitioners at Bottom Line, a nonprofit that aims to help students "get into college, graduate, and go far in life."**

Pathways to College Network

IHEP
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National College Access Network

Building Connections. Advancing Equity. Promoting Success.

Over the past three decades, our nation has witnessed great increases in college-going rates—no doubt due in part to widespread efforts by education policymakers and college access practitioners. Yet despite progress, just over half of students enrolled in four-year institutions graduate within six years (NCES 2009). Underserved students graduate at even lower rates and face significant barriers throughout the educational pipeline. To address low completion rates, the Obama administration has spurred a national movement focused on increasing the number of individuals seeking and completing a postsecondary credential. Federal and state policymakers, philanthropists, and education practitioners have united around this agenda, leading to a number of initiatives at the national, state, and local levels to increase college completion.

A closer look at completion rates show that while enrollment numbers are increasing, gaps persist in degree attainment across racial/ethnic groups and socioeconomic status. For instance:

- Low-income, first-generation college students are nearly four times more likely to leave higher education after their first year than are students who have neither risk factors (Engle and Tinto 2008).

- Of White students seeking a bachelor's degree, 60 percent graduate within six years, compared with 38, 40, and 49 percent of Native American, African-American, and Latina/o students respectively (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, and Ginder 2010).

- African-American and Latina/o students make up 25 percent of the total postsecondary student population, yet make up only 17 percent of degree recipients (Synder, Dillow, and Hoffman 2009).

- In 2007 only 11 percent of low-income, first-generation students earned a bachelor's degree within six years, (Engle and Tinto 2008).

- Low-income community college students are half as likely to successfully transfer and earn a bachelor's degree as their higher-income peers (ACSFA 2008).

***The Role of College Access Practitioners***
Critical to the national college completion movement, the role of college access practitioners has evolved into one that focuses on ensuring students not only have

access to college, but also successfully graduate. To this end, this brief synthesizes existing scholarly research on social supports and self-efficacy, two factors that have been shown to influence retention for underrepresented student groups in postsecondary education. It is our hope that by shedding meaningful light on these important dimensions of student success, we can help college access practitioners better tailor their work to increase student success.

## Definitions

**Social Supports: Strategies that foster and fortify social networks, campus-connectedness and sense of belonging, self-confidence, and academic motivation. Such supports include positive relationships with faculty and strong peer-to-peer networks, both of which help provide students with the personal agency needed for academic success.**

**Self-Efficacy: The belief that an individual has in her or his ability to achieve a goal or outcome, such as degree attainment. Self-efficacy can be developed through providing realistic and meaningful affirmations, documenting and celebrating achievements, and encouraging students to participate in cooperative learning environments such as formal study groups, first-year seminars, and residential advising programs.**

### What Research Tells Us: Social Supports and Self-Efficacy

#### Social Supports
College persistence relies heavily on students' perception that they are academically and socially integrated into campus life (Hurtado and Carter 1997). Integration leads to an increased "sense of belonging," which can in turn help mitigate factors that impede or act as barriers to persistence (Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods 2007). A challenge of the integration perspective, however, is the emphasis placed on assimilation and acculturation, whereby the backgrounds and experiences of underrepresented students may be disregarded (Cabrera 2005; Kraemer 1997; Kuh and Love 2000; and Tierney 1992).

Particularly for underrepresented students, a sense of belonging depends on their ability to identify with an environment that allows for the feeling of inclusion. This includes identifying with fellow students, finding belonging among students groups or organizations, identifying with an institution's mission, or the

way in which faculty teach subject matter. Students who are first in their family to attend college often feel the least included in the college or university environment. Yet, positive changes can be made at both the institutional and student levels to increase sense of belonging and minimize barriers to student success (Padilla 1997).

Positive peer relationships, faculty and staff mentors, and familial and community support are types of social supports critical in promoting sense of belonging and increasing student persistence. For example:

*Peer Support*
- Strong peer networks strengthens academic and social development for first generation and racial/ethnic minority students (Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco 2005).
- Participation in a living-learning community—specialized residential programs providing direct connections with faculty and specific academic units and departments—increases students' participation in enriching educational experiences (Heiss, Cabrera, and Brower 2008).
- There is something distinctly important about the *perception* of social supports, including friendship, peer mentorship, and inclusion felt within the overarching campus environment. This perception is one of the most important factors in the decision to stay or leave college for Latina/o undergraduates (Gloria et al. 2005).

*Faculty and Staff Mentors*
- Establishing faculty and staff mentors is critical to the inclusion and subsequent success of underrepresented students (DeWitz, Woolsey, and Walsh 2009).
- Feelings of isolation are more pronounced for low-income and first-generation students, and can often lead to stress and anxiety in academic settings. Because these groups spend less time on campus and tend to work off-campus, building relationships with faculty inside and outside the classroom is important (Engle and Tinto 2008).
- For underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, developing a research relationship with faculty not only impacts student sense of belonging but also enhances research self-efficacy, which in turn increases learning gains (Strayhorn 2010).
- Black men that experience supportive relationships with faculty, staff, and peers, experience greater levels of satisfaction with college. For some, this offsets socioeconomic disadvantages that may threaten odds for college success (Strayhorn 2008).

*Familial and Community Support*
- Family and community support has a positive influence on the persistence of first-generation students, especially first-generation Latinas (Gloria et al. 2005).

- Students with high family interaction not only report higher GPAs, but also have higher academic self-efficacy (Turner, Chandler, and Heffer 2009).
- First-generation students' perception of family support influences their ability to manage the academic and emotional rigors of college (Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco 2005; Melendez and Bianco Melendez 2010).

**Spotlight on Spelman College**

**Spelman College—an all-female Historically Black College in Atlanta, Ga.—has experienced degree attainment success for Black women studying science, technology, engineering, and math by employing comprehensive support structures. Spelman mitigates completion barriers by cultivating a strong peer culture in academic spaces, increasing the effort of faculty to actively support and encourage students, and expanding their communication of available undergraduate research opportunities (Perna et al. 2009).**

*Academic Self-Efficacy*

Self-efficacy is defined as an individual's perceived capability in performing the necessary tasks to achieve personal goals (Bandura 1997). Academic self-efficacy is one of the major cognitive factors influencing the academic success of under-represented students, particularly during the first year of college (Zajacova, Lynch, and Espenshade 2005; Vuong, Brown-Welty, and Tracz 2010). First-generation students are more likely to encounter low faculty expectations, perceive less institutional support, and have lower levels of academic self-efficacy (Darling and Scandlyn Smith 2007). They also often choose goals that undermine their academic ability and success (DeWitz, Woolsey, and Walsh 2009). The undermining of academic ability and prior success can sometimes make continued success seem like an unattainable task, which hinders overall academic behavior and college completion.

Further research on self-efficacy suggests:

- Academic self-efficacy has a positive relationship with student GPA and credits earned throughout the first year of college and is a predictor of increased intent to persist to graduation (Zajacova, Lynch, and Espenshade 2005).
- Students with high self-efficacy report a stronger sense of life purpose, leading to greater levels of academic success (DeWitz, Woolsey, and Walsh 2009).
- Students with high levels of academic self-efficacy experience less stress and are better equipped to cope

with academic challenges (Zajacova, Lynch, and Espenshade 2005).
- Self-efficacy remains just as important to the academic success of first-generation students in their second year as it does in their first year (Vuong, Brown-Welty, and Tracz 2010), signaling the need to ensure positive self-efficacy throughout the entire college experience.

**Spotlight on Financial Support**

**Though the impact of financial support is beyond the scope of this brief, it is important to recognize the role that college access practitioners play in making sure underserved students and their families receive high-quality information regarding financial support such as loans and grants. Providing accurate information on college pricing is also critical. Accompanied by social supports and increased self-efficacy, adequate financial support helps students meet high academic standards throughout the educational pipeline.**

**Implications for College Access Practitioners**: **Bridging Research and Practice**

The absence of social support structures and low self-efficacy presents a challenge to even the brightest of students in post-secondary education. For underrepresented students, these factors are even more important to college success. As the role of college access practitioners continues to evolve, research on social supports and self-efficacy suggest that underrepresented student groups would benefit from the following interventions:

*Building Social Supports*

- Assist students in establishing and sustaining faculty and staff relationships, and encourage them to ask for and feel comfortable receiving help.
- Work with students and families to assess the nature of the family-child relationship in order to help students further develop or maintain supportive relationships with family once they leave home for college.
- If students continue to live at home while enrolled in college, work with families to help them understand the academic rigor of the college environment and the academic and social transition challenges students may face. Helping students create social outlets that accommodate travel to school activities, work schedules, and family responsibilities is also important.
- Connect students to peer-mentored and peer-facilitated

programs that offer tutoring, supplemental instruction, or other academic supports.

- Encourage students to join learning communities, which often allow students to register for courses with the same instructors, build cohorts of peers, and engage in enriching educational experiences. Some learning communities may be associated with students' major department or student services office.
- Encourage students to attend summer transition programs.

### Building Academic Self-Efficacy

- Strengthen students' confidence in their academic ability by celebrating academic success stories and encouraging them to strive for new challenges.
- Encourage students to become peer mentors on campus.
- Invite students to present to, speak with, and mentor younger students in the education pipeline, particularly those with similar degree/career aspirations. Students may also find it rewarding to engage in their institutions' recruitment of prospective students.
- Assist students with the academic transition to college by helping them interpret the college culture, implement academic success strategies, and refine time- and resource-management skills.
- Collaborate with college advisors to direct students toward academic and social resources.

Relevant scholarly research from the education community can help college access practitioners supplement program implementation and help mitigate the problem of low college completion rates, especially for underrepresented student groups. The research-to-practice link can provide practitioners with strategies to create comprehensive support structures, increase self-efficacy, and in turn, improve student success. ✕

# Lessons from the Field: Bottom Line

**Bottom Line was founded in 1997 to improve the greater Boston community by helping disadvantaged youth get into college, graduate from college, and go far in life. Bottom Line currently has offices in Boston and Worcester, Mass., and plans to launch a New York City office in 2011. Greg Johnson has been executive director of Bottom Line since 2003. During that time, the organization has grown from serving 500 to nearly 1,600 students annually.**
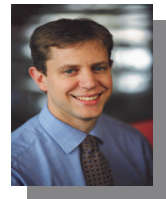
Greg Johnson

**1. Research suggests that self-efficacy and social and emotional support are important factors affecting students' behaviors and intentions toward persistence. How would you say these factors affect the success of students in your program?**
Bottom Line is committed to preparing students mentally for college by cultivating their belief in their ability to succeed, developing goals, and showing them the pathways to get there. In Bottom Line's experience, the more confident its students are in their preparation and the more supported the students feel, the more likely they are to succeed in college.

Bottom Line employs multiple strategies to prepare students. Students are assigned a personal Bottom Line counselor to work with them one-on-one from high school graduation to college graduation. Starting the summer after high-school graduation, students attend several events to prepare them for the challenges they may face, such as time management and using a syllabus. Throughout the year, students receive on-campus visits, mailings, and care packages from their counselors.

**2. What types of challenges may arise when attempting to integrate faculty into your students' social support systems? How has Bottom Line responded to these challenges?**
Although Bottom Line is an off-campus program, it encourages its students to develop relationships with faculty. Bottom Line

counselors advise students on how to introduce themselves to professors and follow up to see if students are visiting faculty during office hours.

On large campuses, where interaction with faculty may be challenging, Bottom Line depends on the peer support of upperclassmen in the program to guide underclassmen toward faculty who have a demonstrated interest in supporting and advocating for underrepresented students.

Although finding a faculty member who shares the same racial/ethnic background assists in campus integration for minority students, Bottom Line counselors find that this is not possible on every campus. Thus, it is important for not only racial/ethnic minority faculty, but all faculty, to be knowledgeable in ways to support racial/ethnic minority students.

### 3. What role do the family members of Bottom Line participants play in the students' development of self-efficacy and social integration on campus?
The majority of parents are very emotionally supportive, even if they cannot be knowledgably supportive. Bottom Line counselors fill this knowledge gap.

Counselors meet with first-year students on campus during the initial weeks of school to assist their integration as much as possible. Counselors will often accompany students to the bursar's office, library, and career center.

During one-on-one meetings throughout the year, counselors assess students' understanding of resources, comfort with classes, and development of social circles. Bottom Line counselors also work to connect students with peers and programs that enhance students' sense of belonging.

### 4. As a practitioner, what type of relationship have you recognized between self-efficacy and knowledge or perception of financial support?
Self-efficacy is improved when students take a more active role in the financial aid decision-making process. Bottom Line assists students in finding the correct information for their circumstances to help them make "quality decisions."

There are many students who do not recognize the reality of what school costs. Johnson notes that the media sometimes make schools look unaffordable and that students knowing peers who have gone to schools they can't afford affirms this notion. In an effort to help students feel that they can pay for college, Bottom Line is often a proponent of lower-cost institutions that are a good fit for the students.

Johnson also notes that it is important to make perceptions of financial support as realistic as possible. Before first-year students arrive on campus, Bottom Line counselors go through a list with students to check the status of all financial aid and account balances. Students are also guided to the school's bursar's office for on-campus support regarding financial issues.

### 5. The perception of strong peer support makes an important contribution to positive first-year outcomes, especially with first-generation students. How does Bottom Line foster a network of peer support? Would you say that peer support also contributes positively after the first year?
Bottom Line has multiple strategies in place to foster peer support for its students. Incoming first-year students attend the Success Send-Off each year. The bonding event groups incoming first-year students headed to the same college into teams. This provides participants with a head start at developing a solid social network.

Bottom Line also connects first-year students with upperclassmen in the program. Upperclassmen help the first-year students navigate campus and classes. Bottom Line finds that upperclassmen who serve as mentors are motivated by the added responsibility and increased involvement on campus.

Recognizing social support as being crucial to college success, Bottom Line has also formed Facebook group pages for each of the campuses it works with, providing yet another environment in which students can find a support network.

### 6. How does Bottom Line assess whether or not student participants are on track to graduate?
Each student completes a one-on-one assessment with a Bottom Line counselor every six months to track academic progress and assess financial standing and employability ranking. Bottom Line counselors evaluate whether students are applying knowledge and using resources by reviewing transcripts. Counselors also check to see how students are managing their time, choosing classes, and performing in classes.

Usually, close to 80 percent of students are on track to graduate and for the approximately 20 percent of students who are not on track, counselors adjust their advising to specific needs of those students. ≋

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## Resource Highlights

*The Role of Academic and Non-Academic Factors in Improving College Retention:* **This ACT policy report is a comprehensive review of 109 studies focusing on postsecondary retention of students at four-year colleges and universities, providing information about the influence of both academic and non-academic factors.**

http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/college_retention.pdf

*Moving Beyond Access: College Success for Low-Income, First Generation Students:* **This Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education report examines the postsecondary characteristics, experiences, and outcomes of low-income, first-generation college students. It highlights how the combined impact of being both low-income and first generation correlates with a range of factors that lower the students' chances of successfully earning a college degree.**

http://www.pellinstitute.org/files/COE_MovingBeyondReport_Final.pdf

*Removing Roadblocks to Rigor: Linking Academic and Social Supports to Ensure College Readiness and Success:* **This Pathways to College Network publication proposes a unifying framework in which academic and social support policies and practices go hand-in-hand with increased expectations and student success.**

http://www.ihep.org/assets/files/programs/pcn/Roadblocks.pdf

## Resource Highlights

**Pathways Online Library:** A searchable database of publications, research reports, Web sites and other relevant resources related to improving college access and success for underserved students.

http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/

**National College Access Program Directory:** An online resource for students, parents, counselors, and researchers, and college access programs to identify and locate services or programs within a region, state, or locality.

http://www.collegeaccess.org/accessprogramdirectory/

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## About the Pathways to College Network and NCAN

### About the Pathways to College Network

The Pathways to College Network 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 the Pathways to College Network, please visit **www.pathwaystocollege.net** .

### 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 underrepresented 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. To learn more about NCAN, please visit **http://www.collegeaccess.org/**.