



Opportunity
YOUTH

College
Success

Introduction

Most young people face challenges on the road to a college degree. They must make important decisions about career preparation, financing a college education, and how college and work fit together to ensure income security while in school. These challenges often seem particularly daunting for two groups of students: opportunity youth—the 5 million youth nationally aged 16-24 who are disconnected from both work and school—and first-generation college students. Many students from both of these groups come from schools or families that lack the resources to fully prepare them for college.



GED to College

In Massachusetts, the local knowledge economy places a premium on the completion of a postsecondary education. Opportunity youth (OY) and first-generation (first-gen) students who fail to earn a postsecondary credential are at a disadvantage in accessing careers associated with a family-sustaining wage. Challenges, however, arise well before choices about college; many OY and first-gen students drop out of high school and earn a high school equivalency (HSE) credential, often in the form of a GED. These students aspire to complete a postsecondary credential—nearly half of GED completers enroll in postsecondary education. Yet, fewer than 12 percent of these students will graduate. National postsecondary data highlights some common issues for GED completers.

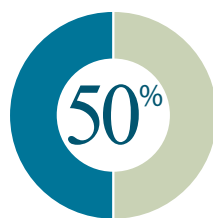
GED Completers who Enroll in Postsecondary



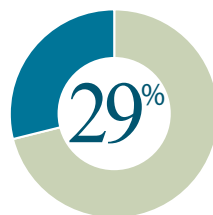
traditional high school graduates

GED completer

receive **20%** less financial aid their first-year of college



return for a second semester



return for a second year



11.6% graduate from a postsecondary institution, often with a work-based credential





OY Success in College

This brief—a product of the research partnership between the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy and the Boston Opportunity Youth Collaborative—explores where policy can improve student pathways to a college degree. Research activities focused on:

- Identifying common challenges that OY and first-gen students face in enrolling in, and progressing through, college;
- Documenting the types of supports generally available on campus, as well as the supplemental supports offered by transition coaches to specific populations; and
- Analyzing where implementing new institution- or system-level policy can address existing gaps.

A goal of this research project is to advance the conversation on how colleges, community-based organizations, and the Commonwealth—most notably state education agencies—can systemize supports for OY and first-gen students. For a more detailed explanation of the research methodology and data collection, see text box at right.

In conducting this research, common themes about students' experiences emerged. This college-going population has a clear set of strengths, including the ability to articulate goals for completing a college degree, a desire to improve job prospects, and an aspiration to set an example for, and take care of, family. However, students—especially OY and first-gen college-going students—need support to improve their likelihood of success in college. Four areas for improvement emerged:

-  Aligning campus systems with students' needs;
-  Streamlining students' paths through academic requirements, to ensure progress in a program of study;
-  Building students' navigation skills to access supports once on campus; and
-  Connecting community and on-campus resources to help students balance the demands of work, family, and college.

The next sections of this research brief consider each of the challenges discussed above and present aligned policy options summarized from existing literature. Bullets highlighted in bold reflect policy options identified by multiple stakeholders, and represent priorities for local policymaking. These sections also feature quotes from students, expressing their expectations for college and what has contributed to their success.

RESEARCH METHODS

The Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, in partnership with the Boston Opportunity Youth Collaborative, designed and executed a research project exploring how to promote college success for OY and first-gen students. The Rennie Center team began this work with a literature review summarizing research on strategies and approaches that most effectively support OY and first-gen students in postsecondary education. Next, the Rennie Center team worked to document the perspectives of local students, coaches, and postsecondary leaders and stakeholders. Specifically, the Rennie Center team conducted focus groups and interviews with:

Students: to learn about their experiences in navigating college. Focus groups were a diverse assembly of students in light of age, race, gender, academic standing, and academic path to and through college (e.g., many had a stop out/drop out in high school or college). Almost all students had attended Boston Public Schools; most students chose community college as their first postsecondary program.

Transition Coaches: to document the kinds of supports they provide, common student challenges, and the on-campus resources most in-demand. A few coaches held a shared educational path with students: some were once opportunity youth, and some were graduates of, or had attended, the high schools or postsecondary institutions at which they were now coaching.

Postsecondary and community-based leaders: to provide feedback on policy and practice recommendations identified in the literature review. These respondents provided pivotal guidance on what policy options can be achieved and by whom.



Align Campus Systems with Student Needs

CHALLENGE

Students understand the importance of a college degree, but many are unsure of the requirements needed to complete college successfully. Campuses can improve systems and processes to more adequately address the challenges students have building a path to a college degree.

SOLUTIONS

- **Develop a comprehensive college admissions, enrollment, transition, and financing process:** Ensure that easy-to-understand information about these processes is accessible to students and their families **i** **S**
- **Assign transition coaches to students early on in the college-going process to provide guidance on admissions, enrollment, transition, and financing** **i**
- Enhance capacity to advise students on careers and courses: Create guided student pathways that allow students to make more clear-cut decisions about their future **i**
- Build peer cohorts around common student interests (e.g., within a particular program or major): Use these as a way to enhance student supports that are not already being provided on-campus **i** **h**

Supports to navigate college

“Enrolling was easy because I had help the whole way. When I was doing my GED, I was doing a dual enrollment class. The professor who did the dual enrollment class took us (to campus) as part of the class.”

Icons identify policy recommendations for postsecondary stakeholders.

i institution/community college **C** community partner **h** high school equivalency (HSE) provider **S** state

Text **highlighted in bold** represent priorities for local policymaking.



Streamline Academic Progression

CHALLENGE

Students often encounter academic “bumps” that derail their progress in college. Providing students with more information about their progress—whether in a course or towards a degree or credential—will make students less likely to stop out or drop out. Articulating intermediate outcomes on the path to postsecondary completion, and recognizing student progress at these milestones, can have an impact on student success at an institution- or system-level.

SOLUTIONS

- **Enhance students’ college preparation and earned credits before college enrollment:** Expand early college and dual enrollment options—programs that allow students to earn credits toward both a high school credential and a college degree simultaneously—in GED and HiSET programs **h**
- **Pilot innovative strategies to decrease the number of students testing into developmental education and the number of courses taken:** Expand the use of past academic performance as a qualifying criteria (e.g., grade point average instead of the ACCUPLACER) and blend remedial & non-remedial work in the same courses **i** **S**
- Incentivize higher credit loads during students’ first year as a persistence strategy: Prioritize student enrollment in, and completion of, credit-bearing courses, and increase the number and variety of courses offered during summer semester and/or online **i** **S**
- **Improve the accuracy and timeliness of the information students receive about their own path to a degree:** Enhance the use of student-facing, online resources to personalize the information students receive about courses, program of study, and options for completing MassTransfer—courses that will transfer for completion of a four-year degree on a state college or university campus **S**
- Develop a more extensive set of intermediate outcomes charting the path to a degree or credential (e.g., number of credits completed toward degree requirements): Create routines around recognizing and celebrating student progress as a way to “shorten” students’ path to a degree **i** **S**
- Use intermediate outcomes as an institutional measure of success: Expand the funding incentives tied to student progression & completion of milestones **S**

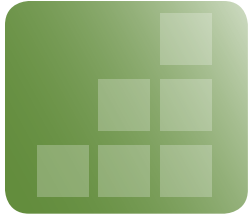
Coaching to make decisions on courses

“I knew what I wanted to do—down to the major—that really helped. Then I found out what I have to take and when it’s offered. All that help was really created by my coach—they helped me make choices.”

Icons identify policy recommendations for postsecondary stakeholders.

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Build Student Navigation Skills

CHALLENGE

Students often lack “college knowledge”—including knowledge of what skills and dispositions they will need to be successful in college, and what supports are available to help them gain these skills. Regular access to comprehensive coaching—that stretches beyond students’ transition to campus—builds students’ skills.

SOLUTIONS

- **Raise aspirations for college, beginning in high school and GED/HiSET programs:** Enhance existing relationships with community-based partners that focus on students’ college aspirations—including students’ own perceptions of themselves as college-bound **i c h**
- Focus on the importance of transition coaching to student success: Fund more positions that include a coaching function **s**
- Coordinate coaching on-campus: Hire dedicated coordinators to support transition coaches (who may be from an external organization) **i s**
- **Increase students’ regular access to comprehensive counseling before they enroll on campus:** Ensure coaching focuses on academic and non-academic needs so that students know what they need to succeed in college **i c h**
- Emphasize the connection between courses and a future career: Comprehensive coaching and advising should provide guidance to students on desired occupation, transfer destination, or major/program of study **i c**

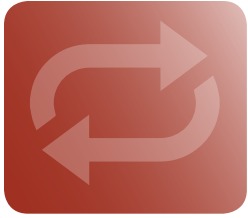
Building expectations for college

“I didn’t think I could handle college. I thought everyone was going to be rushing and doing their own thing, and not have time for me. Once I got in and figured it out, you can totally handle it.”

Icons identify policy recommendations for postsecondary stakeholders.

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Connect the Community and the Campus

CHALLENGE

Life—caring for family, working to ensure financial security, maintaining supports like childcare to attend courses—can present a competing set of demands to completing a college degree. Offering more on-campus supports that are attentive to students’ own experiences is a key ingredient for success in college.

SOLUTIONS

- Build shared expertise between on-campus and community-based coaching supports: Define, and provide, common professional supports to transition coaches **i C S**
- Match coaches with students of a similar background: Emphasize strengths-based and growth mindset perspectives in all coaching provided **i C h**
- **Centralize holistic on-campus supports:** Implement creative approaches for addressing basic needs—including income security—that allow students to better manage personal, social, and academic concerns **i S**
- **Create a workgroup of state policymakers, community leaders, and campus administrators to coordinate and oversee efforts around needs insecurity:** Collaborate with social service agencies to align in-take policies to ensure access to services **S**
- **Develop robust and accessible emergency aid programs to quickly support students:** Train campus staff on needs insecurity issues **i C S**
- Expand strategic partnerships with employers: Incorporate employer feedback on specific credential and degree programs **C S**
- Enhance access to work-based learning: Increase the kinds of credit-bearing, work-based learning experiences available on campus, and the number of paid internships **i C**

Completing a college degree

“I’m a first-generation American—I’m from the Caribbean. And I have two kids now. I want my kids to be proud of mom because of what I have accomplished for myself.”

Icons identify policy recommendations for postsecondary stakeholders.

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Research conducted and brief produced by the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy

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About the Rennie Center

The Rennie Center's mission is to improve public education through well-informed decision-making based on deep knowledge and evidence of effective policymaking and practice. As Massachusetts' preeminent voice in public education reform, we create open spaces for educators and policymakers to consider evidence, discuss cutting-edge issues, and develop new approaches to advance student learning and achievement. Through our staunch commitment to independent, non-partisan research and constructive conversations, we work to promote an education system that provides every child with the opportunity to be successful in school and in life. For more information, please visit www.renniecenter.org.

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