



**JANUARY 2021**

## **COMMUNITY PHILANTHROPY FOR STUDENT SUCCESS INITIATIVE EVALUATION SUMMARY**

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In 2015, College Futures Foundation launched the Community Philanthropy for Student Success Initiative (CPI), a five-year effort to engage a cohort of community foundations across California as partners and leaders in reducing statewide disparities in college completion rates. Through CPI, College Futures specifically endeavored to build the capacity of participating foundations to (a) increase strategic need-based scholarships, (b) increase funding for strategic need-based scholarships, and (c) serve as leaders in regional efforts to eliminate inequities in college attainment rates.

As the initiative entered its fifth and final year of implementation, College Futures engaged the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities as a research partner to evaluate the extent to which CPI reached its five-year goals, the factors that facilitated and hindered progress, and lessons learned that could aid College Futures and other philanthropic organizations advancing efforts to achieve equitable college completion rates.

*"The work started off with scholarships ... but we've realized that if we truly want to see one student succeed, if this is about the life of this person, this young person, then what are the different levers that need to be pulled in order for them to have lived a successful life, a thriving life?"*

**—Community Foundation  
Program Manager**

**john w. gardner**  
**center** for youth and their communities

## KEY FINDINGS

### To what extent did CPI reach its five-year goals?

- **Community foundations built their capacity to increase strategic need-based scholarships.**

Over the course of the initiative, the cohort of community foundations developed and implemented strategies that enabled them to reach students with greater financial need, reduce the gender gap of their scholarship recipients, and consistently award more than 95% of their scholarships to students of color.

In terms of the college path pursued by scholarship recipients, the cohort experienced a slight increase in the proportion attending California State Universities and local community colleges, a slight decrease in proportion attending private colleges (within and outside of California) and a stable proportion attending the University of California.

Interestingly, while it was not a goal of the initiative to increase the grade point average (GPA) of scholarship recipients, the median GPA of the cohort's scholarship recipients increased from 3.6 to 3.8. A few foundations attributed this increase to their deliberate efforts to bolster academic support for the students they sought to serve through need-based scholarships. Others interpreted this finding as evidence of a positive relationship between equity and excellence. While additional inquiry would be needed to understand how to interpret GPAs in the context of need-based scholarships, the CPI evaluation affirmed that, over the course of the initiative, community foundations expanded their capacity to distribute need-based scholarships to more low-income and underrepresented students.

- **Community foundations built their capacity to increase funding for strategic need-based scholarships.**

Given the degree to which need-based scholarships are funded by individual and organizational gifts of various amounts, and the extended timeline associated with estate gifts or endowment dollars, it is not surprising that the cohort's funding for need-based scholarships fluctuated from year to year. And yet, over the course of the initiative, the cohort built its capacity not only for increasing funding, but for increasing the consistency of funding over time.

Community foundations built this capacity by employing development strategies in two domains: external (e.g., donor engagement), and internal (e.g., foundation staff, leadership, board engagement). Foundations engaged external strategies when they supported new and existing donors to invest in need-based scholarships, or in discretionary funds which provided foundations with the option to direct those funds to need-based scholarships. Internal strategies, in turn, included efforts to direct more discretionary funds toward need-based scholarships. Internal strategies also focused on expanding staff resources supporting need-based scholarships directly (e.g., funding new positions or reallocating existing positions to support the need-based scholarship program), and/or indirectly (e.g., increasing support from other functional groups within the foundation, such as marketing or research/evaluation). Taken together, the multiple strategies that span these two domains formed a comprehensive approach to increase funding for strategic need-based scholarships.

While the available cohort data did not lend themselves to analysis that could draw clear conclusions regarding the change in funding between Year 1 and Year 5 of the initiative, several individual foundations did report significant gains in the funds supporting their need-based scholarships program, even with the added complexity and uncertainty brought on by Covid-19 in the first quarter of the initiative's final year.

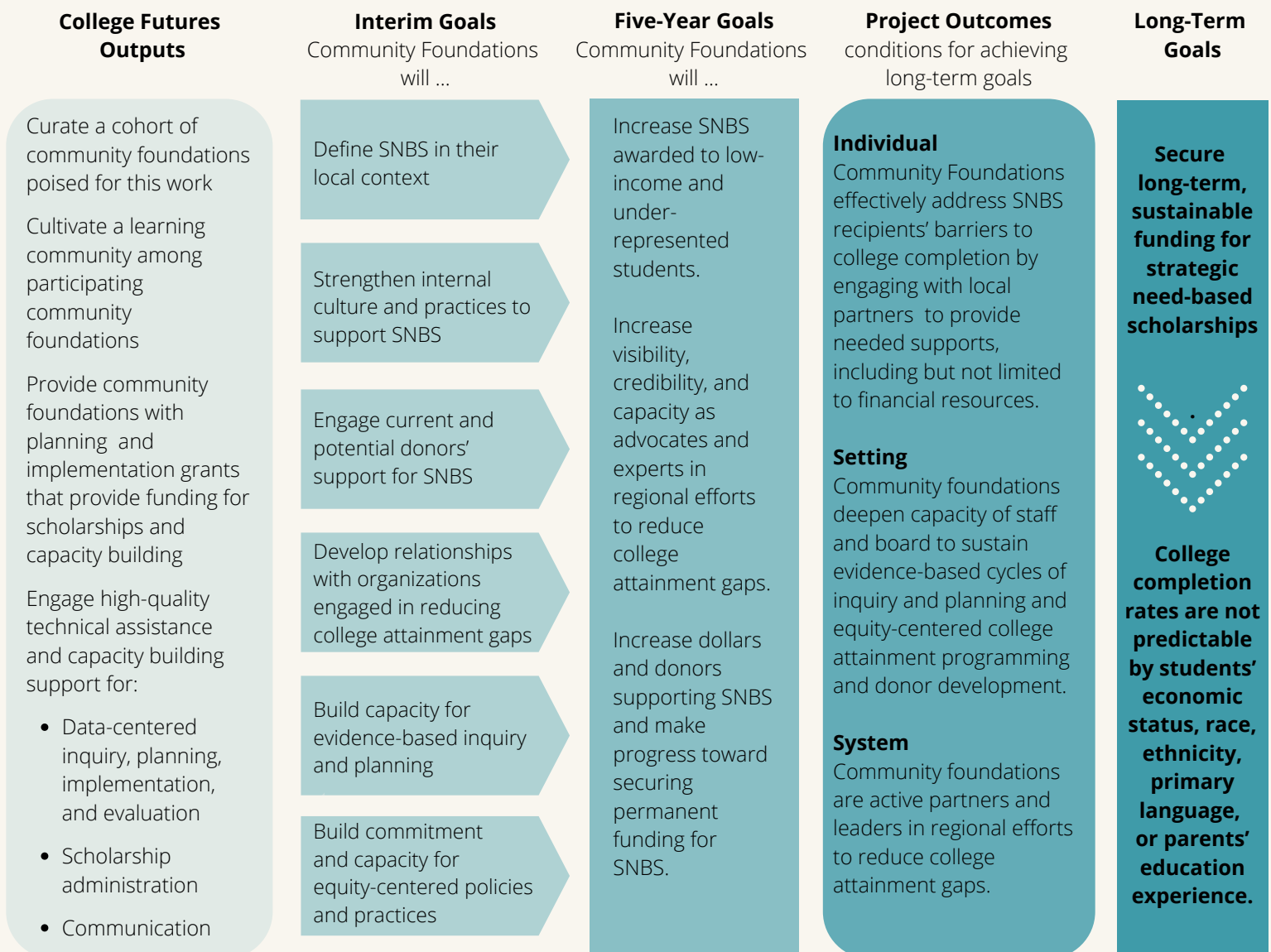
- **Community foundations increased their leadership capacity**

CPI's theory of action assumed a positive relationship between a foundation's need-based scholarship programs and its visibility and credibility as a partner and a leader in regional efforts to eliminate inequities in college attainment rates. Data affirmed the validity of this assumption, and highlighted four specific areas of growth that contributed to foundations' increased leadership capacity: (1) improved capacity for a data-centered approach to continuous learning and improvement; (2) increased capacity for centering and operationalizing equity; (3) expanded relational credibility and influence within their local ecosystem engaged in advancing educational equity and economic development more broadly; and (4) enhanced visibility and credibility as a convener, catalyst, and coach. While this outcome was the least defined at the start of the initiative, the cohort experienced marked improvements in this area and, in turn, provided insight into the combination of capacities that supported their growth as effective regional leaders.

## COMMUNITY PHILANTHROPY INITIATIVE: THEORY OF ACTION

**Problem Statement:** Disparities in college completion rates are the result of complex systemic issues as well as a lack of effective supports for students to succeed, including but not limited to financial resources.

**Lever:** Community foundations are uniquely positioned to be critical leaders and partners in efforts to address the systems, conditions, financial resources and other supports necessary to advance higher college-completion rates for low-income and under-represented students, including but not limited to the distribution of strategic need-based scholarships (SNBS).



## What factors facilitated the initiative's ability to reach five-year goals?

The evaluation found several facilitating factors embedded within a community foundation's approach to operations, donor engagement, and student engagement:

*Operations.* When need-based scholarship programs were situated as a core pillar within a community foundation's strategic plan, rather than as a separate or isolated project, foundation staff experienced greater progress toward the initiative's five-year goals. They also experienced greater advances in their work when they articulated specific goals tied to every stage of the scholarship process, defined indicators of progress toward those goals, and engaged in an ongoing cycle of continuous learning and improvement. In addition, partnerships with local high schools and a wide network of community-based organizations supporting underrepresented students bolstered efforts to improve need-based scholarships. Partnerships with local colleges and universities were particularly pivotal for many foundations.

*Donor engagement.* The cohort's relational approach to donor engagement supported their progress toward CPI's goals. For example, foundations' commitment and capacity to sustain dialogue with donors over time, and to anchor those conversations in data regarding both need and impact, allowed donors to develop new or expanded narratives around "merit," "need," and "equity" which often facilitated their new or additional investments in strategic need-based scholarships. A leader of a community foundation noted, "Across the board, [there was] a misconception that students that are low-income or first-generation...got everything paid for." They continued, "You were educating, yes, but even more importantly, you were ... working that into their new narrative, helping shift the narrative." Personalized, long-term relationships were central to this effort, along with the ability to think creatively—to listen carefully to a donor's desires and to find ways for that desire to be realized through their support of need-based scholarships.

*Student engagement.* The cohort's approach to student engagement centered student experiences and outcomes. This allowed the cohort to see scholarships within the broader context of a student's life and to use that perspective to address specific barriers to their success. For example, foundations facilitated student access to need-based scholarships by improving marketing/communication, streamlining application processes, shifting from paper to online processes, and reducing or eliminating application requirements (e.g., GPA, test scores, essays). Community foundations also provided students with support before, during, and after the application process by conducting application workshops; partnering with community-based organizations to provide academic support, mentoring, or pre-college transition programs; and facilitating renewals for eligible students. One community foundation leader noted that this student-centered approach led them to think more expansively about need-based scholarships as funding accompanied by "a blend [of] wraparound supports and non-scholarship programming."

## What factors hindered the initiative's ability to reach its five-year goals?

Factors found to hinder or complicate the work within and across community foundations, included questions and challenges regarding (a) the availability of longitudinal, comparative, actionable data that could be used to provide nuanced understanding of scholarship recipients' college attainment trends (e.g., persistence rates; 4-year, 5-year, and 6-year graduation rates; reasons for taking a leave of absence or withdrawing from undergraduate studies); (b) the expansion of their leadership role and questions regarding if, how, and when to expand their scope of practice; and (c) efficacy of development strategies given the time that would often be invested in donor relationships without any guarantee that they would invest in a need-based effort.

## What lessons have we learned that could aid College Futures Foundation and other philanthropic organizations advancing efforts to achieve equitable college completion rates?

- **College Futures played a critical role in advancing the efforts of community foundations.**

Across the cohort, community foundations noted that College Futures facilitated improvements that they could have never achieved on their own. Community foundations particularly valued the ways College Futures provided funding for both planning and implementation, invested in both scholarship funds and organizational capacity building, and supported the growth and development of each unique foundation as well as the collective cohort. Community foundations noted that College Futures' provision of skillful technical assistance providers facilitated their planning, implementation, learning, improvement, and overall capacity building throughout the project. Foundations also valued College Futures' statewide perspective on college attainment and its facilitation of meaningful connections within and across geographic regions. Last, but certainly not least, foundations experienced the CPI learning community, inclusive of grantees, technical assistance providers, and the grant maker, as a powerful forum for learning and improvement.

- **The evaluation findings also pointed to a few dynamics that complicated the work.**

These dynamics are not unique to College Futures or CPI, therefore lifting them up and attending to them has the potential to improve the future efforts of both College Futures and community-based philanthropic initiatives more broadly. These dynamics involved the initiative's data and communication systems; prior or existing relationships with a particular community; the art of cultivating a learning community that includes both grant maker and grantees; and the navigation of endings and transitions in relation to how they impact the work of each participating foundation as well as the broader cohort.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR NEXT STEPS

As the initiative comes to an end, the important work of sustaining the commitment and capacity to improve equitable college attainment begins. The evaluation findings highlight seven opportunities that are particularly promising as places community foundations can focus their effort:

- 1 Increase funds for need-based scholarships.
- 2 Deepen and further operationalize their equity orientation.
- 3 Expand their regional leadership role, paying particular attention to ways in which they can use their local knowledge and expertise to affect policies that promote equitable college attainment
- 4 Cultivate partnerships with other organizations and networks within their regional ecosystem that are working to advance equitable college attainment
- 5 Invest in improved data systems that will inform and improve efforts to improve equitable college attainment
- 6 Disseminate best practices among community foundations and those who fund need-based scholarship programs
- 7 Engage scholarship recipients as peer-to-peer mentors and partners in inquiry and improvement

College attainment rates are affected by a complex web of social, historical, economic, cultural, and political factors. In turn, it will take deliberate, strategic, skillful effort over time to improve the equity of these rates. With the support of College Futures, CPI's cohort of community foundations has built its capacity to broaden, deepen, and sustain their impact as partners and leaders in this endeavor.