

# College Graduation Is the Bottom Line

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*“On a scale of 1 to 10, how prepared are you for college level work?”*

This is one of the questions that college counselors at Boston-based Bottom Line ask each student during an initial interview. By the time the counselors get to this question, they know where the student goes to high school, have heard about her past grades, listened to her talk about senior-year classes and know her standardized test scores. An experienced counselor can help them fill in the answer. Some confident students say they feel ready. Others seem to know they aren't and will give themselves a low rank. However, many of the students upon hearing this question look up with a blank stare asking “What do you mean?” These are the students we worry about.

Bottom Line was founded in 1997 to help disadvantaged Boston students get into college, graduate from college and go far in life. In our first year, we supported 25 students through the college admissions process. This year, we are helping more than 350 Boston high school seniors from the class of 2006 to get into college and providing support to more than 375 students who are already enrolled at colleges across the country. Because we begin working with students from the time they begin the college application process, and maintain that relationship until they graduate from college, we have developed a unique perspective on whether students are “college-ready.”

Every May, after students have been accepted to college, our counselors sit down and discuss which of the students whom we helped “get in” are the least likely to finish college. We do this to determine which students need our continued support while they are pursuing a degree. Economics dictate that we can't serve everyone, so we try to predict which students are the most likely to drop out before they finish and focus our resources toward them. Surprisingly, this is not very hard.

Of the hundreds of high school seniors in our program (roughly 15 percent of Boston's college-bound seniors) the neediest become clear very quickly. They are the individuals who have required the most support through the admissions process over the previous nine months. They are the students taking an academic risk by choosing a top school, or taking on a large financial burden, or who struggle the most with reading and writing English or have little or no alternate support network.

We typically rank students across three categories when determining their level of need. The most common

problem by far is that students are not academically prepared for the rigors of a college education. In some cases, they are not even close. The second biggest problem is that students are not ready to make the financial commitment to college. Finally, there are many students who will struggle with the social and emotional adjustment to college.

**Academic readiness.** Most of the students graduating from Boston public high schools (I would exclude Boston Latin School, and if you twist my arm, Latin Academy, O'Bryant and some of the pilot/charter schools) are not ready for college academics. They do not have the study habits. They don't understand the concept of a college syllabus. And they are not aware of or ready for the volume of reading and writing that will be required. They also don't have the knowledge base to make them competitive in the college environment.

To increase diversity on their campuses, colleges are often willing to take a gamble on students from Boston and other urban areas. Contrary to the findings of the 2001 *Diversity Among Equals* study conducted by University of Massachusetts researchers for the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, we see academic preparation take a back seat as universities make the effort to address the racial, economic and geographic diversity of their campuses. As a consequence, state colleges and private universities accept students who don't meet their typical academic standards, and we help students take advantage of these policies.

This would make more sense if those colleges would also provide more significant academic support for students when they arrive. However, this isn't always the case. At Bottom Line, we have become experts at steering students to schools that are likely to accept them, but we are equally conscientious about recommending schools to students that will be a good fit and have support programs in place.

There are several effective programs at public and private colleges in the Boston area where the academic support systems for students are obvious and effective. The Options Through Education program at Boston College, for example, has been remarkable in helping students adjust to academics on campus. The program combines a six-week summer academic program with follow-up advising and mentoring, and Bottom Line students who can get into Boston College tend to make it through. There is also a precedent for state institutions to run successful programs for students who enter college from our at-risk population. The College Now program in the University of Massachusetts at

Dartmouth and the Learning Center program at Salem State have been successful in making students from our program feel at home on campus and provide academic support through this crucial transition.

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The most obvious lack of college preparation exists among the 15 percent of our students bound for community college. These are students who typically have GPAs less than 2.0, poor standardized test scores and limited English skills, but still have a goal of graduating from college. Upon taking the required community college entrance examination, they often place directly into remedial English and math classes. This means they aren't reading or understanding math at a community college level. Students who fall into this category soon find themselves paying for and attending college classes, but not receiving any credit toward a college degree. In simple terms, they aren't "ready" for community college. As bills pile up and no progress is made, it is obvious why after a semester or two, they are reluctant to continue.

**Financial readiness.** Few Boston students are ready for the financial realities of college. Many of their families live paycheck to paycheck. There is usually no savings account to fall back on to help pay for college or related expenses, so the students must rely totally on grants and loans to pay for their education.

In some cases, the top students across the city find the right combination of school, federal and state aid and a scholarship and will attend college without paying out of their pocket. For example, an African-American student who is the first from her low-income family to go to college and is accepted to Smith College or some

other competitive liberal arts college is typically going to receive a financial aid package that will cover all her costs. The financial reality hits hardest though on the student who is a tier or two below Smith in competitiveness. While the cost may be less, after federal aid it is more difficult to round out the package with scholarships. These students take out as many government loans as possible and in some cases apply for additional Parent Plus loans or private loans to meet their expenses. Few Boston students are prepared for the short-term or long-term consequences of this financial burden.

**Social adjustment.** Managing the social transition to college is challenging for just about any 18-year-old. The average college-bound student from the Boston Public Schools attends high school in a building where more than 90 percent of his classmates are ethnic minorities. Except in the case of a Historically Black College, the highest percentage of students of color to be found on a college campus will be around 30 percent. That level of minority enrollment may be lauded in academia, but for the average kid from Boston, that is still overwhelmingly white. At Bottom Line, we don't use that as an excuse, but to think that these students don't have to make a social adjustment is naïve.

In addition, venturing from the familiar surroundings of the inner city to a college environment usually changes the economic climate for an individual very quickly. Not only might they be surrounded by grandiose architecture and newly built, technologically equipped dormitories, but their roommate will be middle- or upper-class and will have the ability to purchase goods that he or she finds out of reach. Again, not an excuse, but a reality. We find that few students enter college prepared to deal with this difference.

Bottom Line's experience has shown that the average Boston high school student isn't ready for college. Whether accepted to highly competitive universities, state colleges or community colleges, these students find themselves swimming upstream, competing with students who are better prepared than them academically, financially and socially. Helping students clear these readiness hurdles is not easy. Continuing to improve the high schools will help, and colleges must invest in effective bridge programs to support students when they arrive on campus. We also believe strongly in the community's role in this effort. At Bottom Line, we recognize the extent of the support that is needed and we have built a holistic program that helps students select "the right" school to attend and when they arrive on campus we provide a support network to help them stay in school and graduate.

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## Fundraising 53, Student Life 28

The *Chronicle of Higher Education* recently asked college presidents how much time they spend on various activities and who they meet with on campus.

More than half (53 percent) of the 764 presidents and chancellors who responded said they attended to some aspect of fundraising every day, while just 28 percent reported attending to student life matters daily. Moreover, 49 percent of presidents reported meeting with their chief financial officers daily, but just 18 percent met with the head of student affairs every day.