

Data as the Critical Driver of College Access and Success Partnerships

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Summary

Over the past 15 years, the majority of college access and success efforts have focused on discrete programming. While this fragmented approach has helped some students, it has failed to help many others, particularly those traditionally underrepresented. Leaders in the college access field have recognized the need for fundamental changes that will take us from the current patchwork of college programs to a coordinated system linking students to comprehensive services within a supportive policy environment. Partnerships are one vehicle for improved alignment, and the use of data is key in formalizing and focusing these partnerships.

In our research, data collection and analysis have emerged as the strongest mobilizing factors in building college access and success partnerships. In community after community, the very act of collecting data and then investigating shared findings has brought stakeholders together, and provided common, concrete goals that lay

the groundwork for joint action. The examples in this article draw largely from the evaluation of the Lumina Foundation for Education's Partnerships for College Access and Success Initiative, which supported eight grantee organizations across the United States to build multi-stakeholder partnerships as vehicles to improve institutional policies and alignment of programs with student supports in their communities.

The State of College Access and Success

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For many in the United States, access to a college (post-secondary institution) education is limited and inequitable. By their late 20s, only 18 percent of African Americans and 10 percent of Hispanics have a bachelor's degree, compared to 33 percent of whites (U.S. Department of Education 2002). A child from a family in the top income quartile is *five* times more likely to earn a bachelor's degree by age 24 than a child in the bottom quartile (Mortenson 2001, U.S. Department of Education 2002). The greatest obstacles to college access and success for underrepresented students include poor academic preparation, lack of college awareness, limited financial aid and limited supports once in college.

Over the past 15 years, the majority of college access and success efforts have focused on discrete programming—

academic tutoring, college fairs, financial aid information, in-college supports—to address these challenges. While this fragmented approach has helped some students, it has failed to help many others, particularly those traditionally underrepresented.

Leaders in the college access field have recognized the need for fundamental changes that will take us from the current patchwork of college programs to a coordinated system linking students to comprehensive services within a supportive policy environment. They now acknowledge the need for greater cooperation both across the pipeline and in providing more holistic supports at specific points in time for students. Greater emphasis on system-level alignments is an important shift for both scaling and deepening the impact of programs and, ultimately, increasing the number of college graduates among underrepresented populations. Partnerships are one vehicle for improved alignment, and the use of data is key in formalizing and focusing these partnerships.

Why Partnerships as a Vehicle for Change?

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Partnerships provide the space and formal opportunities to link multiple players with a vested stake in college access and success. Postsecondary success is a broad-based issue that engages a variety of stakeholders: K-12

schools, institutions of higher education, community- and school-based nonprofits, policymakers and funders, among others. Figure 1 illustrates the variety of college access and success stakeholders and their roles within the system.

Tackling system-level college access and success policies and practices to increase student success is an idea in good currency these days. Governments, communities (including Philadelphia), and some of the most influential funders of college access and success, including the Lumina Foundation for Education and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation¹, recognize that place-based partnerships can be the vehicle to realign fragmented and ineffective systems.

Figure 1: College Access and Success System— Overarching Roles

Students

Role: Seek out help from others when encountering barriers to college access or success

Goal: Graduate from high school ready for and with access to college and complete college

Higher Education

Role: Provide supports in college to increase academic success and graduation of students

Goal: Increase college persistence, academic success and graduation

Community- or School-Based Orgs

Role: Foster a college-going culture in schools and communities, provide supports that help students navigate applying to college and help students persist in college

Goal: Increase the number of students accessing and completing college

Parents, Family, Adult Mentors

Role: Understand the process of applying to, enrolling in, and staying in college and encourage and support their student in this process

Goal: Increase the likelihood that their student goes to and completes college

K-12 Education

Role: Provide academic support and foster a college-going culture to ensure that students graduate college-ready

Goal: Increase the number of college-ready graduates

Funding Partners

Role: Fund college access and success initiatives, and foster connections and accountability among players within the college access and success field

Goal: Increase the effectiveness of college access and success of grantees in meeting their goals

Research Organizations

Role: Investigate the impact of and opportunities for improving college access and success policies and programs

Goal: Increase understanding of barriers to and promising practices that support the college access and success of students

Advocacy and Communications Groups

Role: Monitor trends in college access and success and advocate with policymakers and decision-makers to promote effective policies

Goal: Apply pressure to policymakers to change and maintain policies that support college access and success

Business Community

Role: Leverage role in the community to bring greater funding and advocacy support to college access and success initiatives

Goal: Increase the number of work-ready college graduates

Policymakers

Role: Create and maintain college access and success supportive policies

Goal: Decrease policy barriers limiting student access and success in college

1. ^The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation recently began supporting the Community Learning in Partnership initiative, currently in its planning phase. Other foundations investing in place-based strategies include the Citi Foundation through the Citi Postsecondary Success Program, as well as the Boston Foundation through support of "Success Boston," both launched in 2009.

Why Data?

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In our research and evaluation work over the past several years, data collection and analysis have emerged, somewhat unexpectedly, as the strongest mobilizing factors in building college access and success partnerships. In community after community, the very act of collecting data and then investigating shared findings has brought stakeholders together, and provided common, concrete goals that lay the groundwork for joint action. Quantitative and qualitative data can be used to measure impact, describe a context, or identify resources and opportunities in a community. Table 1 highlights the diversity of data indicators a college access and success partnership might collect and use.

Table 1: Types of Data Collected and Used in College Access and Success Partnership

Quantitative Data	Qualitative Data
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● SAT scores ● Grades ● Grade point average ● Number of college credits ● Number of service hours ● Number of students served 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Prior history of community partnerships and relationships ● Existing relationships among stakeholders ● Student experiences, interests and perceptions ● Stakeholder experiences, interests and perceptions

Nuts and Bolts: Data and Partnerships

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In this section we highlight four examples of how data can be used to drive partnership building and to develop a shared agenda. We use brief examples from the field to illustrate how the work took shape in four different communities across the country. The examples draw largely from the evaluation of the Lumina Foundation for Education's Partnerships for College Access and Success Initiative (PCAS). PCAS supported eight grantee organizations across the United States to build multi-stakeholder partnerships as vehicles to improve institutional policies and alignment of programs with student supports in their communities.

Data Strategy 1: Conduct a scan to understand what supports are in place in the existing college access and success system, and the opportunities for connecting and improving alignment across supports.

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Key Questions

- What types of college access and success programs exist?
- What services do these programs offer?
- Where are these programs located?
- Who do they serve?
- What are some initial observations about program gaps and overlaps?

Implications

Data from a community scan often help individual programs identify areas of duplication or gaps in services. These data can confirm what many in the community already know or have intuitions about. But by pulling together data about multiple programs and players, stakeholders have an opportunity to understand these different pieces as part of a larger system of supports. In addition, community scans can turn up information about smaller organizations deeply embedded in a particular community or discover new providers that operate outside of the sphere of most other providers.

Partnership Implications

Collecting data about which programs and providers operate in a community helps partners begin to see their work within a "system" of supports. By viewing individual programs within a larger context, new opportunities emerge for beginning to work together as a community with joint understandings and decision making.

Data Strategy 2: Dig deeper to build a partnership strategically—conduct a scan to identify the capacities, resources and interests of current and potential partners to achieve common postsecondary goals.

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Key Questions

- Who in the community should be part of this partnership? Consider those with:
 - influence and capacity to help eliminate key obstacles.
 - a deep understanding of programming.
 - political and social capital.
 - unique and important constituencies.
- What capacities (data, time, influence, dollars, infrastructure, skills) do individual partners bring to support the work of the partnership?
- What roles are appropriate for the potential partners?
- How does each potential partner's individual or institutional goal fit within the larger change agenda?
- What will keep existing organizations and individuals

at the table as long-term vested partners?

- What will bring new partners to the table?

Implications

Using data to identify the collective strengths and weaknesses in a partnership provides a pathway for creating a stronger partnership—one that includes those with policy influence, programmatic experience and community connections, as well as those with the authority, authenticity and capacity to move the work forward. Data can help identify critical missing partners or new information about existing partners. In our experiences, most organizations that seek to bring about significant change in college access and success in their communities function as service providers. Many quickly realize, however, that their work requires a broader coalition of stakeholders, including parents, the business community, funders, and those with decision-making power at the community, policy and institutional levels. Existing partners' knowledge is critical in identifying the unique and influential local leaders who have a record of accomplishment.

Partnership Implications

As stakeholders' understanding of community supports and potential partners develops, they can begin to assess opportunities for developing stronger ways of working together. For example, partners might establish roles and

responsibilities that leverage one another's services, capacities, and existing relationships. This process facilitates important dialogue that brings stakeholders together and deepens their understanding of one another.

Data Strategy 3: Identify deeper college access and success trends by sharing and exploring data across organizations and institutions to drive coordinated actions.

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Key Questions

- What data are individual partners collecting?
- What trends are common across multiple programs?
- What questions within the college access and success system remain unanswered?
- What opportunities are there to answer new questions about college access and success by sharing and analyzing data across organizations or institutions?

Implications

Rich program- and student-level data shared across

partners, used over extended periods of time (months, semesters or years), enable programs and stakeholders to observe trends and patterns in their community. This level of data collection also allows partners and supporters to investigate the causes and consequences of these trends and patterns.

Once partners have overcome initial concerns about data sharing (which in some cases takes a few years), they can investigate data trends and underlying causes to determine together whether changes in programming or policy are needed.

Partnership Implications

Linking data from what have traditionally been considered proprietary data systems is a major partnership-building activity. Partners frequently fear what the data might show about their programs or their communities. In part, this has to be overcome through creating dialogue and the “safe spaces” for data sharing. In the process of putting systems and processes in place for sharing data, partners have an opportunity to develop formal structures—data sharing agreements, data release forms—and build tremendous trust as they create mechanisms for sharing and exploring data together to answer new questions.

Data Strategy 4: Use data to push thinking beyond specific program changes to broader policy efforts that have the

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Key Questions

- What data trends might require a broader policy solution?
- What data do we have that clearly show that particular policies impede student access to or success in college?
- What data exist about policy best practices or precedents in other regions or related fields that can help shape the agenda?
- What is the policy change that we hope to see implemented?

Implications

Data play a critical role in demonstrating the need to change a given policy, providing concrete evidence of what's happening on the ground and helping partners identify specific policy and practice areas to address. In OMG's experience, piloting important shifts in

programming and the formation of a policy change agenda are often tackled in concert. We have seen partners tackle policy issues ranging from financial aid regulations, to curriculum requirements, to two- to four-year articulation agreements.

Partnership Implications

Developing a strong partnership model that can tackle complex policy issues is a process that unfolds gradually over time. As data agreements are put into practice and partners begin to own roles and responsibilities, data can pave the way for frank conversations about the state of college access and success in the community.

Partnerships that successfully use data to develop a policy agenda have established tremendous levels of trust and serve as examples of the best that partnership can lead to.

Conclusion

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Data offer a variety of opportunities for key stakeholders not only to come together, but also to establish and align their individual work around common goals. The process of sharing and exploring data, in and of itself, serves as a catalyst for building stronger and more productive relationships among stakeholders. The four strategies

outlined in this article provide ideas about how a variety of types of data can be used to identify and better understand the college access and success system. By investing in joint data collection and use, diverse stakeholders have an opportunity to develop solutions for students that are bigger than any one organization or institution.

Meg Long is Project Director and Sarah Singer Quast and Justin Piff are Project Coordinators at the OMG Center for Collaborative Learning, an independent nonprofit research and consulting organization based in Philadelphia. OMG applies the principles of action research, organizational learning and collaborative planning in a variety of organizational settings. Formally established in 1988, the Center has maintained a focus on public and urban policy issues. A significant portion of OMG's work examines national level demonstrations that include multiple sites and employ multi dimensional strategies to effect systemic change.

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