

**Creating New Pathways to Postsecondary:
Evaluation of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's
Postsecondary Success (PSS) Initiative
Executive Summary**

Center for Youth and Communities



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December 2013

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Executive Summary

In 2008, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, in partnership with the Nellie Mae Foundation, funded the *Postsecondary Success Initiative (PSS)*, an ambitious multi-site effort to develop new pathways to and through postsecondary education for those who have come to be known as “opportunity youth” – low-income youth who had dropped out of the traditional education process without a high school diploma or who faced significant barriers to further education and success in the labor market.¹ Nationally, an estimated 6.7 million youth aged 16-24 are in this group. Of those, it is estimated that 1% will have completed a postsecondary degree by age 28.²

The PSS initiative provided grants to 15 local community-based organizations (CBOs) to develop partnerships with local community colleges that would enable formerly disconnected youth to acquire a high school diploma or GED or needed academic skills, make the transition into postsecondary education or training, and persist through to graduation.

The grants to local programs were made through two national program partners -- YouthBuild USA and the National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC). YouthBuild and NYEC served as program intermediaries – selecting sites, providing training and technical assistance for the local programs, and monitoring progress. A third partner, Jobs for the Future (JFF), supported the national partners and sites through research on promising practices, the development of service-delivery models, support for the design of cross-site training, and management of a leadership group that coordinated the Initiative. Brandeis University’s Center for Youth and Communities served as the Initiative’s evaluation partner.

Three major findings emerged from the evaluation:

- 1. The Initiative was successful in promoting the establishment of new working partnerships between community colleges and local community-based organizations and the creation of new pathways into and through higher education in all of the sites.**
 - Among the *community-based organizations*, the Initiative led to the creation of a new college-going culture and the integration of enriched academic preparation, bridge programming, and postsecondary support strategies aimed at preparing youth for and supporting them in postsecondary education.
 - The participating *community colleges*, in turn, built new and often rich relationships with their CBO partners and incorporated new practices that ranged from improved access to college admissions and advising staff to development of new college transition programs, collaborative case management efforts, and establishment of college courses within the CBO setting.

¹ Several other funders, notably the Open Society Foundations and New Profit, Inc. (through its Social Innovation Fund/Pathways Initiative), later provided further support to expand the PSS initiative to additional sites.

² Belfield, C.R, Levin, H.M., & Rosen, R. (2012 January). Economic Value of Opportunity Youth. www.civicerprises.net/MediaLibrary/Docs/econ_value_opportunity_youth.pdf

2. **Both sets of organizations – the community colleges and the CBOs – benefited from the new partnerships.**

- For the **CBOs**, the partnerships provide a route to better outcomes for their participants as postsecondary education and training have become critical to longer-term labor market success. As CBO staff came to understand the colleges' requirements and expectations, they were also better able to prepare their young people for success in that environment.
- For the **community colleges**, the PSS partnerships helped the colleges expand their outreach efforts and strengthen the system of supports available to their students (by leveraging the CBO-provided supports) at a time when the colleges' own resources were increasingly constrained. Through the partnerships, CBOs became a "new front door" to college for previously under-represented students. As the colleges increased their understanding of the CBO approach, they also looked at new ways of adjusting their offerings to increase the likelihood of student success.

In short, by opening the pathway between CBOs and community colleges, both types of institutions were able to improve and expand the services provided to their students.

3. **The new partnerships produced positive results for students.** By December 2012, nearly three-quarters (73%) of the youth who entered PSS programs without a high school credential gained a diploma or GED through the program. More than half of those students had entered with math and reading levels below the 8th grade. Of those who entered with or acquired a high school credential, 55% enrolled in college and 61% entered college or another form of postsecondary training. Of those who entered college, 70% have stayed in college for two semesters or more. The results compare well with those for community college students nationally, despite the fact that PSS focused on a highly disadvantaged population of youth.

The Postsecondary Success Initiative Approach

At the heart of the PSS initiative was the three-part "Back on Track" model that helped CBOs and their college partners focus on a core set of strategies to create a pathway to postsecondary success. The three elements of the model are:

- **Enriched Academic Preparation:** Integrating high quality college-ready instruction with strong academic and social supports aimed at preparing students for successful entry into and progress through college.
- **Bridge Programming:** Postsecondary transition support designed to enhance college-ready skills and provide transition counseling so students have the skills and information necessary to make a smooth transition to postsecondary.
- **Postsecondary Support:** Support for at least the first year of postsecondary education (and in some cases through completion) to promote postsecondary persistence and completion.

All three elements of the Back on Track model also emphasize ongoing individual guidance and support, an element that was also at the heart of most of the community-based programs involved in PSS. The strong supportive relationships between program staff and students the local sites were seen as a necessary element in the Back on Track design.³

³ See the JFF "Back on Track" website for more information: <http://backontrackdesigns.org>.

The Postsecondary Success Initiative Partners and Strategies

The PSS sites included a diverse group of community-based organizations and college partners. The CBOs included three broad types of youth and education programs: enhanced GED programs, which integrated the Back on Track model into an existing GED program; alternative and charter schools, which incorporated Back on Track into a diploma-granting school setting; and standalone bridge programs, which provided shorter-term support for youth who already had a high school credential. CBO programs ranged widely in size, from a small community program serving 30 students a year to a charter school serving over 200.

The populations served included former dropouts, ex-offenders, homeless and runaway youth, and young parents, most of whom were first generation college-goers.

The college partners also included a range of institutions, from small colleges serving fewer than 1,000 students to large public institutions with enrollments of 30,000 and more. In some cases the colleges and CBOs had prior working relationships, but most had to develop their relationship through the Initiative, a process that was both fruitful and challenging.

Because of the diversity of institutions and contexts, each CBO-College partnership implemented the PSS program in its own way, with its own specific mix of strategies and ways of defining roles between the colleges and the CBOs. In some cases the CBOs took the lead in strengthening their academic programs and building a college culture; in others, the college partners worked closely with CBO staff to review and revise the curriculum; in others college faculty taught classes in the CBO site. CBOs and colleges frequently worked together to create effective bridge programming, including jointly-operated summer workshops, academic or test preparation “boot camps,” and “college success” courses before or during the first semester on campus. CBOs and colleges also worked in different ways to ensure that students were connected with academic and non-academic supports once on campus.

While each partnership differed, the common elements of the PSS/Back on Track model across sites included:

- **Strengthening Academics.** Academic enrichment efforts aimed at providing college-ready experiences: increased reading and writing, research papers, project-based learning, homework, dual enrollment opportunities, and test preparation. Some sites accomplished this by integrating more advanced work into their core curriculum; others created separate college readiness or college preparation courses.

Participant Characteristics

Average Age at Entry	18.8
Gender	
Male	57%
Female	43%
Education	
Diploma or GED at Entry	16%
Reading – Below 8 th Grade at Entry	54%
Math – Below 8 th Grade at Entry	71%
Race/Ethnicity	
African-American	62%
Hispanic/Latino	15%
White	22%
Other	
Parent/Primary Caregiver	17%
Homeless (current or past year)	8%
Court-Involved	24%
First Generation College	59%

N=1929

- ***Integrated Work and Learning.*** At the GED and alternative/charter school-based programs, education was closely connected with occupational training. This grounded the academic education in a real-world context -- vital in demonstrating relevance to the students and sustaining their motivation. It also helped broaden the goal of postsecondary education to include the acquisition of occupational credentials as well as a college degree. In many sites, CBOs and colleges worked to integrate progress towards college certificates into the community-based preparation, with college faculty teaching courses at the CBO and/or CBO faculty becoming certified as college instructors. As a result, students entered postsecondary with faculty they knew and credits toward certification.
- ***Building College Culture and Skills.*** A central challenge for many CBOs was to develop a “college-going culture” as a core value of the community-based programs. Working with their college partners, the local sites achieved this through a variety of activities: making discussions of postsecondary part of their intake and orientation programs; creating college transition courses and workshops that included college tours, FAFSA preparation, and work on practical skills for college (note-taking, time management, communications, etc.); creating summer bridge programs (usually on the college campus); and enrolling students in college-level postsecondary transition courses (for example, “College Success Skills” and “College Success and Survival” classes) once they were on campus.
- ***Postsecondary Supports.*** The Back on Track model also calls for at least one year of postsecondary support to help students make the often confusing and difficult transition into the college environment. The central strategy for most partnerships included continued involvement of CBO staff – counselors, transition coordinators and others – with students as they entered postsecondary. Colleges often provided space and access to a computer and telephone for CBO staff, who met with students regularly on campus, helping them problem-solve and connect with college staff and resources. Most colleges made found ways to enable CBO counselors to talk with faculty about individual students and access students’ college records. Partnerships supplemented those strategies with mentoring and tutoring programs and regular cohort-building activities, all aimed at promoting persistence among students.
- ***Relationships and Individualized Support.*** At the heart of the program design at all sites was the provision of individualized support by staff at the CBOs. In every program, a staff person, counselor, or “transition coordinator” was responsible for providing counseling and academic support during the program’s pre-college stage. CBO staff usually continued working with and tracking students once they were in postsecondary. It was generally the transition counselor who carried the primary load in working with students and who built the day-to-day relationships with key college staff and faculty and maintained a presence on the college campus. Whatever the specific features of the different partnerships, those one-to-one relationships were seen as a critical feature of the PSS experience.

Building the PSS Partnerships

The nature and structure of the college-CBO partnerships established through the Initiative varied widely, ranging from an accommodation of the CBO program (providing space, phones, access to students and faculty) to an active engaged partnership with college and CBO staff and leaders working jointly on curriculum, transition services, counseling and other supports aimed at improving participant outcomes. In most cases, developing the partnerships took time, with staff at both institutions learning about the priorities and requirements of the other, and with all of the partners working with limited resources.

Partnerships grew most quickly when community colleges saw the partnership as furthering a shared mission and meeting a common goal: that of better serving their students and the community. In the words of one college administrator: “What is in it for us? We want students to succeed.” Others noted that PSS helped the college learn about how to better support its students and the community: “Disconnected students represent a lot of the students at [our college]. This is an opportunity to see what we can learn that we can implement more broadly, and what are the benefits of connecting to CBOs.”

One clear lesson from the Initiative is that the keys to effective partnerships are to establish strong relationships (among the partners) and to remain persistent in building them. As one program director observed, “It’s about getting the right person engaged. Keep looking for the person who buys into the mission – not the right title, but a champion.”

A second lesson is that both colleges and CBOs benefited from the partnership, and that colleges are looking for ways to expand those partnerships further. In the words of one college official: “The PSS experience helped us to see that community-based organizations could do things for our students that we could not.”

Making a Difference: PSS Initiative Outcomes

Early results indicate that the PSS partnerships are successful in moving students to and through postsecondary. While it is too early for data on long-term outcomes such as college completion to be available, the initial results show PSS students acquiring a high school credential, entering college, completing developmental education, and persisting through the first year and beyond. The results compare favorably to those for community college students nationally, even though PSS participants began with significant educational challenges.

The biggest thing for our college right now is to identify and work with other CBOs that can provide support services.... Our campus is now looking to other CBOs to see if they could provide similar services as [our PSS partner].

We need more CBOs to pool our resources with. Foundations should promote groups of CBOs to work together with each other and colleges to become more cost-effective in supporting our students.

[Our college] gets a lot of non-college ready students. More work with [our CBO partner] means students who are more college ready. So it’s a real strategic partnership.

- Among students who entered without a high school credential, 73% acquired a diploma or GED as of December 2012; 61% earned an occupational certificate. In total 83% earned some form of secondary-level degree or certificate.
- 55% of those who entered with or acquired a high school credential went on to enter college; 61% entered college or some other form of post-secondary education and training.
- Of those who entered college:
 - 59% entered as full-time students;
 - 42% tested out of or completed developmental (remedial) math;
 - 53% tested out of or completed developmental English;
 - 55% had begun earning college credits;
 - 71% had enrolled two semesters or more and nearly half (49%) had enrolled three semesters or more (i.e., persisted into their second year).

Outcomes (As of 12/31/12)

Program Participants	
High School Diploma or GED at Entry	21.4%
No Credential at Entry	78.6%
Completed Diploma/GED	
Completed High School Credential - Diploma or GED (Percent of those who entered without)	73.0%
Completed High School credential and/or occupational certificate	83.4%
Entered College/Postsecondary	
Entered College (Of those with a HS credential)	55%
Entered College or Postsecondary Training (Of those with a HS credential)	61.1%
College Experience (of those who enrolled in college)	
Full-time at Entry	59.1%
Completed/Tested Out of Developmental Math	41.7%
Completed/Tested Out of Developmental English	53.4%
Earned 1 or more credits	55.0%
Enrolled two or more semesters	71.3%
Enrolled three semesters or more	48.5%

N=1929

Summary of Findings

- The PSS Initiative was successful in promoting the establishment of CBO-College partnerships that created new pathways to and through postsecondary education for students facing major barriers to educational success. Building on the shared Back on Track approach, the partnerships were successfully implemented in a diverse array of settings and among a variety of institutions.
- Both the colleges and the CBOs benefited from the partnerships, which can serve as models for similar arrangements in other communities.
- The early data indicate that these partnerships benefited the students they served, providing a majority of participants with a high school credential, access to postsecondary education, and support through the educational process.

- The foundations and the intermediary organizations supporting the Initiative played a critical role. Foundation grants provided an opportunity for partners to invest in staff, curriculum development, new courses, and other start-up costs. They also made it easier for college partners to join the effort in a time of limited resources. The intermediary organizations (YouthBuild, NYEC, and JFF) provided direction and critical training and support, helping CBOs and the postsecondary partners share information and ideas and build their own capacity.
- Relationship-building was at the center of much of the PSS work: between students and staff, and between CBOs and community colleges. As CBO staff repeatedly said, “students don’t care what you know until they know that you care....” And as a college counselor noted, “This is not about case management – it is about relationships, relationships, relationships.
- All of the local PSS partnerships have indicated that they expect to continue working together past the end of their grants. JFF, NYEC and YouthBuild are also continuing to work with members and in local communities to promote more opportunities for postsecondary success.

Partner Organizations

Jobs for the Future 88 Broad St., 8th Floor Boston, MA 02110 Tel: 617.728.4446 www.jff.org	National Youth Employment Coalition 1836 Jefferson Place, NW Washington, DC 20036 Tel: 202-659-1064 www.nyec.org	YouthBuild USA 58 Day Street Somerville, MA 02144 Tel: (617) 623-9900 www.youthbuild.org	Center for Youth and Communities (Evaluator) Heller School for Social Policy & Management Brandeis University 415 South Street, MS 035 Waltham, MA 02453- 9110 http://cyc.brandeis.edu
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Program Sites

NYEC Programs

X-Cel, Boston, MA
 MY TURN, Brockton, MA
 ISUS (Improved Solutions for Urban Systems),
 Dayton, OH
 LA Conservation Corps, Los Angeles, CA
 The College Initiative, New York, NY
 Youth Development Institute (YDI), New York, NY
 Good Shepherd Services, New York, NY
 Cypress Hills Development Corporation, New York,
 NY
 Open Meadow Alternative Schools, Portland, OR
 Larkin Street Youth Services, San Francisco, CA

YouthBuild Programs

Metro Atlanta YouthBuild, Atlanta, GA
 YouthBuild Brockton, Brockton, MA
 YouthBuild Columbus, Columbus, OH
 YouthBuild McLean County, Normal, IL
 Operation Fresh Start, Madison, WI
 YouthBuild Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA
 Portland YouthBuilders, Portland, OR



Copies of the full report are available at:
<http://cyc.brandeis.edu/reports/index.html>

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