SUPPORTING STUDENTS THROUGH COLLEGE

A literature review prepared for the Breakthrough Collaborative
November 2022

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ANALYTIC INSIGHTS
Supporting Students Through College

This review was prepared to inform the planning of the Breakthrough Collaborative’s **College Success Network Improvement Community**. It describes the challenges college students face today and identifies research- and practice-based evidence of best practices and strategies to support students enrolled in college through completion of their degree, with a focus on students who are similar to those served by Breakthrough Collaborative affiliates: i.e., first-generation college goers, students from minoritized racial/ethnic groups, and students from economically disadvantaged households.

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The Landscape of Higher Education Access and Success

High School and College Completion Rates

Nationwide, 91 percent of the United States’ population 25 years or older holds a high school diploma, with rates varying by demographic subgroup.

- Only 80 percent of students eligible for free- or reduced-price lunch graduate from high school.¹
- Only 74 percent of Hispanic students graduate from high school (Figure 1a).
- Black and white students share similar high school completion rates, while Hispanic students are over 20 percentage points less likely to graduate (Figure 1a).

Sixty-two percent of recent high school graduates ages 16 to 24 years old were enrolled in college in fall 2021, with differences by gender and race (Figure 1b).

- Female graduates are 15 percentage points more likely to enroll than male graduates.
- Asian graduates are over 20 percentage points more likely to enroll than White, Black, or Hispanic graduates.

Ultimately only 38 percent of Americans earn a bachelor’s degree or higher (Figure 2). Disparities in college degree attainment are widening.

- Female students are more likely than men to earn a bachelor’s degree.
- White and Asian students are twice as likely as Black and Hispanic students to earn a bachelor’s degree (Figure 2).
- Roughly half of all college students are the first in their family to do so. Students with a college-educated parent are more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree than first-generation students (70 versus 26 percent).
- College degree attainment correlates starkly with family income. Students from the highest income quartile are five times more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree than those in the lowest quartile (Figure 3a), and twice as likely to complete their degree once enrolled (Figure 3b).
**Figure 1: High School Graduation and College Entrance of High School Graduates**

(a) Percentage of adult population attaining a high school degree, by race, over time

(b) Percentage of high school graduates enrolling in college, by race and gender, over time

Source: Pell Institute, Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the US 2021 Historical Trend Report. Image copied from STS Figure 7c, page 28.


**Figure 2: Bachelor’s Degree Completion, by Race/Ethnicity and First-Generation Status**

(a) Educational attainment of adults age 25 or older, by race/ethnicity (2016)

(b) Percent of adults holding a bachelor’s degree, by race/ethnicity, over time

(c) Educational attainment of adults by parental education status

Summer Melt

“Summer melt” is a term that researchers have coined to refer to students who have graduated high school, intend to go to college, and have been accepted into a college – but fail to matriculate in the fall. Researchers estimate that between 10 to 40 percent of college-intending students do not actually enroll. Students from low- and moderate-income families, and those with lower academic achievement, are more likely to “melt.” Researchers have tested two strategies to reduce summer melt: peer mentor outreach programs and text messaging to remind students of college-related summer tasks and connect them with professional support when they need help. Results suggest that both strategies increase college enrollment.

First Year Persistence

Persisting through the first year of college is an important predictor of success. Seventy-five percent of students who started college in 2020 returned for a second year of college in 2021. Most of them returned to their initial enrolling institution, while one in nine transferred to another institution. Students from minoritized groups are less likely to persist than their peers (Figure 4).
Figure 4: Year Two Persistence Rates of Students Enrolled at All Institutions

By Race / Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Continued Enrollment at Other Institution</th>
<th>Continued Enrollment at Starting Institution (Retention)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>75.8%</td>
<td>60.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>83.0%</td>
<td>67.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whites</td>
<td>79.5%</td>
<td>63.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latinos</td>
<td>66.4%</td>
<td>50.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>61.3%</td>
<td>45.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>60.4%</td>
<td>45.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Continued Enrollment at Other Institution</th>
<th>Continued Enrollment at Starting Institution (Retention)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>75.9%</td>
<td>60.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>76.2%</td>
<td>61.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>74.6%</td>
<td>60.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Missing</td>
<td>72.5%</td>
<td>59.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


High-Achieving Students

Racial and income-based disparities in college degree completion persist even for students with strong academic preparation. Students whose standardized tests place them in the top quartile nationally are less likely to enroll in and complete a college degree if their family income lies below the national median (Figure 5a). And high-achieving students from minoritized racial and ethnic groups are also less likely to attain a college degree even when they are enrolled at an elite institution (Figure 5b).

Figure 5: College Attainment for High-Achieving Students, by Race and Income

a) Postsecondary enrollment and completion of high-achieving twelfth graders, by income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Enroll in college</th>
<th>Complete a bachelor's degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher Income</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Income</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

b) Percent of students graduating at elite colleges, by race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Graduation Rate at Elite Colleges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black students</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White students</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Josh S Wyner, John M. Bridgeland, John J DiIulio, Jr. Achievement Trap: How America Is Failing Millions of High-Achieving Students from Lower-Income Families, Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, 2007. “High-Achieving” defined as students scoring in the top 25 percent on nationally normed standardized tests. “Higher” and “Lower” income defined as those whose family incomes (adjusted for family size) are above or below the national median.

Underrepresentation in STEM Fields

Similar proportions of Black, Hispanic, and White students declare STEM majors when entering college (Figure 6a). However, students from minoritized racial and ethnic groups are less likely than White students to persist and earn a STEM degree, being more likely instead to switch majors or drop out of college entirely (Figure 6b). The result is continued underrepresentation in STEM careers of students of color. For example, only seven percent of jobs requiring STEM bachelor’s degrees are held by Black people, equaling half of their proportion of the population.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 6: Pursuit of STEM Major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>a)</strong> Percent of Undergraduates Who Declare a STEM Major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Newsom, M. “Even as colleges pledge to improve, share of engineering and math graduates who are Black declines”, online article, Hechinger Report, April 12, 2021.

Challenges Faced by College Students Today and Factors Associated with Success

Students face numerous challenges today in pursuing a college degree, many of which are magnified for students from economically challenged communities, first-generation college goers, or students from minoritized racial or ethnic groups.

1. Finding a Good Fit College (Undermatching)

Undermatching occurs when a student enrolls at a college or university that is less academically rigorous than that they themselves can succeed. Students from marginalized groups are more likely to undermatch (Figure 7). The Education Trust reports that 49 percent of Black students and 41 percent of Latino students do not attend the most selective colleges that their qualifications suggest they could. Undermatching is an important issue because selectivity matters for outcomes even when students start out academically strong in high school. High-achieving students are more likely to persist, graduate, go on to graduate school, and earn more money in their career when they attend a more selective school (Figure 8). This is due to multiple factors including the peer effect of being among more academically motivated
students and greater institutional resources and student supports at more selective institutions. Undermatching also predicts lower wages and less job opportunities in adulthood.\(^6\)

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**Figure 7: Postsecondary Enrollment and Selectivity of High-Achieving Students, by Race and SES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Low-SES</th>
<th>High-SES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>19%*</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>24%*</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>29%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-SES</td>
<td>16%*</td>
<td>24%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-SES</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Bromberg, M. & Theokas, C. Falling Out of the Lead: Following High Achievers Through High School and Beyond. Washington D.C., The Education Trust (2014). Figure copied from Figure 11, page 17. “High-achieving” students defined as those in top 25 percent on in-grade-level math and reading assessments.

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**Figure 8: Graduation Rates and Post-Graduation Outcomes of High-Achieving Students, By Selectivity of School Attended**

College Graduation Rates, by Income and Selectivity of Institution Attended

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selectivity of Institution Attended</th>
<th>Lower-Income, High-Achieving Students</th>
<th>Higher-Income, High-Achieving Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most/Highly Competitive</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Competitive</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less and Noncompetitive</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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Giancola, J. and Kahlenberg, R., True Merit: Ensuring Our Brightest Students Have Access to Our Best Colleges and Universities, January 2018, Jack Kent Cooke Foundation. Image copied from Figure 5, page 9.

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Page 6
2. Paying for College

The economic pressures associated with going to college are significant and include not only the major costs of tuition, room, and board, but also smaller expenses like traveling to and from school, books, and unforeseen emergency expenses. Many students, especially those from lower-income families, must balance their academic obligations with pressing obligations to work to earn enough money to stay in school.

College Costs

The cost of attending college has risen steadily for decades. Over the last 30 years, tuition at four-year colleges has more than doubled after adjusting for inflation. Rising costs have hit hardest on lower-income families, with average net prices equating to 94 percent of the average family income of families at the 25th percentile (Figure 9). Rising costs have multiple implications:

- **More students believe that college is unattainable.** Students often think that college costs more than it actually does (once financial aid kicks in). In 2012, one-third of 11th graders did not think their family could afford college. Three years later, those students who believed their family could afford college were almost twice as likely to have enrolled in college as those who did not (58 percent versus 38 percent).

- **More students are going into debt to afford college.** Over half of bachelor degree recipients graduate with some amount of federal or private loan debt. That said, debt is less of an issue for students from economically disadvantaged households. Upper-income households hold a disproportionate share of educational debt in the United States, reflecting their higher enrollment and completion rates and their tolerance for financial obligation.

**Figure 9: Average net price as a percentage of average family income for dependent full-time undergraduate students: 1990 to 2016**

Financial Aid

Need-based financial aid has not kept pace with inflation. In 1980, the Federal Pell grant for college covered three-fourths of the costs of attending a public four-year institution, but today it covers only one-third (Figure 10a). Public institutions were created to provide affordable higher education opportunities for residents, but the past 20 years have witnessed the steady erosion of state investment in higher education (Figure 10b). Due to lack of family wealth, students from minoritized racial and ethnic groups are more likely to rely on grants of financial aid (indicating lower levels of financial wherewithal to pay for college) (Figure 11). That said, schools vary considerably in the amount of need-based aid they offer students, with some schools offering considerably more funding than others.

**Figure 10: Public Support for Higher Education Has Declined**

| a. Coverage of Average College Costs by Pell Grants, Over Time
| b. State and Federal Investments in Higher Education, Over Time


**Figure 11: Percent of full-time, full-year undergraduate students who received a financial aid grant**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Black</th>
<th>American Indian</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Asian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>88%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Housing and Food Insecurity

Nearly three in five college students face some level of food or housing insecurity while enrolled (Figure 12). High tuition fees can result in low-income students sacrificing food or housing to stay enrolled in school. For example, KIPP charter schools serve students in disadvantaged communities: 89 percent are eligible for free or reduced price lunch, and 95 percent are black or latinx. A recent survey of KIPP alumni enrolled in college reports that:

- 57% worried about running out of food,
- 43% missed meals to pay for school-related expenses, and
- 24% sent money home to support a family member.

Researchers at the Hope Center at Temple University call on policy makers and institutions to invest in emergency aid programs, strengthen access to child care, and help students take advantage of public benefits programs.

Figure 12: Housing and Food Insecurity

Percentage of All Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Have been homeless</th>
<th>Have experienced housing insecurity</th>
<th>Faced food insecurity at some point during the past month</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Two-Year Colleges</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four-Year Colleges</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentage of Students Experiencing Basic Needs Insecurity, by Race

Students of color are more likely to experience basic needs insecurity (food or housing).

- Black: 70%
- American Indian / Alaska Native: 70%
- Indigenous: 75%
- White: 54%

Source: Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. Temple University. #RealCollege Survey results, 2020. Housing insecurity refers to difficulty paying rent, mortgage, or utility bills.
Student Employment

More than 70 percent of college students work while enrolled, and one in four of them are working full time while also going to school full-time. However, not all employment opportunities are distributed equally. The Federal work study program subsidizes on-campus jobs, but they are not always reserved for students with financial need. One in five work study students come from families making more than $100,000 a year, and only 23 percent are from families making less than $30,000 a year.

Higher-income students often have access to the best jobs and professional learning experiences (like internships), and are more likely to be employed in lucrative fields like STEM, business, or healthcare or in jobs related to their majors or career interests. In their research, KIPP found that 72 percent of college-aged KIPP alumni did not have career-aligned summer jobs or internships.

Higher-income students are also likely to work fewer hours. Students from lower-income families are more likely to work longer hours while enrolled in jobs unrelated to their studies. This takes time away from schoolwork and can result in lower grades. Indeed, research demonstrates that students working more than 15 hours per week may have lower grades.

3. Academic Preparedness

The Department of Education’s landmark report “The Toolkit Revisited” outlined the desired course of high study associated with greater college persistence, including a minimum of four years of English and four years of math, including Algebra 2. When students do not have these prerequisites, they must often take remedial coursework in college before they can begin their course-earning work. One in three American college students take remedial courses, and they end up being one-third less likely to complete their degree than other students. Students who attend less-resourced high schools may enter college less academically prepared or with lower test scores than their peers, leading them to have less confidence in their academics.

Being academically prepared also includes developing strong study habits, time management, note taking skills, and workload organization. Many college readiness programs such as AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), College Bound, and GEAR UP focus on developing these skills. We know from David Conley that academic content knowledge is not sufficient; to succeed in college students also need to have:

- **Key Cognitive Strategies**, such as intellectual openness, inquisitiveness, analysis, reasoning, interpretation, accuracy, and problem solving;
- **Academic Skills and Behaviors**, including writing, research, study skills, and the ability to monitor and evaluate their own thinking; and
- **Contextual Skills and Awareness**, defined as “privileged information necessary to understand how college operates as a system and culture.” Examples include understanding the norms and values of the postsecondary system, and the human relation skills needed to navigate this system.
It is these contextual skills that Tony Jack describes in “The Privileged Poor.”

“Just because students are admitted to an elite college does not mean that they will take advantage of all the connections and resources they have access to on campus…. Within every elite institution there is a hidden curriculum full of unwritten rules, unexplained terms, and a whole host of things that insiders take for granted…. Let us start with the most commonly used words, which are rarely defined or explained: syllabus, liberal arts, prerequisite, internship, fellowship, credit, and the like. For anyone who is not used to being around a college or has not attended a prep school, these words are foreign, even alienating. Something as simple as professors describing the purpose of office hours ... could be a step on the way toward making explicit the tacit expectations that permeate so many facets of college life.”

Anthony Jack, The Privileged Poor

Preparing students for the academic challenges of college involves addressing all of these areas: content knowledge, academic skills, cognitive strategies, and a contextual understanding of “how college works.”

4. Personal, Non-Academic Obstacles

Sense of Belonging

Research shows that students who feel like they belong at an institution are more likely to persist, engage in learning, and have fewer mental health problems than students with low sense of belonging. Students with high sense of belonging are more likely to seek out and use institutional resources, which may contribute to increased persistence. Feelings of belonging may also mitigate the impact of stress, bolstering students’ mental health. In contrast, very low levels of belonging are associated with considerably lower levels of persistence, as students with low sense of belonging report greater difficulty making friends, getting help, and interacting with faculty members.

A growing literature shows that minoritized racial/ethnic groups and first-generation students enrolled at 4-year institutions report lower levels of belonging than their peers. A recent KIPP organization publication reporting on a survey of thousands of college-enrolled KIPP alumni reported that 58 percent of respondents reported feeling negatively judged by others based on their race.

Practitioners have identified ways to strengthen students’ sense of belonging. Some must be implemented by postsecondary institutions, such as developing “getting to know each other” programs for first-year students, or creating mandatory diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging training for students and staff. Others could be adapted by external organizations supporting students, including:

Sense of Belonging: Whether or not students feel respected, valued, accepted, cared for, included, and that they matter, in the classroom, at college, or in their chosen career path. (Strayhorn, 2018)
• Teaching students key skills such as mindfulness and emotional regulation, which will help students openly and honestly communicate with each other, building connections.
• Connecting students to older students already enrolled at their institution.
• Providing students with information and resources about their new community (on and off campus).

Mental Health

Mental health is a significant challenge for many college students. One third of college students in 2020 reported having moderate to severe anxiety or depression, with rates of anxiety reported higher than in 2019.18 And in another recent study, 59 percent of college freshmen reported frequently feel overwhelmed by all they had to do, and 57 percent frequently felt anxious. Yet only one in four first-year students report taking advantage of psychological services on campus (Figure 13).

Figure 13: First Year of College Indicators of Student Satisfaction and Supports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied with general education and core curriculum courses</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied with their overall academic experience</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would recommend their college to others</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used student health services</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used student psychological services</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used campus safety services</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used the disability resource center</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used financial aid advising</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA. Journey Through the First Year of College Infographic. Based on the 2018 Your First College Year Survey. Developed by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) and the Policy Center on the First Year of College in 2000, the Your First College Year survey (YFCY) is administered annually through the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) at the University of California, Los Angeles. The YFCY was the first national survey designed specifically to measure student development in the first year of college, and it is distributed to students at the end of their first year. Twenty-three institutions participated in the 19th administration of the YFCY in the Spring of 2018. The sample consists of 5,204 first-time, full-time students at these institutions. Image copied from website.
How the Breakthrough Collaborative Can Support Postsecondary Student Success

Students do not stop needing support when they graduate high school. College readiness programs like the Breakthrough Collaborative increasingly are offering some level of continued support to their students who have enrolled in college, to help ensure success. Research suggests that supplemental support interventions can increase college persistence and attainment, and that programs with multi-faceted and more comprehensive supports achieve greater results (see callout next page). Indeed, students need support continuously along their college journey. The most effective programs are those that are comprehensive, use multiple strategies, engage with students during their entire college journey, and adapt supports to meet students’ needs as they change along the way. Ratledge and Wavelet identify four important components to such programs to maximize impact:

- One-on-one advising providing holistic counseling (academic, social, psychological, financial) with low caseloads not to exceed 1:150.
- Proactive and frequent outreach, versus waiting for students to ask for assistance.
- Financial support to assist students with costs not covered by financial aid (books, transportation, emergency expenses). Some programs tie these incentives to program participation to encourage student engagement.
- Encouraging students to remain enrolled full-time, as doing so is shown to increase likelihood of academic progress and on-time graduation.

The remainder of this report suggests ways that Breakthrough Collaborative might offer support to alumni in college. It draws upon the research literature as well as a review of the following programs, which are described in greater detail in Appendix A: Promising Student Support Programs:

- KIPP Forward
- Scaling Up College Completion Efforts for Student Success (SUCCESS)
- Thrive Scholars
- Inside Track
- Seizing Every Opportunity (SEO) Scholars

Detailed below are 10 strategies that may assist Breakthrough in supporting its students through college:

1. Provide financial support
2. Guide students’ college choice
3. Reduce summer melt
4. Support the transition to college
5. Provide counseling and advising
6. Support students’ mental health well-being
7. Cultivate student-to-student connections
8. Support students’ career development
9. Partner with higher education institutions
10. Use data to monitor success
Results from College Success Program Evaluations

In 2021 researchers reviewed eight programs that provide supplemental, targeted support to full-time, low-income college students at 2-year and 4-year institutions and had been rigorously evaluated with an experimental or quasi-experimental study. All of the programs provided one-on-one counseling, for the most part provided in person by an adult, while one site offered remote advising, and another used near-peer mentors. The student-to-counselor ratio ranged from 34 to 157 students per counselor (advisor). Programmatic supports varied and included some set of the following, offered by college employees or staff at non-profit entities working with the colleges:

- Personalized advising from a counselor who assists students with academic, social, or interpersonal needs. Academic advising includes course selection and academic guidance.
- Help “navigating” college, including how to talk to faculty members
- Help building a plan to transfer (for 2-year students)
- Additional supplemental supports for students in danger of dropping out
- Career services
- Tutoring and supplemental instruction
- Financial incentives to participate / meet with advisor or to maintain GPA
- Financial support for textbooks, transportation, fees, and vaccinations
- Skill building workshops or seminars (time management, goal setting, study skills)
- Referral services to social services (child care, food assistance, housing vouchers)
- Emergency assistance funds
- Virtual remote coaching
- Near-peer mentoring by upper-classmen
- Job placement support (resume writing, interview skills)
- Tracking of data metrics to provide early and real-time alerts when students go off path

Evaluation results:

Four of the eight programs reviewed produced statistically significant positive effects on first-year persistence. The four programs that positively increased first-year persistence were more intensive, offered more comprehensive services, and increased persistence rates by up to 21 percentage points after one year of intervention. Three of the eight programs also showed a positive impact on degree completion, up to 18 percentage points higher, and those results lasted six years later.

1. Provide Financial Support

It goes without saying that students from low-income families need assistance paying for college. Organizations without access to full scholarship support can still help students pay for college by helping them access available financial aid and paying for small expenses not covered by financial aid. Research has shown, for example, that having advisors help students fill out their Free Application for Financial Student Aid (FAFSA) results in a higher percentage of low-income families submitting the FAFSA, increasing the amount of financial aid those students received, and positively increased college access and persistence. In contrast, just providing families with written information about the FAFSA without helping them fill it out had no impact on outcomes. Programs can use the following strategies to help students pay for college:

- Educate students about the true “net” costs of college and financial aid options.
- Support students’ annual application for federal and state-based financial aid (FAFSA).
- Educate students about and help them apply for private scholarships.
- Educate students about resources available on campus (food pantries, emergency aid funds, public benefit programs).
- Provide funding support to help with smaller expenses (books, transportation costs), computers, or technology support.
- Operate an Emergency Funds program for unexpected expenses that might derail a student’s enrollment.

2. Guide Students’ College Choices

Students who attend a well-matched institution are more likely to persist. In addition, some institutions offer better financial aid or on-campus student supports than others. Research shows that providing high-achieving students with information about college costs and selective institutions can shift their application behaviors and lead them to apply to more selective schools where they receive better financial aid.

While students are still in high school, organizations can guide them towards applying for and choosing schools that offer better aid and have more comprehensive support services on campus, with the goal of landing students at a school that will support them. The Noble Charter Schools Network in Chicago maintains a spreadsheet on all colleges attended by Noble alumni detailing for each institution the outcomes of Noble students who attend and the intensity of counseling supports available to students from low-income families on campus. This information informs the college choices of Noble high school seniors as they apply to college. In addition to alumni data, the following extant data sources also provide information on average financial aid received by student family income level and graduation rates of minority students.

“If you don’t have the resources to help students economically (because that’s the number one things students need – when we hear from them, they need money for books, travel, emergency funding), then it’s about getting students connected on campus, and directing them to the campuses that you have a strong relationship with and whom you know will support your students.”

~ Patrick Wu, College & Career Counselor, KIPP DC
• The U.S. Department of Education’s College Scorecard provides first year retention rates, overall graduation rates, Pell Grant recipient graduation rates, average cost, percent of students graduating with debt along with their average debt.

• The New York Time’s Upshot reports on the socioeconomic diversity of student bodies and lists elite colleges that enroll the highest percentage of low- and middle-income students.

• Graduation rates of students from minoritized racial/ethnic groups are available for individual institutions from the Department of Education’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

3. Reduce Summer Melt

“Summer melt” refers to students who at the start of the summer have been accepted into a college and intend to enroll, but do not actually enroll when fall arrives. Programs can support students in the summer following high school graduation to ensure that they do not “melt” but instead matriculate in their chosen college. Research shows that summer texting campaigns, reminding students of key deadlines and tasks to complete, are highly effective at increasing matriculation rates. Breakthrough affiliates may also want to track summer melt by determining students’ college intentions with a senior exit survey and following up afterwards, to identify which of their students actually enroll in college. Guidelines and advice on how to do this is found here and here.

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“The tasks that college-intending students must complete during the summer after graduation are numerous. Even seemingly simple tasks can become significant barriers to timely college enrollment. Common summer tasks include attending orientation; completing financial aid and other paperwork; paying for tuition, room and board, and student fees (including health insurance); taking placement exams; and selecting classes. Providing students with modest levels of assistance with these tasks has the potential to significantly improve timely college enrollment among your graduates.”

~ Benjamin Castleman et al., Summer Melt Handbook

4. Support the Transition to College

Transitioning to college can be tough. Students must adjust to increasing autonomy and isolation. They also face expectations and workloads that are greater than what they experienced in high school. Some colleges and universities have created extended orientation and first-year programs to help students get established. Examples include summer bridge programs, small learning communities, freshman seminars, peer mentors and academic coaches.

Nonprofit organizations can encourage their graduates to take advantage of these transition supports. They may also offer their own programming aimed at helping students through the transition from high school to college. The Getting Ready for Success Pilot Program, designed by the College Success Foundation with support from MDRC, aims to strengthen low-income students’ college readiness by providing academic, social, and financial support during the end of high school and start of college. Indeed, one research study
found that investing two hours of outreach and counseling in students over the summer increased their probability of matriculating to college by roughly 10 percentage points. To assist students, the Partnership for After School Education shares that one of its programs has created “blueprints” to guide students in competing tasks and deadlines for:

- Planning how the student will physically get to campus
- Completing housing questionnaires
- Attending college orientation
- Registering and enrolling for classes
- Completing health forms
- Making payments

**Psychologically Orienting Students Towards College Success**

In addition to prompting students with tactical reminders, research has demonstrated that intentionally orientating students to the challenges they may face in their first year by presenting them with a “lay theory” of what to expect can improve outcomes. The approach in these studies was to (a) describe common challenges students might encounter; (b) provide vivid stories from upper-year students to illustrate these challenges and how they were overcome; (c) convey data that supports these messages; and (d) allow participants to take ownership over the lay theory by writing about challenges they anticipate and how they might overcome them. The results were remarkable: participating students were more likely to enroll in college in the fall and earned higher first-year cumulative grade point averages than control students. Later follow-up also demonstrated that participating students were more likely to use student support services, and had developed stronger friendships and mentor relationships. Figure 14 outlines the theorized process that results in these outcomes.

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**Figure 14: Theoretical Model Underlying the Process by which Lay Theories Affect Students’ Behavior and Academic Outcomes During the Transition to College**

Source: Yeager, D.S. et al, Teaching a lay theory before college narrows achievement gaps at scale, PNAS, May 31, 2016. Published online with details on the process used to teach the lay theory outlined here.
The following strategies may help Breakthrough affiliates support students’ transition to college:

- Educate students before beginning college on what to expect. (Teach them a lay theory.)
- Encourage students to participate in freshman orientation activities and courses.
- Connect students with program alumni who are enrolled at their institution.
- Offer counseling support to students.

5. Provide Counseling and Advising During College

Aside from financial aid, one-on-one advising is the most prevalent component of college success supports and the program element most often cited as having a positive impact. By itself, advising has a small effect on increasing retention. When combined with other services, advising becomes even more powerful, as advisors connect students to available resources, customize support according to student needs, and help students trouble-shoot solutions. College advising takes many forms:

- The SUCCESS program pairs students with on-campus coaches who reach out to students once a month to check in, monitor progress, and help them with personal and academic issues. SUCCESS counselors are available during evenings and weekends hours when necessary. While students also receive a monthly financial incentive to participate, they report that their relationship with their program coach is the most valuable part of the program, and offers them not only concrete advice and information but psychological support and encouragement in times of challenge.

- **Posse** students are matched with a faculty mentor on their campus. Mentors meet with their scholars each week as a group and every other week individually. Program evaluations have found that students report that their mentor played a critical role in their success, including helping them transition to college, supporting their persistence, and encouraging development of their career goals.

- **Uncommon Schools** identifies “Alumni Success Coaches” for students attending college in specific regions. These coaches are not situated at one campus but serve students enrolled across multiple institutions. Students can schedule coaching sessions virtually or when their advisor visits their institution.

- **KIPP Forward Advisors** begin working with students the summer after high school graduation and continue for six years through either college or career, student depending. Advisors are full-time paid employees, most of whom are recent college graduates. Some advisors are situated on specific college campuses that enroll higher numbers of KIPP Graduates; others advise students across multiple institutions virtually. Figure 15 outlines the KIPP Forward advising approach.

“I think [this advising] program is about addressing equity issues. And, so, when we are providing students with holistic coaching, where there’s some people may see it as handholding or helicoptering, it’s not doing things for them; it’s teaching them how to get there and then to do it themselves. Like Kathy said, we’re not going to do it for you, but we are going to help you and then hold you accountable.”

~ Cara Reader, counselor in the SUCCESS program
While implementation strategies vary, common aspects of advising include:

- Course selection,
- Goal-setting,
- Academic support (referral to tutoring when needed),
- Career development (resume review, job or internship applications),
- Encouragement and support during difficulties,
- Organization of social activities for students on the same campus or virtually, and
- Connecting students with on-campus resources including tutoring and writing centers, libraries, mental and physical health services, emergency aid.

6. Support Students’ Mental Health and Well-Being

First-generation, low-income, and minoritized students may face multiple psychological challenges in college, including:

- Family conflicts and guilt over leaving their families at home.
- Feelings of being an “imposter” who doesn’t fit in.
- Confusion, lack of understanding how to navigate campus resources.
- Anxiety about academic achievement, social inclusion, and financial pressures.22

Counselors and academic advisors may offer support when students face challenges, but are not trained mental health professionals. Some programs thus supplement their advising with additional professional support in the area of mental health. Students in the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation’s College Scholarship award, for example, have access to a Student Assistance Program (SAP), which provides free, confidential, expert advice for a range of issues that may affect students’ academic or personal life. Through the SAP, students and their families can receive expert counseling for free to help them with personal or family
problems. Likewise, KIPP’s recently launched Alumni Network includes free therapy services for all alumni offered by two providers, Ayana Therapy and Talkspace.

7. Cultivate Student-to-Student Connections

Strong connections to other students can increase students’ sense of belonging at their institution. Recent research finds that frequently interacting with diverse peers and peer mentoring have positive impacts on students’ sense of belonging. Two types of relationships are important to support students through challenges, cultivate their sense of belonging, and build their career networks:

1. Connections with other first-year students
2. Near-peer mentoring from older students

*Being Part of a Cohort*

The Posse Foundation embodies the cohort model with its programming that identifies high school students with demonstrated academic and leadership potential and places them in groups of 10 (“Posses”) at partnering institutions with scholarship and advising support. These students enter college already knowing other students who are “like them.” Breakthrough students form strong connections with each other during the summer programming. One possible avenue of support is to consider how Breakthrough might continue to facilitate connections among Breakthrough alumni, so that they might serve as peer supports to each other as they embark on college (either at the same campus, or virtually if at different campuses).

*Near-Peer Advising*

Connecting new students with other students who share similar backgrounds but are a few years ahead is also beneficial, as older students can provide advice on navigating common challenges and connect new students with on-campus resources. If mentors are not available on campus, they can be provided virtually. Matriculate is a free college advising program that connects high-achieving low-income high school students with a near-peer college mentor who helps them through the college advising process. A similar program could be developed to support first-year college students.

Near-peer mentoring doesn’t have to be formal. The Posse Foundation’s model of admitting 10 students each year to partner campuses also results in natural, informal near-peer mentoring as each incoming cohort of students is connect them with the three other cohorts of 10 students ahead of them who are in their 2nd, 3rd, or 4th year. To foster student-to-student connections, Breakthrough can:

- Track the institutions at which Breakthrough students enroll and connect incoming students with other Breakthrough students who are either entering in their cohort or are already enrolled on campus.
- Develop a near-peer advising model in which older Breakthrough students serve as mentors, guides, or “buddies” to newly graduated Breakthrough students entering college.
- Construct mechanisms through which Breakthrough alumni can stay in touch with each other (message boards, social media groups, etc.).
- Encourage students to seek out opportunities to meet other students on campus.
8. Support Students’ Career Development

One important purpose of a college degree is to better position graduates for long-term employment success. College success organizations can support students’ career development by helping them explore and articulate career goals and locate internship or employment opportunities that are career-relevant while they are in college. Many students must work while in college; college success organizations can help them get paid internships or positions that will actually develop job market skills, instead of working in food service, sales, or administrative support jobs that are unrelated to future careers.

- **Thrive Scholars** is a national scholarship program that works with high-achieving students of color from their junior year of high school through college graduation. They have organized their entire program of support through a set of career tracks: Core, Tech & Engineering, Life Sciences, Finance, Consulting, and Law. Supports are customized based on students’ interests and chosen track. Students on the Finance track, for example, receive one-on-one finance-focused career coaching, mentorship and job opportunities with Thrive Scholars’ Finance Pathway corporate partners, and finance technical skills training including financial modeling, Excel, financial statement analysis, and technical interview training.

*Alumni Networking*

Another way to foster the career development of program graduates is to connect students with graduated alumni. KIPP Forward recently launched an Alumni Network that includes a directory of alumni-owned businesses, regional alumni associations, and career and leadership programs. The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation has solicited internship opportunities for its college scholars from alumni in the workforce. Program alumni also can be great resources for students wanting to learn more about a field or conduct an informational interview.

9. Partner with Higher Education Institutions

Most colleges and universities have some level of programmatic support for students who are first-generation, lower-income, or from marginalized groups. Building partnerships with the higher education institutions attended by students has multiple benefits, including data sharing and collaborating on services provided. Breakthrough Collaborative alumni go to many different institutions. Yet tracking the institutions at which they enroll might be the first step in identifying institutions at which high numbers of Breakthrough students enroll and with whom it makes sense to partner. Through partnerships, there may be opportunities to convince institutions to open up campus resources specifically for Breakthrough students, or to build Bridging programs that help students transition to those campuses.

- As part of its “KIPP Forward” college success programming, **KIPP Public Schools** has established collaborative partnerships with nearly 100 institutions of higher education, through which KIPP and the institutions share the costs of supporting adult and near-peer advisers for KIPP students. At Howard University, this means funding an in-person KIPP staffer on campus who meets with all KIPP students, can access student data, and connects students with Howard staff and resources as needed. KIPP students enrolled at Howard are also allowed access to its Food Pantry and to an institutional Emergency Fund to pay for emergency needs that might threaten persistence.
10. Use Data to Monitor Success

Information is power. Annual tracking of data collected from institutions of higher education, from national databases like the National Student Clearinghouse, and from students themselves allows for outcome measurement as well as monitoring of student progress. Here are several examples from existing programs:

- The KIPP program collects transcript and financial aid data and then uses data after each benchmark or transcript period to identify students in need of greater support.

- At Ivy Tech Community College, a counselor in the SUCCESS program (which they call “I-SUCCEED”) describes her use of data: “I’m always pulling reports to see what students have a low midterm grade, or are there outstanding assignments, or did a professor raise a flag on any of our students that needs to be addressed. And I’m always using the information we have at Ivy Tech, and using data to make sure that our coaches are addressing needs that we can see in our different systems.”

- The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation collects data annually from scholars, including course enrollments, grades, awards, honors, activities, internships, and leadership positions. Reported grades of C or lower trigger the Academic Support system, where students receive letters of support and are encouraged to connect with their advisers.

In addition to tracking persistence data through the National Student Clearinghouse, Breakthrough might consider using data collected annually from alumni themselves to identify students that need more support. Possible indicators of students being at-risk of dropping out include students’:

- Inability to articulate goals and plan to reach graduation.
- Feeling disconnected from their school community. *(Note, the new engagement survey questions from NSSE could be collected from Breakthrough alumni to benchmark engagement.)*
- Receiving grades of C or lower.
- Working more than 15 hours per week.
- Owing an outstanding balance to school combined with lack of a plan to pay it.
- Experiencing food or housing insecurity (difficulty paying bills or purchasing groceries).
- Lacking support from family members or friends in attending college.
- Feeling anxiety, homesickness, or depression.
Appendix A: Promising Student Support Programs

This appendix describes programs with student populations similar to those served by Breakthrough Collaborative affiliates that actively support students into and through college, conversations with whom might help inform the Breakthrough Collaborative working group. The programs highlighted include:

- KIPP Charter School Network
- Inside Track
- Scaling Up College Completion Efforts for Student Success (MDRC)
- SEO (Seizing Every Opportunity) Scholars
- Thrive Scholars

Where noted, program descriptions and models are copied verbatim or cut-and-pasted directly from program websites.
KIPP Forward

The post-high school success support program offered by the KIPP Charter School Network

The Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) Charter School Network is the largest charter school network in the United States, comprised of 280 schools serving students in grades K through 12. KIPP schools are organized into regions. KIPP Schools were created initially to bridge educational and opportunity gaps in middle school, but have since expanded to serve students in K through 12 grades. Now, the KIPP program is expanding again to support KIPP alumni as they pursue college and careers with a program called “KIPP Forward.” KIPP Forward is implemented differently in each region. I spoke with Patrick Wu, a counselor with KIPP DC, who shared with me that in the Washington D.C. region, KIPP Forward has five components: near-peer advising, on-site advising at individual colleges, a text nudge campaign, emergency funding, and an alumni network. All KIPP graduates are offered the option of enrolling in KIPP Forward and receiving advising support for up to six years following high school graduation, whether they enroll in college or pursue a career.

The national office has outlined a college persistence strategy framework (see below).

![College Persistence Strategy Framework](image)

Source: KIPP website. Referenced 10/26/2022
Inside Track

[Program description copied from website]

Inside Track uses one-on-one executive-style coaching as a way to help all learners achieve their education and career goals. Our mission is to fuel social mobility and close equity gaps by empowering and advancing all learners. We use the power of coaching to support individuals in achieving their educational and career goals – transforming lives and organizations while creating social change. For more than two decades, our evidence-based coaching methodology has supported more than 2.6 million learners at every step of their student journey. For some, that means high school, community college and four-year universities. For others, it’s employer-based educational programs and job-specific credentials.

InsideTrack’s holistic coaching support is a proven catalyst for transformation. Simply put, coaching empowers every learner to navigate their unique circumstances and achieve their goals, regardless of their educational background, age or career stage. Education is a lifelong journey that often includes a unique mix of degrees, credentials and training. Coaching helps students thrive and excel, making the transformational promise of education a reality.

The technologies our coaches use to connect with students have changed considerably over the years, and we have adapted along with it. We now use multichannel communication via a single platform to deliver our coaching. This means we can continue to tailor solutions to meet students where they’re at, through their preferred channels of communication. From automated nudges to one-on-one phone calls, coaches use every channel at their disposal, ensuring that outreach is cost-effective and scalable. What’s more, technology captures valuable insights about the student experience — insights we share with our organizational partners to strengthen the experience for all learners. Technologies will continue to change, but the personalized support our coaches bring to each conversation will always serve as the heart of our impact.

Coaching can move and track with learners across every stage of their educational journeys, whatever path that takes – from degrees and credentials to workplace learning. We directly support students and partner with the educational institutions, organizations and employers that serve them. Coaching is all about tailoring our work to the individual learner and their specific goals. To do so, we focus on eight key areas that impact enrollment, retention and completion — areas that are tied directly to our research on why students stop- or drop-out. We use these focus areas to assess and address learners’ strengths, opportunities and red flags. Coaching helps ensure that learners are satisfied and successful in these areas, so they’re more likely to get the most out of their education.

The positive impact of InsideTrack coaching has been confirmed through nearly 100 randomized control trials (RCTs) during our 20-year history. The most widely known is the landmark study published by Stanford researchers Dr. Rachel Baker and Dr. Eric Bettinger in 2013. This study evaluated the effectiveness of InsideTrack’s coaching as a student success intervention. The randomized controlled trials measured the performance of 13,555 students across eight different 2-year, 4-year, public and private colleges and universities. The study showed significant increases in student persistence and graduation of coached students.
Inside Track’s Approach to Coaching

**Focusing on WHAT MATTERS MOST**

Coaching is all about tailoring our work to the individual learner and their specific goals. To do so, we focus on eight key areas that impact enrollment, retention and completion — areas that are tied directly to our research on why students stop or drop-out. We use these focus areas to assess and address learners’ strengths, opportunities and red flags. Coaching helps ensure that learners are satisfied and successful in these areas, so they’re more likely to get the most out of their education.

**Setting learners up for SUCCESS**

Coaching supports the development of specific knowledge, skills and beliefs necessary for success in school and beyond. Emphasizing noncognitive competencies — such as critical thinking, creativity and perseverance — promotes transformational, long-term learning.

**KNOWLEDGE**

Empower learners to understand themselves, their institutions, and resources that will support their goals.

**SKILLS**

Support learners as they identify and develop the abilities that will promote their goals and enhance their school experience.

**BELIEFS**

Celebrate and reinforce the beliefs that are serving learners’ values and goals.

**THE FIVE ELEMENTS OF COACHING**

The five elements of coaching represent the core skillsets coaches use to personalize their support for greatest impact.

- Building Relationships
- Assessing
- Advancing
- Building Motivation
- Strategizing
Inside Track’s Theory of Change

For more about Inside Track see their annual report.
MDRC’s Scaling Up College Completion Efforts for Student Success (SUCCESS) project seeks to improve graduation rates for traditionally underserved students at two- and four-year colleges. Since 2019, MDRC has partnered with states and institutions to develop and implement large-scale, financially sustainable, evidence-based support programs. SUCCESS, now operating in 13 colleges across five states nationwide, integrates components from multiple programs that have proved to be effective at helping students accomplish their goals. The components include coaching, full-time enrollment, financial incentives, and data-driven management.

Each college’s program incorporates the four components of SUCCESS described above into an integrated program, and all of the colleges are serving low-income, associate degree- or certificate-seeking students. Three of the programs are targeting students of color to improve outcomes for these students. These colleges are working to add into their programs culturally responsive practices designed to support students of color, such as connecting students with peer mentors of the same background or holding identity-based group meetings to foster a sense of community. The colleges are also using insights from behavioral science to improve student outreach and engagement. For financial incentives, most colleges are providing $50 monthly gift cards for items such as food and textbooks, contingent on students satisfying requirements to meet with their coaches regularly and reach credit-enrollment benchmarks.

Taken from online MDRC Issue Focus report: [Implementing Evidence-Based Programs to Support College Success](#), March 2021.
SEO (Seizing Every Opportunity) Scholars

We serve 1038 Scholars in college, attending 195 colleges and universities, in 30 different states. 90% of SEO Scholars graduate from college and earn a Bachelor's degree.

Highly-trained College Persistence Advisors (CPAs) support SEO Scholars through every academic, career, and personal, challenge they may face as low-income, first-generation college students. The impact is powerful: SEO Scholars achieve a 90% college graduation rate and are well prepared to pursue economically viable and productive careers or graduate-level education.

College Readiness Workshops
SEO Scholars attend a series of workshops before beginning their first year of college, and then again during college. Topics include adjustment to college life, homesickness, health issues, time management, course selection, relationship-building with professors, and effective study strategies.

One-On-One Support
Every SEO Scholar receives continual and individualized one-on-one academic, career, and personal support guidance throughout the entirety of their college years.

Career Exploration and Networking Events
SEO Scholars work with their advisors to explore multiple career paths based on personal preferences and academic aptitude. The process is ongoing, dynamic, and fully utilizes the wealth of resources from SEO’s robust network of current Scholars, alumni, and friends.

Intensive Career Advising
To ensure that SEO Scholars have access to career-critical internships, we provide our Scholars with intensive career advising. This includes ongoing resume drafting and updating, cover letter guidance, and in-person and web-based mock interviews, all aligned with internship search and placement support. In 2020, Scholars in college participated in jobs, internships, and fellowships at 317 companies and organizations. Learn more about some of these great organizations here.
Thrive Scholars

Refined over 20 years, our comprehensive, data-informed model works. Our Scholars go to better colleges. Earn better grades. And enjoy better careers. Those aren’t just brags. They’re proven outcomes. We understand the opportunity gaps – and their impact. That’s why our program targets the five key inflection points that prevent high-achieving, low-income students of color from getting into top colleges and graduating ready for top careers.

FIVE CORE PILLARS DRIVE OUR SUCCESS

- Expert College Advising
- Academic Preparation
- Social-Emotional & Academic Support
- Financial Support
- Career Development

All Thrive Scholars choose a Career Pathway program – Tech & Engineering, Life Sciences, Consulting, Business, Law, Finance. We provide six years of support – Junior & Senior Year of high school, plus 4 years of college. We drive all programming through six “industry pathways” to target supports and programmatic experiences based on Scholars’ desired career / interests.

Scholars Get Six Years of Tailored Support

- College-level instruction by professors from Amherst and other top colleges at Summer Academy that prepares Scholars for the academic rigors of college curriculum
- Personalized college admissions counseling to find the “right fit” schools that support their area of academic interest
- College success guidance and mentorship to ensure Scholars thrive academically starting from day 1 on their college campus
- Personalized career development and 1-on-1 coaching
- Access to internship and full-time career opportunities across sectors with Thrive Scholars’ corporate partners
Other Programs

The following programs may also be informative to Breakthrough Collaborative as it designs its college supports:

- AVID - Advancement via Individual Determination
- I-Succeed, a program offering personalized counseling and student-to-student networking benefits to community college students of color
- Matriculate
- Noble Network (Chicago)
- Posse Scholars (Annual Report 2020)
- Quantum Opportunity Program
- Sponsor A Scholar Program
- Talent Search
- Uncommon Schools, specifically its Alumni Success Coaching program
  - Anna Taylor is the Senior Associate Manager of College Access and Success (anna.taylor@uncommonschools.org)
- Upward Bound
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