

## THE DREAM OF COLLEGE: Helping Struggling Students Succeed in College

Emerging findings and recommendations from the  
New York City Partnership for College Access and Success

**A college degree has become increasingly important for success in today's economy.** High school graduation no longer ensures a wage level that is adequate to support a family. For the tens of thousands of struggling New York City students and youth who have dropped out of high school, a college degree remains an elusive dream.

Mayor Bloomberg's Commission for Economic Opportunity noted in its September 2006 report that "Low-income students are less likely to complete post-secondary education, placing them at greater risk of ongoing poverty."<sup>\*</sup>

The City University of New York (CUNY) has launched its own effort to change this. *The Campaign for Success* aims to identify and implement strategies to improve the conditions that foster CUNY students' success.

Results from the pilot initiative described below show promise for these youth and provide useful information for CUNY and the City of New York on how to better set the stage for them to enter and succeed in college.

### OVERVIEW

The New York City Partnership for College Access and Success, sponsored by the Fund for the City of New York Youth Development Institute (YDI) in partnership with CUNY, Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation (CHLDC), and Forest Hills Community House (FHCH), is piloting an initiative to increase opportunities for college access and degree completion for youth between the ages of 16 and 24 who have dropped out of school or were near to dropping out, and who have obtained a GED or high school diploma. The initiative is forging partnerships between colleges and community-based organizations (CBOs) and includes two CUNY campuses, New York City College of Technology, and LaGuardia Community College.

### RESEARCH FRAMEWORK: *A Trilogy for Student Success*

Students' success in college depends on three broad conditions:

- Young people must be **ENGAGED**, aware, interested and motivated in their quest to attend and succeed in college. Students require adults who will help them develop a personal plan and goals for their education; facilitate their connection to college life, and reduce the non-academic barriers they may face, such as financial aid and home-life issues.
- Young people must have the **CAPACITY** – including academic skills, knowledge, and understanding – needed to navigate the world of higher education. In short, young people must be prepared.
- Young people need the **CONTINUITY** of sustained institutional and interpersonal opportunities—including material resources and ongoing guidance.

If any of these three conditions are missing, the student's chance of success is jeopardized.

*This framework is adapted from the 2004 report: Engagement, Capacity, and Continuity: A Trilogy for Student Success, by Eric Jolly, Patricia Campbell, and Lesley Perlman; [www.smm.org/ecc/](http://www.smm.org/ecc/).*

<sup>\*</sup> *The New York City Commission for Economic Opportunity*, Report to Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, NYC, 9/2006; P.30.

Now in its second year, findings from this initiative illustrate the barriers young people face in their quest and point to a range of policy and programmatic recommendations to make the dream of college a reality for more young people than ever before. These findings are outlined below.

While many struggling students want to obtain a college education, they face significant barriers to achieving this goal. Nationally, only five percent of GED-holders complete college. We know that academic, financial, and personal issues are the most significant barriers to student success. Findings from the initiative point to the value and great potential of partnerships between colleges and community organizations and as well as of institutional strategies that provide personalized support in college, to address these issues.

## **BARRIERS STUDENTS FACE**

### Academic

Far too many struggling students leave high school or GED programs unprepared for higher education and future careers. The academic barriers these young people face include:

- Low writing, math, and reading skills
- High need for often unavailable preparatory coursework to build skills
- Limited skills and understanding of time management, study habits, homework completion, classroom and coursework expectations, relationships with instructors, and how to navigate the college bureaucracy

### Financial

Most, if not all, struggling students need a range of economic support. These include:

- Financial aid (and assistance navigating the process of securing it)
- Resources to cover the cost of textbooks
- Child care
- Transportation
- College application fee waivers

### **Student Snapshot**

*In the Cypress Hills LDC's Moving Towards Achievement (M.T.A.) program, students work toward an Associate's Degree at CUNY's New York City College of Technology (City Tech).*

*Demographic Profile of the M.T.A. students fall 2005*

*90% attended Full-time; 10% Part-time  
20% Female; 80% Male  
60% aged 17 to 19; 40% aged 20 to 21  
30% Black; 40% Hispanic; 30% Unknown  
80% Passed the Reading Assessment Test  
40% Passed the Math Assessment Test  
20% Passed the Writing Assessment Test*

*Thirty percent of the participating M.T.A. students received PELL and TAP grants, but 70 percent were deemed ineligible for aid, including undocumented students. At least one-third of the students with financial aid experienced delays in processing applications and receiving funds. Both aid-eligible and non-eligible students alike had difficulty covering the costs of books (book prices reach as high as \$100 each). One in five students eventually withdrew for lack of book funds. None of the students were able to cover transportation costs.*

### Personal

Many struggling students simply do not believe that they can be successful. The factors that can influence a young person's negative perception of their ability to obtain a college degree include:

- Little or no exposure to the "message" of college as a likely or possible life goal
- Internalization of the message that he or she is "no good in school," "not college material," "going nowhere" etc.
- Lack of awareness of the availability of financial aid, loans, and other resources

- No history of college attendance and graduation among family members, friends, or members of their community
- Family members who are unable to help the student navigate the procedures related to the college and financial aid applications, registration, and other bureaucratic processes

### Difficulty Accessing Available Supports

Struggling students often do not know how to utilize available non-financial resources. Information on college and related issues, which is seldom advertised or easy to access, can help them be successful in college. This information includes:

- Counseling
- Academic guidance
- Tutoring in learning labs
- Writing assistance
- Health & mental health care
- Independent living resources, especially for young people without family supports, including youth aging out of the foster care system

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

What can be done to make the dream of college a reality for young people who face many or all of these barriers? The ideas outlined below have emerged as key areas where targeted change can make a difference.

### Make College Financially Possible

- Increase financial aid options for low-income students
- Waive or greatly reduce application fees at CUNY campuses based on ability to pay
- Provide designated personnel (including collaborations with CBO partners) to serve as financial aid liaisons to admitted students with very low income levels in order to help them identify and access resources such as grants, loans, child care, and assistance with the cost of textbooks
- Provide reduced transportation rates for all students on a sliding scale, down to a no-cost option for college students with very low incomes

### **The Cost of College**

*The cost of attending a CUNY school ranges from \$10,096 for students living with a parent to upwards of \$16,708 for those living alone. The cost varies further depending on school fees, transportation, books and supplies, and living expenses.*

*Most low-income students rely on a combination of the federal Pell grant, the New York State Tuition Assistance Program (TAP), student loans and work/study in order to cover the cost of college.*

*As college costs rise and Pell and TAP Grant awards remain stagnant, students increasingly depend on loans and work/study. This presents significant challenges for low-income students.*

*The higher the work/study amount, the more time a student must spend working (versus studying). And relying heavily on loan programs places a substantial long-term financial burden on low-income families.*

### Build Institutional Supports for Student Success

- Develop partnerships between colleges, schools and CBOs to support struggling students who do not have the personal or academic skill levels or the parental expertise that young people of all income levels and academic proficiency rely on during their college years. It is important that these partnerships begin before entry into college and are sustained throughout the college years. Often, support for students once they are in college is neglected, despite the evidence of high dropout rates.

- Build on the findings of the Learning Communities pilot at Kingsborough Community College.\* This approach has shown promising, early success in a rigorous evaluation. It uses a “small school strategy” within a college, creating a team of instructors including a counselor, and intentionally developing support among a group of students who take classes together.
- All young people need to hear the “message of college” early and often to increase the likelihood that it becomes a goal in their personal and career plans. Utilize all stakeholders and avenues in a young person’s life to deliver this message, including schools, CBO-sponsored programs such as Beacon Centers, settlement houses, youth employment programs, religious institutions, and sports coaches and combine this message with broader campaigns in the media.
- Engage CBOs and schools to provide struggling students with intensive skill building in literacy and mathematics in conjunction with GED preparation or involvement in multiple pathways programs for students who are still in school and overage and/or under-credited. Such “bridge” or remedial preparatory classes can be critical to help ready struggling students for college-level coursework and avoid early course withdrawals or failures, especially if it is closely aligned with the curricular requirements and expectations of college. Also, developing a system to enable all entering students to complete needed preparatory courses prior to September of freshman year would allow for greater standardization of their college programs and help colleges and CBO partners develop supports to assist them.
- Create student support centers in middle schools, high schools, and in community-based programs such as Beacons and settlement houses to help young people select courses that will enable them to prepare for college entrance and success. There is no more important factor in college access and success for a young person than taking the right courses in high school, yet many young people and their families do not understand this. Student support center staff will require training and access to computers with high-speed internet connections.

#### Prepare Students for College Success

- Expose young people in middle and high school and during their early college experience to role models—particularly college graduates from similar backgrounds who overcame similar challenges. This will help students bolster their own sense of college as a personal goal that is important and doable.
- Build the expectation of college success. Beginning in middle school and continuing through their college experience, they need to hear a consistent, strong message that they can succeed. They need to receive this message along with clear information of the supports that will be in place to assist them along the way.

#### Help Students Navigate College Life and Create More Personalized Environments in Colleges

- Create mechanisms within colleges and engage the resources of CBO partners to help struggling students navigate key processes and offices, such as Admissions, Financial Aid, Bursar, Registrar, and Student Support Services.
- Help students avoid traps, including missed deadlines, penalties for early withdrawal, and course failure, and understand the implications of course withdrawal vs. failure and the inefficient use of financial aid resources.

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\* *Building Learning Communities*, Dan Bloom and Colleen Sommo, MDRC, New York City, June 2005. This is one of a series of studies on community college programs to increase student success.

- Schedule tutoring in dedicated time blocks structured to maximize student efficiency and not in conflict with classes or other time periods when students would be less able to participate.

### Build College and CBO Staff Capacity

- Build a team of people within the college faculty, support and administrative staff who are trained to work with struggling students, and work as a team, such as in the Learning Communities project cited above. Extensively train college faculty to develop their willingness and skills to support struggling students.
- Make sure that CBO staff are trained and know about college options, resources, requirements, and challenges
- Foster relationships and ongoing dialogue between CBO staff and college faculty, including instructors and counselors who are working with these students

**Most importantly, a new model of college needs to be envisioned and implemented—one that will stack the odds for success in favor of struggling students and for all students.**

Making success possible for students facing the greatest barriers is a critical part of the strategy to ensure that they will have the tools necessary to lift themselves and their families out of poverty. A college education also helps young people to become broader thinkers and develop a wider set of perspectives, better preparing them to adapt to a future world and work environment that none of us can fully predict.

## **BEST PRACTICES**

The following strategies can help support young adults to enter and succeed in college:

### **Bridge Programming**

Pre-college: The creation of comprehensive programming that combines skill-building work, literacy instruction, and test preparation with social service supports can help prepare students for college success. CBOs can provide this programming and then offer students the continuity of ongoing support when they take on college coursework.

### **Learning Communities**

In college: Provide young people with a peer group of students who are experiencing similar challenges and are at a similar stage in the college experience to help engage struggling students in college life, give them supportive relationships, and offer targeted, timely assistance. It is important also to train and build teams among college faculty who may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with students who lack strong college preparation.

### **Intensive Student Guidance**

Similar to strategies that work at the high school level, intensive student guidance should cover development of the student's education plan, assistance with navigating college systems, working with students to articulate life goals, connecting students to financial and non-financial resources, and ongoing counseling.

### **Mentoring**

Pair new students with experienced students who have tackled similar challenges along the road to college success. A mentor can be a role model and coach for struggling students, providing a personal example of someone who has been in their shoes, faced tough challenges, and persevered.

### **Transition Support**

Identify the points at which students encounter the most difficulties and provide targeted support during those transitions. These critical moments are most prevalent during the student's first year but can also occur at other times, such as during the transition to career-track classes, which are much more difficult than earlier coursework.

## One Student's Path to College at the New York City College of Technology

Denise Martinez hails from a single parent, Dominican immigrant family that had little access to educational or economic opportunities. She grew up in a neighborhood marked by drug trafficking and poverty. While many of her friends dropped out of high school, Denise went to school religiously, but received little encouragement to continue with her education once she graduated.

After high school she bounced from one job to the next. By 2005, with a young daughter at home, a dead-end job, and a husband who worked long hours just to keep the family afloat, Denise was overwhelmed. She wanted to change the direction of her life, but was unsure of what to do. In the past she had considered college, but something always stopped her from pursuing that goal.

Though only 24, Denise faced tremendous barriers to higher education, including motherhood, poverty, and a lack of English proficiency. As she thought about her future, she reconnected with the Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation (CHLDC)—a local, community-based organization which she had been involved with as a youth. Her connection to CHLDC led her to College STEPS, the organization's college access program. In the fall of 2005, Denise came into the STEPS office seeking college guidance and met with the director to discuss her educational ambitions and challenges.

After meeting with Denise, the director helped her join CHLDC's newest initiative: the **Moving Towards Achievement Program (M.T.A.)** through which she enrolled in an Associates Degree program at CUNY's New York City College of Technology (City Tech). The M.T.A. program also gave Denise access to free tutoring, childcare, weekly transportation vouchers, personal counseling, academic support within her department, a peer network, book vouchers, and financial support. Denise is thriving in the program, both academically and emotionally, with the support of CHLDC and City Tech staff and her fellow M.T.A. participants.

At a recent celebration dinner, Denise stood up to express her gratitude for the program, simply stating, "Before I belonged to this program I was without hope, without a future...." Denise has finished her first semester at City Tech with a 3.0 GPA and dreams of what her future holds.

Denise is active at City Tech, and is working in the Student Activities division as part of her work/study placement. She is also president of the Latin club and was recently selected to participate in the Woman's Leadership Council. Denise has also been nominated to apply for a scholarship at City Tech. She is doing well in school in her second semester at City Tech, but has struggled with math. Even with tutoring, Denise decided to withdraw from the class and try again next semester.

Overall, Denise is making great progress. She recently took the exam to become a NYC police officer and passed, but has decided to stay in school to obtain her Associate's Degree.

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