



**National
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Lessons from NCAN's
Benchmarking Project:

Shared Approaches for Successful Outcomes

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Introduction

This paper summarizes the findings of case studies of four organizations participating in the National College Access Network's (NCAN) Benchmarking Project. Drawing on the expertise of nearly 400 member organizations throughout the U.S., NCAN focuses on improving the quality and quantity of support that students from all backgrounds, particularly those underrepresented in higher education, receive to apply to, enter, and succeed in college. To achieve this goal, NCAN provides members with professional development, networking opportunities, and other resources, including webinars, online tools such as guidebooks, and support for new initiatives.

The purpose of NCAN's Benchmarking Project is to develop an understanding of the college enrollment and completion rates of students served by its member organizations. Launched in 2013 with support from The Kresge Foundation, the project helps organizations answer the question, "To what extent are students we serve achieving their goal of a college degree?" With over 60 participating organizations in its most recent round, the Benchmarking Project has produced three reports summarizing empirical data on the collective impact of NCAN members.ⁱ Now in its fourth year, the data show that member organizations' students continue to enroll in college and attain degrees at higher rates than underserved students in general. NCAN member-served students have a 69.7-percent postsecondary enrollment rate and a 51.3-percent six-year completion rate. The national comparison rates for similar students are 60 and 31 percent, respectively.ⁱⁱ At the same time, the data indicate that significant gaps exist between underserved students and students generally, meaning that the need for the services provided by NCAN members is still great.

Another component of the Benchmarking Project has involved the development of a series of case studies highlighting the practices of organizations with strong student outcomes. Using data from the benchmarking reports, NCAN conducted case studies of four organizations with high degree attainment rates to identify strategies they employ that significantly impact students' college success and could be replicated by other programs. Not surprisingly, these case studies found considerable commonality among the strategies these organizations use to support students. This paper summarizes these strategies and discusses the ways in which others can replicate them.

Methodology

Data collection for the case studies involved site visits to interview organizational staff, students who currently attend college, and board members, as well as staff of higher education institutions, school districts, community agencies, and philanthropic partner organizations. Interviews with organizational staff encompassed student selection, staffing, how student data were tracked and used, and which program components are

believed to have the greatest impact on students' college success. Student and partner interviews focused on the alignment between their experiences with the organization and staff perceptions about strategies that contributed most to student success. At least 10 people were interviewed from each organization. In addition to interviews, the case studies gleaned data from descriptive information, performance reports, evaluation studies, and other material provided by the organization staff.

Organizations Studied

In addition to boasting impressive postsecondary success rates, the organizations selected for the case studies represent a variety of sizes, program models, and geographies.

The Philadelphia- and Columbus-based organizations limit most of their services to students attending their cities' public school districts. I Know I Can works with students individually and classrooms during the school day, while Philadelphia Futures directly serves students coming to its Center City location after school. Act Six and Bottom Line have national offices that oversee the work of sites in multiple states.

Act Six

Locations: Chicago, Indianapolis, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Portland (OR), Spokane, Tacoma-Seattle, Yakima Valley (WA)

Six-year college completion rate: 80%

Act Six connects local faith-based community organizations with faith- and social justice-based colleges to provide leadership training and scholarships for emerging young urban leaders who want to pursue a college education so they can make a difference on campuses and in their communities. It recruits and selects multicultural cadres of promising high school student leaders, primarily from low-income backgrounds, and trains them to support each other, succeed academically, and serve as agents of change on their campuses. Act Six also supports students during college and provides ongoing leadership development and vocational connections to prepare them to serve their home communities. Since 2002, Act Six has sent over 600 students to partner colleges in five states.

Bottom Line

Locations: Boston, Chicago, New York, Worcester (MA)

Six-year college completion rate: 78% – 80%

Bottom Line provides guidance and mentoring to help first-generation students apply to college, enroll, and persist until they complete a degree prepared for a career or graduate school. Bottom Line serves 6,000 students a year through its two primary programs – College Access and College Success. Beginning in 11th or 12th grade,

students meet one-on-one with a Bottom Line counselor monthly after school to identify colleges that match their interests, aspirations, and academic history, and help them navigate the college and financial application processes. During the summer before college, Bottom Line provides transitional programming to prepare students for campus life. Students who attend a set of regional colleges that Bottom Line prefers because of their commitment to student success receive ongoing support with overcoming academic, financial, and other challenges that otherwise could result in them leaving school before earning a degree.

[I Know I Can](#)

Location: Columbus, OH

Six-year college completion rate: 60%

The mission of I Know I Can, the only college access program in Columbus serving all public school students, is to “inspire, enable and support students in pursuing and completing a college education.” Community and civic leaders founded I Know I Can in 1988 because they believed that no child should be denied a college education because of a lack of financial resources. I Know I Can offers everything from children’s books about going to college (to elementary school students) to one-one-one counseling and in-depth college planning blueprints for middle and high school students to scholarships and support for college students. I Know I Can serves 26,000 7th-12th grade students and 1,000 college students a year, and awards last-dollar scholarships totaling \$480,000.

[Philadelphia Futures](#)

Location: Philadelphia, PA

Six-year college completion rate: 60%

Philadelphia Futures provides low-income, first-generation students with a comprehensive array of programs, resources, and opportunities to reduce the institutional, academic, social, and financial barriers to college success. Through its direct service programs – Sponsor-A-Scholar and College Connection – Philadelphia Futures assists 600 high school and college students annually with academic enrichment and skill-building, personalized college guidance, placement and retention services, and financial aid. It also offers college guidance resources to 40,000 students and families.

Policies and Practices Contributing to Students’ College Success

The organizations studied have a number of common features: a strong emphasis on data-driven decision-making, a continuum of support services from high school through degree completion, and strong partnerships with higher education institutions, public high schools, and community organizations. The provision of scholarships, a selective admissions process, and pre-college training also play important roles in students' college success.

Data-driven decision-making

All four organizations use data to make accountability for student success central to their work. Data enable staff to understand what is happening with students and assess the effectiveness of their services in meeting organizational goals. Staff also rely on data to identify areas where they need to make changes to better support students and target organizational resources to activities that have the greatest impact on student success. Organizations collect data from intake forms, service records, National Student Clearinghouse enrollment status records, and college academic transcripts. Staff working directly with students are trained to input the data and have time allocated in their weekly work schedule for this purpose. Bottom Line and Act Six have established key performance indicators for each of their program goals against which they track student progress with completing the tasks necessary to achieve that indicator. Philadelphia Futures and I Know I Can assess their progress using NCAN's [Common Measures for College Access and Success](#), which are research-backed and member-developed, and include indicators that lead to college enrollment and/or completion.

Tracking student progress data allows organizations to identify students who are falling behind and to provide interventions to help them get back on track. Organizations also use data to help students make decisions about courses to take and develop plans for the upcoming semester. Another way programs use data is to determine the “dosage” of service that makes a difference between students succeeding and struggling in college. By examining the number of times students received specific types of assistance, I Know I Can found that students who have 13 program contacts in grades 9 – 12 are more likely to enroll and persist in college than those who have fewer contacts. This knowledge led staff to establish 13 contacts as a performance indicator.

Another way in which organizations use data is to target their resources on programs and services that impact student outcomes in significant ways and eliminate those with little or no effect on performance. I Know I Can eliminated a weeklong summer campus enrichment program for 8th graders and an ACT preparation boot camp based on data that showed neither program had an impact on student aspirations or achievement. Philadelphia Futures changed its approach to SAT preparation from an intensive, two-session workshop, which produced little improvement in students' SAT scores from 11th to 12th grade, to embedding preparation into their reading/writing after-school instruction. To address disparities in college persistence rates by gender, the

organization also launched a young men's support group, which resulted in an increase in participants' persistence rates from 46 percent to 65 percent.

Continuum of services through degree completion

All of the organizations studied offer students a continuum of services from secondary school through college completion, but they begin serving students at different times. I Know I Can starts working with students in 7th grade, Philadelphia Futures in 9th grade, and Bottom Line in the fall of 12th grade. Act Six recruits students in the fall of 12th grade and begins working intensively with those selected for the program the following March. Every organization supports students with the transition from high school to college matriculation – helping with steps they must complete to register for classes, orienting them to the expectations of college-level courses and availability of campus support services, and going over study skills and time management strategies. Staff members work hard to develop trusting relationships with students so the latter can feel comfortable communicating openly about their concerns and accept constructive feedback about what they need to do to achieve their goals.

Once students begin classes, organizational staff visit campuses in close geographic proximity a few times a semester to check on students and help resolve problems they may be having. In between visits, staff and students stay in touch via text message and phone. Bottom Line has the most structured college success program. The first two to three years focus on students' progress toward completing degree requirements, while the later years emphasize preparing students to transition to employment or graduate school. Act Six provides a formal program for first-year students and works with them informally in the subsequent years. In addition to assisting students when problems arise, Philadelphia Futures and I Know I Can meet students in person between semesters to review their progress and develop plans for the next semester. Both organizations also match students with mentors – professionals from their local communities who communicate with students at least monthly via text, Facebook, and, in the case of I Know I Can, an online mentoring platform. The Philadelphia Futures mentors make a five-year commitment to their mentees from 10th grade through students' first two years of college.

Strong college partnerships

The four organizations all have strong partnerships with higher education institutions that enroll significant numbers of their students. These partnerships are vital to students' college success. College partners designate a liaison who introduces organizational staff to the campus student support services office. The liaisons also work with staff to assist students having trouble. Establishing strong relationships with campus financial aid offices and staff are especially important, given the reliance of students on maintaining sufficient financial aid throughout their time in college.

The partnerships work best when campus liaisons and organizational staff establish ongoing, trusting relationships. Campus liaisons frequently notify organizational staff when students are having problems, and they work together to get students back on track before it is too late. Some campuses also provide special support for students. Several of the Act Six college partners recruit and train faculty and staff to serve as mentors for Act Six students, while two of Philadelphia Futures' partners hold special orientation programs for Philadelphia Futures students.

School district and community agency partnerships

Reciprocal partnerships with high schools and community organizations are another feature important to the effectiveness of these organizations. Act Six, Bottom Line, and Philadelphia Futures rely on such partners to identify and recruit students for their pre-college programming. In return, they share information about the progress of students with their partners. In some instances, partners and organizations work together to assist students who are having problems. Philadelphia Futures distributes over 40,000 college planning guides for students and their families through its school and community partners. Bottom Line organizes periodic partner convenings on topics such as how to review award letters with students and strategies for reducing summer melt.

I Know I Can's school partnerships differ from the other programs' in significant ways. Instead of partnering with individual schools, I Know I Can collaborates with the city's public school district to provide college access services to all 9th – 12th graders. I Know I Can and the school district jointly fund advisors to work three to four days a week on-site in all of the district's high schools. District leaders also rely on I Know I Can to organize citywide events such as a celebration of 12th graders who have committed to attend college the following fall.

Selective admissions

While I Know I Can serves all of the city's high school students, Act Six, Bottom Line, and Philadelphia Futures identify students with whom they work through a selective process based on the premise that they will get the best return for their investment by working with students who have the motivation and academic skills needed for college success. Bottom Line and Act Six require students to have solid academic skills as demonstrated by their high school GPAs because neither offers academic enrichment services. Philadelphia Futures invests substantial resources in academic enrichment programming and so accepts only students who will commit fully to participating in the after-school classes and tutoring sessions they offer. All three programs receive many more applicants than they are able to serve; Bottom Line accepts fewer than half the students who apply, while Act Six accepts approximately 10 percent.

Scholarships

Philadelphia Futures, I Know I Can, and Act Six offer two types of scholarships for students: last-dollar awards funded by money they raise, and awards committed by partner colleges and universities. I Know I Can and Philadelphia Futures award last-dollar scholarships of \$1,200 – \$1,500, renewable for up to four years and supported by annual fundraising campaigns and endowments that the organizations' founders created when they established the programs. They also assist students with study abroad expenses, emergencies, and summer school courses students need to stay on track. In addition, I Know I Can offers students in grades 8 – 12 a matched savings program through which participants who save \$500 over a six-month period can receive a \$1,000 match.

The partner college scholarships go to students with outstanding high school achievement. In the case of Act Six, every student receives an award and so these scholarships are a primary reason students apply for the program. In May 2017, 99 first-year Act Six students received full tuition up to full-need awards from 13 college partners. I Know I Can's four-year college partners have committed awards of up to \$10,000 or full-tuition, and Philadelphia Futures' nine partners have committed full-need awards to all of the students they accept.

While Bottom Line does not offer scholarships, staff maintain a list of approximately 20 higher education institutions that over the years have consistently met the full financial need of Bottom Line students whom they accept.

Pre-college training

Philadelphia Futures, Act Six, and Bottom Line offer pre-college training programs that graduates say contributed significantly to their college success. Philadelphia Futures' program is the most comprehensive of the three. Students are required to attend after-school critical reading and writing classes and a month-long summer program focused on research skills and the habits of mind needed for college-level coursework. Bottom Line's training curriculum is designed to maximize the likelihood that 12th graders will finish the college admissions and financial aid application processes and achieve the key performance indicators for its College Access Program. Instead of small group instruction, Bottom Line offers students its curriculum through monthly one-on-one meetings with their advisors and homework assignments designed to empower students to develop ownership of the college admissions process. The Act Six training lasts for 36 weeks beginning in March before students graduate from high school. In addition to strategies for having a successful first year of college, students discuss how issues of race, privilege, and power are likely to impact their experiences. Students also develop leadership and intercultural competency skills and a strong sense of purpose for their college education for which they feel accountable to Act Six.

Evidence-based theories of change

Evidence-based theories of change are central to the programming of Act Six and Bottom Line and play a key role in students' successful outcomes (Attachments A and B). The Act Six theory of change is grounded in research about why students from low-income communities finish college at low rates, the assets such students bring to their college experience, and the roles they can play in transforming college campuses into more culturally inclusive communities. It spells out short- and intermediate-term outcomes, one or more actions designed to help students achieve each outcome, and indicators for measuring student progress toward achieving each outcome. Bottom Line's theory of change for its College Success Program is designed to be used by students as well as staff. It encompasses goals and milestones for students in four critical areas: Degree, Employability, Aid, and Life, the acronym for which is DEAL. Program participants all have a working knowledge about what DEAL stands for, and Bottom Line advisors use the framework in working with students throughout college.

Replication Opportunities

Programs interested in replicating the strategies that contribute to the high college completion rates used by the organizations NCAN studied can consider three options:

- using the consulting services provided by the national offices of Act Six and Bottom Line,
- licensing tools and resources used by the organizations, and
- replicating specific program components independently.

Act Six and Bottom Line replication services

Degrees of Change, the organization that oversees the network of Act Six sites and supports existing programs, offers a comprehensive portfolio of tools, consulting services, and other resources to help communities replicate the Act Six model. The most challenging aspects of replicating this model in its entirety are securing the commitment of a community organization to sponsor the program, raising funds from local sources, and recruiting a group of colleges to provide four-year, full-need scholarships and support for students when they arrive on campus. That said, six cities have successfully replicated Act Six since its inception in 2002, and in 2017, 12 partner colleges awarded scholarships to 99 entering students. Eighty percent of Act Six scholars have earned degrees within six years of enrolling. Driven by a \$3.5 million grant from College Spark Washington, Degrees of Change is now piloting and preparing to share a new version of the model designed to serve larger numbers of students attending public two- and four-year colleges.

Bottom Line also has a wealth of resources for organizations interested in replicating its model. Based on 20 years of experience and lessons learned, Bottom Line has codified

virtually all of its program elements that lead to successful college outcomes for students. The most efficient way to replicate the Bottom Line model – and the only way this has been done so far – is to contact the national staff about applying to sponsor a Bottom Line site. Cities participating in the Bottom Line network have access to all of the organization’s materials, staff training and technical assistance, its student tracking system, and HR and payroll support. Local sponsors need to raise money for startup and operating expenses, including contributing a percentage of their budget to support the services provided by Bottom Line’s national office.

Licensing tools and other resources

Degrees of Change has developed an online software tool that speeds up and enhances analysis of National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) Student Tracker data, which normally can be cumbersome to analyze, often requiring weeks to process. The [Follow Your Students \(FoYoSt\) College Enrollment Visualizer](#) quickly converts unwieldy NSC data into intuitive, easy-to-read visual displays. The program displays individual students’ current enrollment and degree status, and allows organizations to follow their students’ progress through college quarter-by-quarter and year-by-year. It also can filter persistence and graduation rates by demographic variables to explore the performance of student subgroups. A basic version of FoYoSt is offered for free, or users can enjoy more advanced features in the Pro version, which requires an annual paid subscription.

Replicating specific program components

A third option would be to replicate specific program components developed by these organizations. Philadelphia Future’s Admissions Marathon and Young Men’s Initiative are examples of interventions that could be replicated without adding staff members, provided funds are available for field trips, instructional supplies, and refreshments. Compiling and analyzing data from students’ college acceptance and award letters, as Bottom Line does, could improve an organization’s ability to help students build college lists that fit well with their interests, academic skills, and financial resources. Partnering with higher education institutions to provide support for enrolled students as Act Six, Bottom Line, and Philadelphia Futures have done is another example of an intervention that does not require significant financial resources. Getting nearby colleges and universities to earmark scholarships for students, which occurs through Act Six, I Know I Can, and Philadelphia Futures, requires dedicated staff time for relationship-building. Mentoring programs similar to those of I Know I Can and Philadelphia Futures also require an investment in staff to recruit and train mentors, match them with mentees, and support these relationships.

Conclusion

While the organizations participating in NCAN's Benchmarking Project collectively have achieved college completion rates that exceed the national average for similar students by more than 20 percentage points (51.3 compared to 31 percent), those selected for case studies have significantly higher rates, ranging from 60 percent to 80 percent. Looking across these organizations, the case studies identified eight practices contributing to students' college success that, if replicated by others, would likely result in increased degree completion rates. Three of these practices appear to have the greatest impact on students' college achievement – data driven decision-making, a continuum of services through college completion, and strong partnerships with higher education institutions – and so deserve special consideration for replication.

Data-driven decision-making

Using data to inform decisions pays off for both the individual student and the program. Tracking data on student performance allows staff to monitor students' progress toward completing the steps involved in transitioning to and through college and meeting the requirements for a degree. Such data can also help staff identify students who are encountering problems, and put interventions into place that will keep them on track and avoiding pitfalls such as losing financial aid or taking courses that do not meet degree requirements. At the programmatic level, data can help staff determine whether specific activities are achieving the desired student outcomes, and modify or discontinue those that do not. If an academic enrichment program does not result in students taking more rigorous high school courses or improving their grades, for example, staff can use this information to modify the program.

Data also are important for accountability purposes. The organizations studied use data to check whether advisors are fulfilling their responsibilities to the students they serve and help them problem-solve if that is not the case. Likewise, boards of directors use data to hold the executive director accountable for achieving the organization's goals, while funders look at data to decide where to spend their dollars for the greatest return on investment.

Implementing data-driven decision-making requires investing time to find a tracking system that meets the organization's goals, makes it relatively for staff to input data, and can readily generate needed reports. Depending on the organization's size, there needs to be a staff person with full- or part-time responsibility for managing the system, training staff to use it, and troubleshooting when problems arise. If that person does not have experience with setting up and managing similar systems, a consultant with that expertise will be required. While data-tracking systems require significant investment, the long-term payoff is great in terms of improved staff productivity, degree completion rates, and successful fundraising.

Continuum of services

A continuum of services from high school through degree attainment increases the likelihood of students achieving a degree. Making a successful transition from high school through the first few years of college is fraught with challenges, especially for first-generation students whose parents lack the information and experience to guide them.

The summer after high school graduation, students must complete a number of unfamiliar tasks before they can begin the fall semester, including everything from paying their college bill and securing a student loan to selecting first-semester courses and finding out what they need to live on campus. While 10 percent to 40 percent of low-income students who intend to go to college immediately after high school never get there,ⁱⁱⁱ assistance completing these tasks increases their enrollment by 8 – 12 percentage points.^{iv}

Similarly, low-income students who receive navigational coaching during their first year of college and beyond – such as that provided by the organizations studied – are more likely to return for their second year than such students in general.^v Ongoing support is critical for students to stay on track with completing degree requirements, as evidenced by the high degree attainment rates of students served by the organizations studied as compared with those of low-income students nationally.^{vi} Students of color face unique challenges, especially those attending predominantly white institutions, and benefit from support dealing with microaggressions and racist practices they may encounter.

Supporting students served in high school through college completion is also important for financial reasons, both for college access organizations and students themselves. College access programs invest significant resources in preparing students for college, helping them build college lists, meeting their needs, and completing the application process. To realize a return on this investment, organizations need to offer whatever support they can to see students through to earning a degree or certificate. Otherwise, what they have spent on pre-college programming could be seen as an ineffective use of resources. Likewise, many students rely on loans to pay college expenses based on their belief that a college education will equip them for a financially secure future. If they leave before completing a degree, however, they must repay what they borrowed without having the credential needed for a decent-paying job. Students in this situation are at high risk of defaulting on their loans, resulting in them having a negative credit rating and limited options for returning to college.

Higher education partnerships

Strong partnerships with higher education institutions offer many resources to support students' degree completion above and beyond the tools provided by college access organizations. A designated campus liaison can connect students with tutoring, counseling and emergency financial aid assistance more quickly than would be the case

otherwise. Liaisons can advocate for students on campus and inform organizational staff when students are encountering problems, and organizational staff and liaisons can work together to assist with non-academic problems that are interfering with students' academic performance. Many institutions are willing to make exceptions for students when they know a partner organization is supporting them. Other examples of the benefits students derive from organization-higher education partnerships include being able to register early for classes and having a faculty or staff member assigned to be their mentor.

In addition, and perhaps most important to students, are earmarked institutional scholarships and grants as is the case in three of the four organizations studied. Where there are not earmarked scholarships, strong partnerships can result in students receiving better aid packages because higher education institutions know that the assistance students receive from the college access organization makes it more likely they will to persist to degree completion.

The Benchmarking Project has been, is, and will continue to be an important partnership between NCAN and its members. Future rounds of data will allow NCAN to continue to examine successful programs, their practices, and approaches for replication for other college access and success organizations, and to share this information with the field in hopes of better serving students.

List of Attachments

- [Attachment A: Act Six Theory of Change](#)
- [Attachment B: Bottom Line DEAL Framework](#)

ⁱ National College Access Network. 2016. *Closing the College Graduation Gap: 2016 National College Access and Success Benchmarking Report*. Washington, DC: National College Access Network.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., National College Access Network, 2016; Cahalan, Margaret, Perna, Laura, Yamashita, Mika, Ruiz, Roman, & Franklin, Khadish. 2016. *Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States: 2016 Historical Trend Report*, Washington, DC: Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, Council for Opportunity in Education (COE) and Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy of the University of Pennsylvania (PennAHEAD).

ⁱⁱⁱ Castleman, Benjamin & Page, Lindsey. 2014. *Summer Melt: Supporting Low-Income Students through the Transition to College*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

^{iv} Ibid., Castleman & Page.

^v Linkow, Tamara et al. 2017. *The Power of Coaching: Highlights from the Interim Report on the Impact of Success Boston's Transition Coaching on College Success*. Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates.

^{vi} Ibid., Calahan et al.
