

Building Connections. Advancing Equity. Promoting Success.

February 2017

NCAN Benchmarking Spotlight:

Philadelphia Futures

Writer: Dr. Ann Coles, Senior Fellow, uAspire

© 2017 National College Access Network. All rights reserved. Washington, DC www.collegeaccess.org

"Step Up to Your Future! Your Path to College Starts Here"

Organization Overview

Philadelphia Futures' (PF) mission is to provide low-income, first-generation students the tools, resources, and opportunities they need to gain admission to and succeed in college. Underlying this vision is the organization's belief that "a college education is the portal to economic self-sufficiency and a satisfying life."

Launched in 1989, PF first enrolled a class of 31 high school freshmen and matched each with an adult mentor and a sponsor, who committed to putting aside funds to help defray the student's college-related costs. In the 26 years since, PF has expanded its programming to serve 600 high school and college students directly every year and offer outreach activities through which 40,000 students throughout the city receive valuable information about the college admissions and financial aid processes. During this time, over 450 individuals, families, faith- and community-based organizations, and corporations have contributed close to \$7 million to help students with their college-related expenses.

The program results speak for themselves. Over 98 percent of the students enroll in college right after high school. While only 10 percent of Philadelphia high school graduates earn college degrees, Philadelphia Futures' overall college graduation rate is 60 percent. The graduation rate has risen dramatically over the past decade, resulting in a projected graduation rate of 70 percent for the high school classes of 2005-2012.

Direct Services for Students

PF offers two direct services programs that support students from high school through degree completion - Sponsor-A-Scholar (SAS) and College Connection (CC). Both programs target low-income students who demonstrate a high level of motivation to go to college but lack a sense of the opportunity to do so because they have limited experience beyond their neighborhoods. Each program accepts approximately 50 new students a year.

Seven principles serve as the foundation of Philadelphia Futures' direct services:

- 1. Services are robust, comprehensive, and long-term.
- 2. Financial resources alone are not sufficient to ensure college success.
- 3. Students must find a college that is the right fit academically, financially, and socially.

Profile of Students

- 100% low-income
- 96% first-generation
- 57% female
- 43% male
- 18% Asian-American
- 54% Black
- 15% Hispanic
- 9% White (includes Arab–American)
- 4% Multi-racial

- 4. Students are held to high standards regarding their attendance, participation, and behavior.
- 5. Services are delivered by experienced, professional staff.
- 6. Relationships with volunteers and colleges are critical to the programs' success.
- 7. Services are driven by information and data.

Throughout students' involvement with PF, the staff takes a holistic approach to support by helping students with whatever issues arise that make it difficult for them to pursue a college degree.

Sponsor-A-Scholar (SAS)

SAS provides individualized college readiness services for Philadelphia public high schools students beginning in 9th grade. The program serves 185 students annually. Students are selected for the program through an application process that encompasses consideration of high school grades and attendance, an essay, recommendations, an interview with the student and his/her parent or guardian, and a reading test to determine whether the student is on grade level. Students also must participate in a dynamic assessment process involving group activities that allow staff to observe their behavioral skills and gauge whether a student is a good fit for SAS. Overall, the staff looks for students who have a foundation of cognitive and noncognitive skills on which they can develop the capacity for college success.

Students describe SAS as helping them to take their education seriously and stay focused. During the school year, they participate in weekly after-school academic skill-

building classes, tutoring, and clubs. The classes focus on skills needed for success in college courses and are taught by professional teachers, who grade them separately on mastery of the content and work habits (Attachment A.) The clubs are similar to those offered in more affluent high schools. Led primarily by volunteers, the clubs help students to become self-directed learners, develop leadership skills, and bond with peers who share their college goals. School-year activities take place at the PF office, which, in addition to classrooms, has a computer lab where students do their homework and complete other projects.

Students describe SAS as helping them to take their education seriously and stay focused. During the school year, they participate in weekly after-school academic skill-building classes, tutoring, and clubs.

Building strong work habits is a hallmark of PF's efforts. Attendance is kept for all activities, and on-time attendance is mandatory. In the event of student absences or

chronic tardiness, staff members intervene to try and correct the course before it becomes a serious issue. Students who don't adhere to PF's attendance policy will be terminated from the program; however, a shared understanding of these expectations has yielded a strong record of attendance, and the staff has dismissed few students.

In addition to school-year activities, students participate in a month-long summer program. Held on local college campuses, the summer program emphasizes the development of skills needed for college success, including reading, writing, critical thinking, teamwork, and self-management skills. College professors teach the classes, which involve lectures and research projects to give students exposure to the content and expectations of college courses.

The PF mentoring program helps students develop social capital that will ease their transition from high school through college and into a career. Students are assigned a mentor in 10th grade, giving staff time to know students well enough to pair them with someone with whom they believe a student will be comfortable. Mentors commit to communicating with students weekly and meeting them in person once a month for a minimum of five years. Typically, meetings involve visiting interesting places, attending performances, or sharing a meal. Before mentors start working with students, they participate in a two-hour training program where they learn best practices for supporting students. This training continues after mentors begin developing a relationship with their mentee (Attachment B).

College Connection (CC)

CC serves students beginning in 11th grade who are taking college preparatory courses and are focused and hardworking but need guidance to find a college that is a good fit for their goals, interests, and financial needs. The program serves approximately 100 high school students annually from public, parochial, and charter schools. Most students have a combined SAT diagnostic score (M+CR) of 900 or above. CC offers students personalized college counseling and support, weekly college readiness classes, academic skill-building and SAT preparation, and college awareness activities. Students also participate in intensive summer experiences before they begin 11th and 12th grades and receive individualized tutoring as needed.

College Retention and Success Services

PF's Office of College Retention and Success supports SAS and CC students throughout their college years through a case management model. Services encompass academic and personal support tailored to individual needs and preparation for careers, with the goal of reducing the time it will take for students to earn a degree. Staff check in with students at least once a month by phone to see how they are doing and help with issues ranging from time management and personal problems to communicating with college faculty and using campus support resources. In addition, retention coordinators

make annual visits to campuses where five or more PF students are enrolled. Students are expected to contact their coordinator before they drop a course or change their enrollment status.

Collegians also meet with their coordinator during winter and summer breaks to review their progress toward achieving their college and career goals, identify solutions to problems they may be encountering, and make plans for the next semester. Finally, coordinators assist students with completing financial aid renewal applications.

Outreach Futures

Outreach Futures is designed to share PF's expertise and resources with the thousands of first-generation students and families throughout Philadelphia that PF does not have the capacity to serve intensively but who need information about and assistance with planning for college. Outreach Futures' components include:

- Step Up to College: a detailed guide to the college planning process starting in 9th grade. Over 40,000 copies of the print edition of the guide are distributed each year to students and families, high schools, public libraries, and youth-serving organizations. A digital version, along with videos on college planning, is available at www.stepuptocollege.org. A mobile app accompanies the guide.
- College planning workshops offered at schools and community-based organizations specifically tailored to the needs of students, parents/guardians, or educational professionals. The workshops address issues such as finding your "fit", understanding the Common Application, and making sense of admissions acceptance and financial aid award letters.

Staffing

PF has 29 full-time and three part-time employees, including 20 direct service providers ("coordinators"), a manager of volunteers and special projects, a director of outreach services, a curriculum and assessment specialist, a director of institutional advancement, five administrators, and three development/communications staff members. Pre-college coordinators have caseloads of 30-50 students depending on the grade, while college retention coordinators have caseloads of 75-80 students. Staff members reflects the diversity of students PF serves.

Organizational Culture

PF's organizational culture features a deeply felt commitment to students, high expectations for both students and staff, and a shared sense of accountability for what is happening across the organization. Staff members are relentless in their efforts to do what is best for students. They constantly talk with students about the high standards PF expects them to meet and what they must do to prepare for college. Because of high

Students quickly find themselves challenged in new ways, however, learning how to analyze literature, take notes, write research papers, and manage their time.

grades and accolades students have received from high school teachers, some initially think they do not need PF's academic skill-building courses. Students quickly find themselves challenged in new ways, however, learning how to analyze literature, take notes, write research papers, and manage their time. They come to realize that getting ready for college is serious business and that they need do what PF requires to be successful. They perceive staff as genuinely caring about their well-being and success, always available to help, and reliable.

Along with setting high expectations for themselves, staff members place a high value on collaboration, with everyone taking responsibility for activities across the organization and

not just in their area.

Tracking Student Progress

PF follows student progress using a series of benchmarks that are embedded in its organizational theory of change. Staff track 104 indicators across PF's programs, with every program activity having at least one measurable objective. The indicators encompass student participation in program activities, school achievement, noncognitive skill development, and other interim and long-term outcomes. Many are drawn from NCAN's Common Measures for College Access and Success and the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education's Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States. In addition to data from report cards, attendance records, and other documents, staff gather information through annual surveys administered to students and mentors. Information is entered into the Efforts to Outcomes platform developed by Social Solutions, Inc., from which the staff generates periodic reports. In addition to assembling the year-end report on all 104 indicators, staff members receive regular updates on class and club attendance, retention rates, grade point averages, and other key data points on a routine basis.

Finances

PF's annual budget is \$3.3 million. Eighty-three (83) percent of the budget supports program services, and the balance goes to fundraising and administration. Funding comes from corporations (43 percent), foundations (21 percent), and individuals (18 percent). In addition, PF has a \$7 million endowment, the income from which supports operations and a separate account of \$1.9 million used to fund students' college-related expenses and awards for outstanding high school achievement.

The annual per-student cost is \$5,400 for SAS and \$5,200 for CC. This amount covers the cost of all programming, including the College Admissions Marathon and the peer-to-peer support programs.

Policies and Practices Contributing to Student Success

Data-driven Decision Making

Collecting and using data are deeply embedded in PF's culture. Keeping data in front of the staff allows staff members to understand which interventions are having a positive impact, where modifications or additional interventions are needed, and which students need help. Looking at data also gives the PF staff insight into the outcomes their students achieve. Comparing data year-to-year allows staff to see where students are improving and where changes are needed to improve outcomes.

PF has made numerous program changes based on analysis of data. Finding a

disparity in college graduation rates for the young men and young women in the program led to an increased focus on improving the achievement of young men. Seeing little increase in students' SAT scores from the May to the October exams resulted in shifting SAT preparation from two intensive sessions, one in the spring and the other in the fall, to continuous preparation over nine months. PF also ended a federally funded school-year internship program when the data showed that it did not produce impactful student outcomes.

In addition to improving programming, data is important to PF's fundraising efforts. PF has a long-standing policy of complete transparency with regard to sharing data and program results with funders. Funders appreciate such openness and feel confident that PF is stewarding their investment appropriately.

One program staff member serves as database administrator for the Efforts to Outcomes platform while all program staff participate in entering data. Although PF does not look specifically at dosage

data, recording attendance at all events allows staff to follow up in real time. Coordinators record information about significant student interactions. This ensures continuity in service if a student's usual coordinator is not available and supports students making the transition to a new staff member. Directors work with coordinators to make compiling data useful but not burdensome, and to find a balance between serving students and recording the services they provide. To generate buy-in among new staff, experienced staff members share the ways in which tracking data has helped to improve program services and produce better student outcomes. In fact, some of the

across PF's programs, with every program activity having at least one measurable objective. The indicators encompass student participation in program activities, school achievement, noncognitive skill development, and other interim and long-term outcomes.

Staff track 104 indicators

staff's favorite professional development sessions focus on how sharing data informs their work with students.

Mentor and Staff Support

The long-term support that mentors and staff provide to students from 9th grade through college completion is key to PF participants' high college enrollment and degree attainment rates.

Mentors

Students are uniformly enthusiastic about the relationships they have with their mentors. They describe their mentors as exposing them to new social and cultural experiences, supporting them socially and emotionally, and introducing them to different career opportunities. They also value the experience of learning to relate comfortably to someone with a different background than their own. Frequently, mentors become lifelong friends with students, supporting them in ways beyond the role PF envisions for them.

Staff Support

PF's staff is highly educated and brings experience in social work, counseling, teaching, and higher education. Students highly value the personalized support they receive from their PF coordinators. Coordinators provide students with academic, social, and emotional support. They help students think through decisions and solve problems that are interfering with students' academic progress. An example is helping students who attend predominantly white institutions to deal with micro-aggressions that make them feel unwelcome on campus. Students describe their coordinator as someone to talk with when they feel they are not smart enough to succeed in college, who believes in them and pushes them to stay in college. They can call their coordinator about any concern and count on getting a quick response. Students also appreciate their coordinator holding them accountable when they are not doing so themselves.

Peer-to-Peer Support

PF uses different approaches to foster strong peer relationships. The Young Men's Initiative (YMI) provides wraparound support to males in SAS and CC. Staff launched the YMI in 2006 after they observed that males in the program matriculated to college at the same rate as females but completed degrees at significantly lower rates. The program's goal is to create a positive peer network and provide a safe space where males can feel comfortable striving for academic and personal excellence. Activities include a bi-weekly roundtable where students explore cultural, social, and political topics, leadership and team-building activities, community service projects, and exposure to different careers. Students must participate in at least two YMI activities

every semester and earn high grades for behavior on their high school report card. YMI has had a significant positive impact on participants. Since its implementation, the college graduation rate for the program's males has risen by 19 percentage points. The graduation rate for young men in the high school classes of 2007-10 is 65 percent.

Based on the success of YMI, PF started Young Women Rising (YWR) with similar goals several years later. As with the young men's group, YWR gives females a safe place to talk with each other about gender-specific issues such as nontraditional careers for women, early warning signs of abusive relationships, and gender inequality in social media and pop culture. Students report that their participation in YWR has deepened their engagement in PF activities, and the sense of belonging and sisterhood fostered by the program has increased their confidence in their ability to succeed in college.

Students report that their participation in YWR has deepened their engagement in PF activities, and the sense of belonging and sisterhood fostered by the program has increased their confidence in their ability to succeed in college.

A third type of peer-to-peer support offered by PF is the DREAM Team. This program targets students attending Community College of Philadelphia (CCP) and a local Pennsylvania State University campus who are under-prepared academically for college and may have burdensome family responsibilities. The model emphasizes students creating and committing to a vision for their college education by developing personal plans for achieving their career and life goals. Students meet monthly to share ideas and support one another. In between meetings, they complete assignments such as taking a career interest inventory, the results of which they discuss at the next session. PF staff work closely with key college staff in financial aid

and student services to help students take steps toward realizing their vision, including exploring career options, declaring a major, or creating a plan for transferring to a four-year college. Students must attend at least three meetings a semester.

While all of PF's work depends on a "one student at a time" approach, work with the DREAM Team is particularly individualized and has resulted in incremental gains. The projected transfer and associate's degree graduation rates for students in the high school classes of 2010-13 who attend CCP is 47 percent, compared with 37 percent for all CCP students.

College Admissions Marathon

The College Admissions Marathon is an intensive summer program that prepares rising 12th graders in Sponsor-a-Scholar and College Connection to successfully navigate the college admissions and financial aid processes. Students spend a week in residence at

Haverford College and a second week commuting to the Community College of Philadelphia. This is an arrangement that allows them to experience the difference between attending a residential and non-residential campus. By the end of the first week, students have created an admissions portfolio, completed their college essay, and participated in mock admissions interviews. During the second week, students focus on understanding the concept of a college "fit" and how admissions decisions are made. They also research and develop an initial college list and a scholarship action plan.

Following the Marathon, students' coordinators meet individually with them to review their college lists, with particular attention to the cost of attendance and the institutions' profiles of admitted students. They also recommend other colleges for the student to consider, and suggest how to determine the best academic, financial, and social fit. Coordinators subsequently prepare written "college consultation" reports summarizing these discussions that students can share with their families, high school staff, and other supportive adults (Attachment C).

Students describe the College Admissions Marathon as one of the most helpful PF precollege programs. In surveys administered at college graduation, PF students universally rate the Marathon as an essential source of support for the college admission and financial aid processes. Seniors who recently participated in the Marathon report that upon returning to their high schools in September, they were miles ahead of their peers who did not have this opportunity. This places PF 12th graders in a strong position as they complete their college applications and juggle their academic and extracurricular responsibilities.

College Partnerships

PF has formal partnerships with nine four-year Pennsylvania colleges and universities. College partners commit to awarding students financial aid packages that minimize loans and to designating a staff member who serves as an advisor for PF students throughout their time in college. PF college advisors meet with first-year students once a week in the fall and every other week in the spring to discuss their progress and provide needed support. Over the past decade, one-third of PF's pre-college students enroll in a partner college, and 82 percent have graduated or are still enrolled. One-hundred two (102) PF participants have earned a bachelor's degree from a partner college, and 124 are currently enrolled.

PF's college retention coordinators work diligently to develop close working relationships with partner college mentors and other staff. PF students waive their Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) rights so that retention coordinators can get information about students directly from college staff as well as from the students themselves. In addition to the weekly check-ins with students,

coordinators call college mentors regularly to discuss how students are doing. Mentors and PF staff have a mutual understanding that when students are having difficulties, they will contact each other and work together to resolve the problem. Colleges report that the commitment of PF to support students from 9th grade to college completion and the trusting relationship they have with PF staff are key to the success of the students they enroll.

Colleges describe benefiting from their relationship with PF in several ways, the most important of which is an increase in the diversity of their student body. At one institution, the number of students of color has increased from less than 1 percent to 16 percent, and the degree attainment rates of African-Americans rose from 45 to 90 percent, in part because of its PF partnership. Other benefits include having a group of applicants PF has pre-vetted and the support provided by PF to students throughout their college experiences, which increases students' retention and completion rates.

Scholarships

PF awards over \$200,000 in scholarships annually to SAS and CC students in college. Every SAS student receives \$6,000, while each CC participant receives \$3,000. These funds, which PF calls "sponsorships," go directly to students at the beginning of each semester in \$600 and \$300 increments, respectively, to help defray book costs and related expenses. While these amounts may seem modest, students stress their importance in helping them to secure books or transportation passes at the beginning of the semester. In addition, PF occasionally pays for summer school courses for students who need to fulfill prerequisites or recover from not meeting Satisfactory Academic Progress standards, costs associated with study abroad, and emergencies such as not having money for bus fare or food that otherwise would lead to students leaving college.

PF also awards approximately \$28,000 annually to 150 high school students in recognition of outstanding academic achievement. These awards are made three times a year in increments ranging from \$75 to \$200.

In recent years, the cost of attending Pennsylvania public colleges and universities has outpaced what students' financial aid covers. The result has been that students with a maximum Pell Grant award and a Direct Loan have a cash gap of \$3,000 to \$6,000 annually. In response, PF now requires all 12th graders to apply for at least two private scholarships. Also, PF donors have established private scholarships to help fill this gap.

C3 Program: Classroom-to-College-to-Career

Based on the belief that students will work hard if they have a vision for their future, the PF staff embeds career awareness into all of its programming. Through C3 activities, students develop the career knowledge and social capital that will help them find professional jobs and advance in their chosen field. Students participate in required

career awareness workshops beginning in 10th grade that expose them to different careers, and help them construct resumes and develop interview and networking skills. Twelfth grade students participate in a series of activities that prepare them for visits to professional worksites where they learn about the various career options offered by that employer and practice their networking skills. PF takes students shopping for clothes that will make them look and feel professional.

Through the Career Futures Internship Program, PF's college students participate in six-week paid summer internships related to their academic and career interests for 25 hours per week. Students earn a minimum of \$200 a week that PF funds if their employer is not able to do so. Of the 17 Career Futures interns who have earned their bachelor's degree, 76 percent secured jobs related to their major or matriculated to a graduate degree program shortly after completing their undergraduate degree.

Replication

Replicating PF's services in their entirety would require a substantial financial investment, greater than most college access and success programs could make. A more affordable option would be to replicate specific PF interventions. The College Admissions Marathon and Young Men's Initiative are examples that a program could replicate without adding staff members, provided that funds were available for the oncampus stay, meals, field trips and instructional supplies. The mentoring program and college partnerships would require a dedicated staff person to organize, recruit, train, and support community and campus volunteers. Developing and using a student tracking system similar to PF's would require funds to support the data management system and a staff person to oversee the system and run reports.

Conclusion

Through PF's programs, students receive substantial academic, social, and financial support all along their journey to a degree. This holistic approach is a major factor contributing to the students' success.

- The academic support students receive helps them develop their ability to meet the
 demands of college courses. Through bi-weekly seminars taught by a professional
 English Language Arts instructor, students strengthen their reading, writing, and
 critical analysis skills. The PF summer institutes give students the opportunity to
 apply these skills in courses taught by college faculty and help them identify skills
 they need to strengthen.
- The social support provided by PF advisors, mentors, and peers helps students
 develop non-cognitive skills important for college success, such as meeting
 attendance expectations, managing time, and seeking and using help. PF mentors
 play a critical role in helping students develop social capital that will make it easier
 for them to adjust to their college community and secure internships and summer
 jobs that will advance their career goals. Knowing how to dress for different

- situations, communicate appropriately with professors and workplace professionals, and advocate effectively for what they need are examples of the lessons students derive from their mentor relationships.
- The financial support students get through PF significantly reduces the financial stress that frequently leads students from low-income backgrounds to leave college without a degree. Coming in the form of four-year financial aid packages awarded by PF's partner higher education institutions, "sponsorships" for college-related expenses, and assistance with costs such as summer school courses, transportation, and emergencies, students describe this support as critical. While a \$300 to \$600 stipend at the beginning of a semester may seem insignificant to some people, it allows students to purchase a bus ticket back to campus or the books they need on the first day of classes.

A strong emphasis on accountability also contributes to the success of PF. Students feel accountable to their coordinators, mentors, and, through the peer-to-peer support groups, each other. Likewise, staff members indicate a high degree of accountability to each other and to students for fulfilling PF's mission and goals. Accountability at PF is not just rhetoric; it is supported by a clearly articulated theory of change with 104 indicators against which staff measure progress with students, identify areas where students are falling short of the program's goals, and, based on analysis of data, make changes needed to improve performance.

Partnering with volunteers, higher education institutions, high schools, community organizations, and business leaders is equally important to PF's capacity to achieve its mission and goals. Through these partnerships, PF not only breaks down barriers keeping low-income students from successfully pursuing college degrees, but also promotes a shared sense of responsibility for producing the future corporate, civic, and community leaders needed to ensure Philadelphia's economic and social vitality.

Acknowledgments

The following people contributed valuable information and insights to the development of this case study: Joan Mazzotti, Philadelphia Futures' Executive Director at the time, Ann-Therese-Ortiz, Director of Pre-College Programs, and Christina Santos, Director, College Retention and Success at the time. We also are grateful to the Sponsor-A-Scholar students and alumni, and college, community, and high school partners for sharing their experiences with Philadelphia Futures.

List of Attachments

- Attachment A: Student Progress Report
- Attachment B: Table of Contents, Mentor Training Handbook
- Attachment C: College Consultation Report