

Better Together

Expanding Access and Opportunity Through Community-Based Organization and College Partnerships

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Overview of Report

Over at least a half-century, the most selective U.S. colleges have partnered with K-12 schools, local organizations, nonprofits, philanthropists, and policymakers to address a shared imperative: enroll and graduate more young people from lower-income and first-generation backgrounds as well as communities of color, thus expanding pathways to opportunity and workforce success. While they have made significant strides in this effort, thousands of talented students across the United States continue to fall through the cracks, lacking the support, advising, and information needed to apply to and enroll in a postsecondary option that could change their trajectory.

Each year, tens of thousands of students from lower-income backgrounds have the credentials to enroll in the nation's more selective colleges, but instead choose less selective institutions.¹ This trend of "undermatching" has a ripple effect that spans the postsecondary pipeline. More than half of students at selective colleges ultimately come from families in the top fifth of the income distribution, and more than 75 percent of bachelor's degree recipients come from families in the top half of the income distribution.² At a time when economic uncertainty takes an increasing hold in communities across the country and institutions lack the resources to expand their reach to—and support of—more talented students, the progress the field has made in areas of college access and success is at risk. Our colleges require additional assistance now more than ever to realize a longstanding imperative; both as a part of their individual missions and for the public good.

Better Together, a report produced by the [American Talent Initiative](#) and [College Greenlight](#), makes the case for how community-based organizations (CBOs) are best positioned to provide that assistance, connecting thousands of talented minority and first-generation students and students from lower-income backgrounds to the colleges and universities they deserve to attend. For young people with limited postsecondary exposure and resources, decisions about applying, traveling to, and attending college are fraught with uncertainty, made even more challenging by complex application, financial aid, and enrollment processes. For these students, the potential impact of a trusted partner cannot be understated. Studies show that CBOs can generate promising gains in academic engagement, applications for financial aid, and postsecondary enrollment, remedying longstanding imbalances in the supports that students can leverage to access needed resources or advice.³

The Role of Community-Based Organizations

In this report, CBOs include those postsecondary access and success organizations that support first-generation and students from low-income and minority backgrounds to and through their college journey. No matter their size, reach, and focus, they all represent trusted intermediaries for students seeking to navigate the growing complexities of the postsecondary journey. In short, they represent a powerful solution for colleges seeking to improve the diversity of their recruitment pipelines for three key reasons:

- **CBOs engage with traditionally underrepresented students who aspire to enroll in higher education and represent a critical pool of diverse talent.**
- **CBOs often bridge gaps in college counseling and advising services by propelling students through complex admissions and financial aid processes.**
- **CBOs can position students to make significant strides in postsecondary enrollment, academic engagement, and college-going behavior.**

Cover photo courtesy of Chicago Scholars

1 Hoxby, C. & Avery, C. (2013). *"The Missing One-Offs": The Hidden Supply of High-Achieving, Low-Income Students*. Brookings Papers on Economic Activity, Spring 2013.

2 Cahalan, M., Perna, L., Yamashita, M., Ruiz, R., & Franklin, K. (2016). Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States: 2016 Historical Trend Report. Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education; Pisacreta, E., Schwartz, E. & Kurzweil, M. (2018). *Impact: A 2018 Report on the Progress of the American Talent Initiative in its First Two Years*. The American Talent Initiative.

3 Hooker, S. & Brand, B. (2009). *Success at Every Step: How 23 Programs Support Youth on the Path to College and Beyond*. American Youth Policy Forum.

The CBO-College Partnership Framework

This report synthesizes insights gathered from various CBO and institutional representatives, drawn from College Greenlight's network of partners and the American Talent Initiative's coalition of members, to address two complicated questions:

- How might colleges and universities better serve students and families via CBOs?
- How might these partners create a sustainable process for evaluating CBO and college relationships for long-term student fit and success?

In response to those two avenues of inquiry, the report presents a series of proven practices that institutions can leverage as they **initiate**, **implement**, and **improve** their partnerships with CBOs. Each of these steps includes sub-strategies that are outlined in greater detail with accompanying examples.

CBO-COLLEGE PARTNERSHIP FRAMEWORK		
1. INITIATE	2. IMPLEMENT	3. IMPROVE
Define an "ideal" CBO partnership based on institutional priorities.	Develop communications strategies and materials focused on CBOs.	Maintain relationships and preserve institutional knowledge.
Examine CBOs' missions and programs to evaluate potential fit.	Anticipate and minimize financial barriers for students from lower-income backgrounds.	Collect and act on data on the impact of CBO student initiatives.
Intentionally establish mutually beneficial partnerships.	Provide practical supports and exploration opportunities valued by CBOs.	Evaluate collaborative efforts and extend CBO partnership portfolios.

1. INITIATE

In selecting aligned organizations from an expansive network of potential partners, it is important to initiate a structured intake process, matching organizations based not only on their ability to realize the institution's goals, but also on criteria such as location, support of students in a demonstrated area of focus, and/or interactions with peer institutions.

2. IMPLEMENT

As potential partnerships arise, institutions should equip all members of the admissions staff with the resources and training to highlight relevant programs, speak about the experiences of underrepresented students, and elaborate on financial aid opportunities and policies. Institutions should also offer ongoing, collaborative opportunities for their partners, whether through virtual convenings of their CBO networks, student panels, or sponsorship of regional CBO events, and designate a dedicated point of contact to manage the emerging relationship and ensure accountability for the goals set, whether they were outlined in a formal memorandum of understanding or in informal conversations.

3. IMPROVE

To contribute to the sustained success of these partnerships, colleges and universities should create CBO advisory boards, embed information on CBO partnerships in transition and onboarding plans for relevant staff members, and continually engage with partner organizations even after their students enroll. These efforts are all designed to enable institutions to continually evaluate the efficacy of the partnership, using data systems to track student applications, acceptances, enrollment, academic success, and graduation rates and make needed adjustments to ensure they can meet their goals.

This framework serves as a starting point for institutions as they seek to expand opportunity for all young people. As outlined in the below synopses of the two case studies in this report, the University of Michigan and University of Richmond have provided a path forward; both for institutions that are just beginning to develop a partnership strategy and those seeking to scale their CBO networks.



UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Embarking on the Initial Year of a CBO Partnership Strategy

Beginning in 2015, the University of Michigan (U-M) set a goal to ensure that Pell Grant recipients represented at least 20 percent of its undergraduate enrollment by 2020. In service of that goal, its Office of Enrollment Management (OEM) identified the need to increase engagement with CBOs. To obtain a better sense of how departments and units across the institution were collaborating with CBOs and identify their ideal role in these efforts, the OEM staff spent a year canvassing various teams and departments, including Financial Aid and New Student Programs.

Following this engagement work, the team recognized the need for a coordinated strategy that integrated related CBO initiatives across the university and prioritized partnership development efforts with CBOs that focused generally on college access and success, offering a pipeline to underrepresented students and families less familiar with U-M. As a part of this strategy, the team determined the value of increasing financial aid investments and working with partners to issue clear, accurate messaging about various aid options, which could open doors for more high-achieving students across the country.

U-M's OEM and its partners are now exploring how to streamline processes across the enrollment pipeline and engage others around campus in building out their CBO partnerships. With input from a cross-section of institutional partners, the OEM has also developed criteria to surface potential partners based on the students they serve, the rigor and impact of their programming, and their efforts to demystify financial aid offers and expand postsecondary options for out-of-state students—and will embed these into memoranda of understanding. Finally, to ensure the longstanding success of these engagement efforts, the OEM is also in the midst of developing data systems that integrate information about CBO partners and students, embedding CBO representatives into virtual recruitment processes, and generating visibility for this work among departmental admissions teams across campus.

It is worth noting that this work is made possible by the time the OEM team spent up front to establish a comprehensive strategy.



UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND

Issuing Longstanding Investments in the Promise of CBO Partnerships

Meanwhile, the University of Richmond (UR) has devoted two decades to the development of its CBO partner ecosystem, which now includes 27 organizations across the country that work with students from lower-income backgrounds, first-generation families, and communities of color. The investment has paid off as 20 percent of applicants from partner CBOs enroll at UR, compared with just 7 percent of students from the general applicant pool. Hundreds of those students ultimately thrive at (and after) their college experience, succeeding because of both the college's focused academic and social-emotional supports (including the Spider Firsts initiative, which connects cohorts of students with resources, mentors, and cocurricular opportunities) and its efforts to meet students' full financial need.

Decades into this effort, UR is continually exploring how to improve and expand its CBO engagement strategy, taking steps to develop a standardized memorandum of understanding, evaluate partnerships more frequently, and translate engagement and support to a remote context. UR continues to refine a rigorous screening process that identifies partners based on their alignment to the college's goals, criteria set forth as part of a standardized partnership development process, and ongoing data collection, tracking, and sharing efforts.

Once UR identifies those partners, it outlines safeguards that protect student privacy, offers clear expectations for engagement with the CBO, and highlights benefits for students, including application fee waivers, reserved spots for overnight student visit programs, and loan-free financial aid packages. The admissions team seamlessly embeds this work into its day-to-day practice, enabling UR to regularly assess the efficiency and effectiveness of its CBO collaborations.

The key to the success of these partnerships are that they are mutually beneficial, with UR providing partners with admission, persistence, and job placement data and CBOs using that information to prepare future students for postsecondary success. The return on their investment is clear, both in the number of transformative partnerships formed across the nation and trajectories of hundreds of students that have been impacted as a result.

How Partners Can Be Better Together

By applying the findings from Better Together, institutions can take steps to establish and deepen partnerships that promote increased access, equity, and success for students from lower-income backgrounds, first-generation families, and communities of color. While a network of dozens of partners does not form overnight, by establishing and nurturing a few relationships each year, an institution can ultimately transform its recruitment efforts—and position an increasing number of young people for success.

As leaders at institutions of higher education reimagine how to meaningfully engage with our nation's talented students, especially in times of crisis and uncertainty, the insights from this report offer a lens into how we can move forward together. While forming robust partnerships will not singlehandedly reverse historical achievement and attainment gaps, they can serve as a critical component of broader efforts to expand access to higher education to those from lower-income and first-generation backgrounds as well as communities of color.



Courtesy of College Horizons, Inc.



The **American Talent Initiative (ATI)** is a [Bloomberg Philanthropies](#)-supported collaboration between the Aspen Institute [College Excellence Program](#), [Ithaka S+R](#), and a growing alliance of top colleges and universities committed to expanding access and opportunity for lower-income students.

ATI seeks to substantially expand access and opportunity for talented, low- and moderate-income students at the nation's colleges and universities with the highest graduation rates. Specifically, the initiative has one central goal: attract, enroll, and graduate 50,000 additional high-achieving, lower-income students at the nation's colleges and universities with the highest graduation rates by 2025.

Leading public and private colleges and universities comprise ATI's membership, collectively representing 31 states, seven Carnegie Classes, and a wide range of institution sizes. With the support of its member institutions, ATI centers its work around a commitment to achieve access and attainment goals, compile and elevate related research and promising practices, and regularly highlight the importance of its work. For more information about the American Talent Initiative, please contact Benjamin Fresquez at benjamin.fresquez@aspeninstitute.org.



College Greenlight is a leading college admissions advocacy network for first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented students. College Greenlight makes college more accessible to first-generation low-income students by bridging the information & opportunity gap and bringing community-based organizations (CBOs), counselors, and colleges together to facilitate successful college enrollment and success.

Launched in 2012 by its parent organization, Cappex, College Greenlight supports a nationwide community of more than half a million students, more than 1,500 CBOs (including schools), and 15,000 counselors. Two hundred leading universities partner with College Greenlight to connect with high-achieving underrepresented students, build new recruitment pipelines with right-fit organizations, and promote their diversity initiatives to the access community. Sixty American Talent Initiative member institutions are also College Greenlight partners.

College Greenlight focuses its efforts on:

- Enhancing the collaboration between colleges, schools/CBOs, and counselors to improve outcomes for first-generation and low-income students.
- Closing information gaps, expanding opportunities, and reducing barriers for underrepresented students and providing meaningful resources for the counselors who support them.
- Enhancing diversity enrollment and sharing best practices for communicating with, recruiting, and enrolling students from underrepresented populations.
- Addressing the challenges of affordability, helping students pay for college, and increasing college options for low-income students.

For more information about College Greenlight, please contact Jonathan April at japril@collegegreenlight.com.

