



Transition to Higher Education Policy Framework

March 2008

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National Youth Employment Coalition
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Introduction

The challenges facing youth and adults who are disconnected from education and employment systems are substantial. According to a 2004 report by the Education Trust, only six out of ten students who begin study at four-year colleges and universities earn a B.A. within six years.¹ This translates into over 500,000 students a year failing to complete college. In addition, ACT's *2007 National Collegiate Retention and Persistence to Degree Rates* database reports mean graduation rate from two-year public institutions of 51.4%; nearly 50 percent of students at these institutions did not graduate.² Young people of color and low income youth are disproportionately represented in the group of students who fail to complete postsecondary education programs.³

Increasingly, the members of the National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC) have shifted from focusing primarily on high school completion, GED attainment, job readiness and employment placement to also including an emphasis on preparation for postsecondary education, careers, and lifelong learning. This is largely due to recognition that a high school diploma is no longer sufficient preparation for the better paying jobs being created by our economy; that narrow occupational skills often become obsolete very rapidly; and that lifelong learning is critical to career success. Today, youth workforce development programs serving struggling high school students, high school dropouts, and other out-of-work and out-of-school young adults increasingly strive to prepare these young people, who might previously never have considered postsecondary education, for admission to two-year and four-year colleges and universities. Unfortunately, these programs often are unable to continue their relationship with participants after their enrollment in college. Generally, college admission, rather than college completion, is deemed to be the measure of program success.

Through the Transition to Higher Education Initiative, NYEC and its partners embarked upon a research study to inform the development of a policy framework. The purpose of the study was to identify barriers to college success and key program elements that contribute to college success for disadvantaged/disconnected youth to inform the development of federal higher education, education, and workforce development policy and legislation. During the course of the initiative, we have also learned that there is little empirical research in the field and hope that this initiative will contribute to the knowledge base on quality practices in transition programs.

¹ Carey, Kevin. *A Matter of Degrees: Improving Graduation Rates at Four-Year Colleges and Universities*. The Education Trust. May 2004.

² *National Collegiate Retention and Persistence to Degree Rates*. ACT Institutional Data File, 2007.

³ Haycock, Kati. *Promise Abandoned: How Policy Choices and Institutional Practices Restrict College Opportunities*. The Education Trust, August 2006.

Transition to Higher Education Initiative Overview

The National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC), with support from the Lumina Foundation for Education, is engaged in an initiative focusing on connecting out-of-school youth (ages 16-24) to higher education. As part of this initiative, NYEC has developed a policy framework, informed by research and practice, to promote the development of federal policy intended to improve college access, retention, and success for struggling students and formerly out-of-school youth transitioning from youth employment/development programs to colleges and state universities.

In 2006, NYEC, in conjunction with research and evaluation firm Decision Information Resources, Inc. (DIR), conducted a research study of youth programs providing transition support for out-of-school youth between secondary and postsecondary education. The intent of the research study was to identify key program elements that contribute to postsecondary success for out of school youth to inform the development of federal policy pertaining to education and workforce development.

Program sites participating in the research study include:

- Arbor E & T Youth Services (Formerly ACS), Fort Pierce, FL
- California Family Life Center Empower Youth and Planet Youth Programs, Hemet, CA
- Center for Career Alternatives, Snohomish County Youth Programs, Everett, WA
- CUNY Preparatory Transitional High School, Bronx, NY
- EASTCONN Out of School Youth Program, Danielson, CT
- Larkin Street Youth Services, San Francisco, CA
- Maya Angelou Public Charter School, Washington, DC
- Olympic Education Services District 114 Pathways to Success Program, Bremerton, WA
- Open Meadow Alternative Schools, Inc., Portland, OR
- Our Piece of the Pie, Hartford, CT
- Queens Academy High School, Flushing, NY

Program elements identified as critical to re-engaging struggling students and disconnected youth in education and assisting them in the transition into and through postsecondary education include:

- Mandatory Program Orientation
- Creative and Flexible Curricula and Instruction
- Comprehensive Support Services
- High Expectations
- Caring Staff
- Low Participant to Staff Ratios
- Youth Input
- Financial Assistance
- Collaborative Partnerships
- Postsecondary Transition Support

During the course of the initiative, NYEC and its partners also identified barriers to enrolling and persisting in postsecondary institutions that the target population faces. These barriers include:

- Lack of financial resources to pay for postsecondary education tuition and expenses as well as basic needs (housing, food, transportation, clothing, etc.)
- Lack of personal motivation among the youth participants
- Absence of a caring and nurturing adult
- Shortage of comprehensive support services
- Limited academic preparation

Transition to Higher Education Project Policy Framework

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SUMMARY

DATA

- Build the infrastructure and capacity needed to collect, report, and use data on youth participation and outcomes across youth-serving systems.

FUNDING & ACCESS TO FUNDING

- Fund programs that increase the academic preparedness of out-of-school and disadvantaged youth so that they can successfully transition into and through postsecondary education.
- Increase the amount and accessibility of need-based aid and decrease reliance on student loans.

COLLABORATION

- Promote and support collaborations and partnerships between postsecondary education institutions and out-of-school youth-serving agencies in order to establish a supported bridge into and through college for out-of-school youth.

TRANSITION, ACADEMIC PREPARATION & SUPPORT

- Ensure that former dropouts and struggling students receive support, services, and opportunities designed to increase their postsecondary enrollment, persistence and completion similar to what is offered to high school graduates and high-achieving students.

DATA

Recommendation: Build the infrastructure and capacity needed to collect, report, and use data on youth participation and outcomes across youth-serving systems.

Discussion:

The postsecondary participation, persistence, and completion rates of out-of-school youth are largely unknown. Typically, when a young person exits the secondary public school system, whether as a graduate or a dropout, they cease to be tracked. Data on whether and when the young person eventually enrolls in postsecondary education is usually only available to the postsecondary institution, student loan providers, students and parents. Staff of the high school that the young person attended or the community-based organization that served the young person in his/her transition between secondary and postsecondary education have few, if any, avenues to obtaining data on the young person's postsecondary participation and performance.

Programs and organizations that provide these young people with preparation and support for transition into and through postsecondary education, including public high schools and community-based organizations, must be able to access data on youth currently and previously enrolled in their programs in order to measure and monitor youth outcomes and offer follow-up services. Efforts by youth programs to obtain data from postsecondary institutions on individual students they currently or previously served are typically denied due to restrictions imposed by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

Currently, FERPA allows the release of student records to occur only with student permission (or parent's permission, if the student is a minor) or in the case of a very small set of limited circumstances, such as for purposes of determining financial aid, in the case of health or safety emergencies, or to state and local authorities in the juvenile justice system. However, since FERPA was enacted in 1974, Congress has not updated the law to clarify the ability of state and local entities or community-based organizations to access educational records needed for their work. These organizations are not identified as "educational institutions" by the federal government, but are nonetheless involved in providing educational services and conducting educational research; and because of the overly restrictive nature of FERPA, they cannot access records they need in order to measure student progress and meet modern government accountability requirements. This lack of flexibility also severely inhibits the ability of states to implement modern longitudinal data systems.

In some states efforts are underway to create comprehensive longitudinal educational data systems by linking K-12 and postsecondary data systems. States should be encouraged to create mechanisms to allow public agencies and community-based organizations serving out-of-school youth to access data on those young people that it directly serves. Mechanisms might include establishing protocols and agreements to enable the data to be shared with the youth-serving organizations. States should also be encouraged to establish comprehensive longitudinal educational data systems (P- 20) to track the continued academic participation and progress of out-of-school youth if they have not already.

FUNDING & ACCESS TO FUNDING

Recommendation 1: Support/fund programs that increase the academic preparedness of out-of-school and disadvantaged youth so that they can successfully transition into and through postsecondary education.

Discussion:

Many young people who have left school seek opportunities to get re-engage in a secondary education. According to a recent survey of high school dropouts, 77% said they definitely or probably would re-enroll in a high school for people their age if they could.⁴ Programs providing young people with alternative pathways to completing a high school diploma or equivalent and increasing their academic proficiency are critical to making postsecondary education an attainable goal for these youth. Forty-five percent of young people who dropped out went on to earn a high school diploma or equivalent within eight years of their expected high school graduation and eventually enrolled in postsecondary education. In comparison, only 15% of dropouts who did not earn a high school diploma eight years after their expected graduation date enrolled in postsecondary education.⁵

Often, programs providing transitional services, including youth workforce programs, alternative high schools, and adult basic education programs, are limited in how many young people they can serve. To be effective, these programs maintain low staff-to-student ratios and deliver academic instruction and support in a small group setting or one-on-one format. High school dropouts who were surveyed confirm the value of small settings and individualized instruction. When asked what would make a difference for today's high school students, 81% of dropouts cited the need to make the classroom experience more relevant via real-world learning opportunities, and 75% indicated that smaller classes with more individual instruction would be helpful.⁶ Increased funding for these programs would both enable existing programs to hire more staff to serve more youth and allow for new programs to be established.

⁴ John M. Bridgeland, John J. Dilulio, Jr., Karen Burke Morison, *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*, Civic Enterprises, 2006, 6-7.

⁵ National Center for Education Statistics. *Educational Attainment of High School Dropouts Eight Years Later: Issue Brief, 2005-2006*. Washington, D.C.

⁶ John M. Bridgeland, John J. Dilulio, Jr., Karen Burke Morison, *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*, Civic Enterprises, 2006, 6-7.

FUNDING & ACCESS TO FUNDING

Recommendation 2: Increase the amount and accessibility of need-based aid and decrease reliance on student loans.

Discussion:

The affordability of postsecondary education has a significant impact on a young person's decision about whether to enroll in the first place and whether to continue through to completion once enrolled. Out-of-school and disadvantaged youth need access to adequate need-based aid, such as Pell grants, in order to make postsecondary education more affordable. Rising tuition costs make grant-based aid increasingly important in order to ensure that young people do not have to take on unmanageable amounts of student loan debt in order to attain a postsecondary degree or credential.

Previously, a “work penalty” existed which limited the the Income Protection Allowance for independent students without dependents and posed a barrier to postsecondary enrollment for out-of-school and disadvantaged youth who often rely on earnings from their employment to cover the portion of postsecondary tuition and associated expenses not covered by need-based grants and to make student loan payments. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the Income Protection Allowance is “the amount of living expenses associated with the maintenance of an individual or family that may be offset against the family's income.” Many out-of-school and disadvantaged youth are responsible for supporting themselves, their children and other family members. The College Cost Reduction and Access Act (P.L. 110-84), enacted in September 2007, increases the income protection allowance to \$6,000 for a dependent student, \$9,330 for an independent student without dependents, who is single, separated or married and whose spouse is also enrolled in an institution of higher education, and \$14,960 for an independent student without dependents, and whose spouse is not enrolled in an institute of higher education. The law also increases the income protection allowances for independent students with dependents and allows for percentage cost-of-living increases over time.

In addition, youth and their families and guardians need guidance on financial aid options and assistance completing financial aid applications. The complexity of the financial aid process has deterred and discouraged some out-of-school and disadvantaged youth from applying for financial aid. The FAFSA is longer and more complicated than the federal tax return. Many young people have difficulty obtaining the required income and other documentation from parents and guardians. Others are estranged or live far away from parents and guardians, preventing them from requesting documentation they need. Completion of the FAFSA also poses many challenges for young people with special circumstances including youth who have been part of the foster care system, youth with disabilities, and marginally housed and homeless youth. Simplifying the financial aid application process and recognizing the various circumstances that young people may be facing would allow out-of-school and disadvantaged youth to more readily access financial aid

Young people who have not received adequate opportunities to complete a high school diploma face another barrier to receiving adequate financial aid for postsecondary education. These young people are required to pass an independently administered exam demonstrating they can benefit from education or training. Adding a second avenue for eligibility – completion of six units of college courses that are applicable toward a degree or certificate with a grade of C or better – would enable more young people to access the financial assistance needed to pursue postsecondary education.

COLLABORATION

Recommendation: Promote and support collaborations and partnerships between postsecondary education institutions and community-based organizations in order to establish a well-supported bridge into and through postsecondary institutions for out-of-school and disadvantaged youth.

Discussion:

Strong relationships between community-based youth-serving organizations and postsecondary institutions can facilitate young people's postsecondary enrollment, persistence and completion. Successful partnerships between youth organizations and postsecondary institutions can take many forms such as:

- dual enrollment and dual credit arrangements for youth program participants
- engaging youth program participants in on-campus events and activities
- engaging postsecondary faculty, staff, students and alumni in youth program activities
- offering non-credit education and training opportunities to youth program participants both on and off campus
- establishing mentoring and tutoring relationships between youth program participants and postsecondary students or graduates
- maintaining consistent communication between youth program case managers and postsecondary advisors and/or faculty to monitor student progress and provide ongoing assistance and encouragement

Out-of-school and disadvantaged youth often require more intentional and intensive support for transition into and through postsecondary education. By partnering with youth-serving organizations that have pre-established relationships with out-of-school and disadvantaged youth, postsecondary institutions can ensure that these youth continue to receive the consistent support they need to succeed and persist in their education. Partnerships allow staff of both the youth programs and postsecondary institutions to regularly communicate with one another about the young person and coordinate efforts to provide needed support and assistance. Ongoing coordination and communication enables the partners to leverage their joint financial and human resources to provide holistic support while reducing duplication and gaps in services.

Incentives should be provided to postsecondary institutions to encourage more intentional partnership development with youth-serving organizations. Some examples of creating and providing incentives for these partnerships include:⁷

- The San Francisco IT Consortium takes a sector or industry-based approach to take advantage of postsecondary institutions' desire to provide skill training for high-demand jobs and maintain high job placement rates. More incentives could be instituted to encourage this type of sector-based approach.
- The Capitol IDEA in Austin, TX puts college credit at the center of their program. Focusing on college credit makes it easier for community colleges and other institutions of higher education to incorporate specialized programs focusing on out-of-school and disadvantaged youth into their larger mission. Incentives for youth-

⁷ Gruber, David. *Building Community College/Community-based Organization (CBO) Partnerships: A Report to the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation*. Workforce Strategy Center, New York, NY. 2004.

serving organizations offering secondary and postsecondary credit hours could encourage this type of partnership.

- City College of San Francisco has established an A++ computer technician training class at Glide Church. By clearly defining the respective roles of the community college and the community-based organization, the community college can focus on providing instruction and curriculum, and CBOs can focus on providing and supporting social services and case management.
- In the case of the City College of San Francisco, low enrollment in a previous year led to lowered funding caps. The local CBO-Community College partnership provided an important source of new students, as well as providing the support to disadvantaged students that helped them to advance to under-enrolled advanced-level courses.
- Portland Public Schools Office of Educational Options partners with Portland Community College to offer programs bridging secondary and postsecondary education for at-risk youth ages 16-21. One of its programs, Gateway to College, offers 345 students per year the ability to complete high-school while gaining college credit at the same time.

Other incentives that might be offered to encourage CBO-postsecondary partnerships include:

- Dedicated funding streams for partnerships between CBOs and institutions of higher education, including competitive grants and other discretionary funding sources. This is especially important when colleges and CBOs confront the high cost of implementing a new partnership. In some cases, these costs can be offset by the advantage institutions find in diversifying funding opportunities. For example, many community colleges may be able to access workforce related funds that were not available previously. However, lack of funding for initial operations presents a great barrier to overcome.
- Opportunities for postsecondary institutions to contract out the expense of remedial education to CBOs. Nationally, forty-two percent of entering freshmen at public two-year colleges and about twenty percent of entering freshmen at four-year public institutions are enrolled in at least one remedial course.⁸ CBOs can provide much of the basic-skills preparation necessary to raise students' ability to succeed once reaching postsecondary class work.
- Opportunities for postsecondary institutions to partner with CBOs for social support services. A 2002 MDRC study shows that the primary reason disadvantaged students do not succeed in college is inadequate social support.⁹ Community-based organizations are often very strong at connecting disadvantaged youth with case management, counseling, housing and transportation assistance.
- Illustrate how partnerships between CBOs and postsecondary institutions can provide institutions with visibility and inexpensive advertising for recruiting new students and for gaining community and political support. In this manner, these partnerships can demonstrate a postsecondary institution's commitment to attracting disadvantaged students to communities.

⁸ Parsad, Basmat and Lewis, Laurie. *Remedial Education at Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions in Fall 2000*. National Center for Education Statistics, Postsecondary Education Quick Information System (PEQIS). November 2003.

⁹ Matus-Grossman, Lisa and Susan Gooden. *Opening Doors: Students' Perspectives on Juggling Work, Family and College*. MDRC, New York, NY, July 2002.

TRANSITION, ACADEMIC PREPARATION & SUPPORT

Recommendation: Ensure that former dropouts and struggling students receive support, services, and opportunities designed to increase their postsecondary enrollment, persistence and completion similar to what is offered to high school graduates and high achieving students.

Discussion:

Out-of-school and disadvantaged youth need comprehensive and consistent support, services, and opportunities to help them enter, persist and complete postsecondary education. While postsecondary institutions often offer outreach, access and support service programs to students from low-income backgrounds, some through federally funded TRIO programs, these programs typically target high academic achievers. TRIO funded programs are only available in communities and at postsecondary institutions that have received the competitive grants, further limiting the chances that out-of-school and disadvantaged youth will reap the benefits of these federal programs. The state of California has established a successful state-wide program, the Extended Opportunity Programs and Services, that provides comprehensive support and services to high-risk community college students that targets young people with various barriers to success including those who are academically under-prepared or at-risk. A report by the California Community College's Office of the Chancellor finds that EOPS students "persist from term-to-term at a higher rate than non EOPS full-time students," and that "EOPS students are more likely to earn a degree or certificate than other full-time students."¹⁰ More states and postsecondary institutions should be encouraged to establish similar programs or expand the eligibility criteria for existing programs to include disadvantaged youth.

Some out-of-school and disadvantaged youth receive critical postsecondary transition support, services, and opportunities from the same community-based youth service organizations that are helping them complete their high school diploma or equivalent, increase their academic skills and obtain job training and employment. When program funding and staff capacity allows it, community-based youth service organizations strive to prepare and support youth to make a transition into and through postsecondary education. These programs find that out-of-school and disadvantaged youth as well as their families and guardians need intensive and ongoing support, services and opportunities both prior to and following entry into postsecondary education. Before they enter postsecondary education, many programs offer opportunities for youth to explore their college, career and financial aid options, to be exposed to postsecondary students, faculty, staff and facilities, to complete academic assessments and testing, and to receive pre-enrollment advising and assistance completing applications for enrollment and financial aid.

Once they have entered a postsecondary institution, the programs find that out-of-school and disadvantaged young people need continued support such as tutoring and academic assistance, help navigating and accessing on-campus services and support, advice and assistance with class selection and scheduling. Many also need guidance on maintaining financial aid and obtaining emergency financial assistance for tuition, books, supplies, and basic expenses. Often, young people enrolled in postsecondary education rely on community youth programs for help obtaining employment so they can pay for their tuition and expenses as well as contribute to family finances. Youth programs also serve as a source of referral and

¹⁰ California Community Colleges, Sacramento. Office of the Chancellor. *California Community Colleges Extended Opportunity Programs and Services and Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education 2001-2002*.

connection to community services such as physical and mental health providers, affordable housing, transportation and child care. While the postsecondary institutions may offer some of the same forms of support and assistance to students on campus, many young people feel more comfortable seeking assistance from the caring adult staff at the youth programs with whom they already have an established and trusting relationship.

NYEC Transition to Higher Education Working Group

Co-Chairs:

Ephraim Weisstein, Vice President, Center for Youth Development and Education, Commonwealth Corporation

Dr. Frances Degan Horowitz, President, Graduate School & Center, City University of New York

Members:

Julian L. Alssid, Executive Director, Workforce Strategy Center

Betsy Brand, Director, American Youth Policy Forum

Dr. Robert Ford, Vice President for Research, Texas Southern University

Hector Garza, President, National Council for Community and Education Partnerships

Dr. Ronald Henry, Provost & Vice President, Academic Affairs, Georgia State University

Richard Kazis, Senior Vice President, Jobs for the Future

Dr. Joan F. Lorden, Provost and Vice Chancellor, Academic Affairs, University of North Carolina, Charlotte

Dr. James Maher, Provost & Senior Vice Chancellor, University of Pittsburgh

Phil Matero, Deputy Director, Los Angeles Conservation Corps

Dr. Cecil Payton, Assistant to the President, Morgan State University

Sally Prouty, President, National Association of Service and Conservation Corps

Bob Rath, President & CEO, Southend Community Services

Thalia Saplak, Executive Director, Career Options Program, Shoreline Community College

Dr. Joseph Silver, Sr., Vice President of Academic Affairs, Savannah State University

Sangeeta Tyagi, Vice President for Education and Career Development, YouthBuild USA

Sponsoring Partners and Members:

Mala B. Thakur, Executive Director, National Youth Employment Coalition

N. Joyce Payne, Director, Office of the Advancement of Public Black Colleges, National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges