

Providing a Continuum of Supports for First Generation Low-Income Students' Success

January 14, 2016

Overview

"[America's] future success will depend on whether we can prepare the new generation of young people for the next generation of jobs." – Dr. Robert Templin

AYPF hosted a discussion group on how to strengthen the continuum of supports for first generation, low-income college students (FGLI) within and across systems. Policy leaders, researchers, and practitioners from the K-12 system, postsecondary institutions, government, and community-based organizations (CBOs) convened to discuss the needs of these students, what should be explored further about providing comprehensive and continual supports to these students, and the role of policy, research, and practice in facilitating this support.

AYPF set a framework for the discussion, asking participants to think about ways we can better coordinate efforts to promote postsecondary access and success through a comprehensive continuum of supports for FGLI students. These supports include increasing FGLI students' academic preparedness, addressing their financial constraints, and equipping them to navigate the college system. Participants then identified policy opportunities that support FGLI students from education through career.

Opening Presentation – Dr. Robert Templin

Senior Fellow, The Aspen Institute

President Emeritus, Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA)

Presentation

Dr. Templin shared his experience helping FGLI students and students from other underrepresented groups succeed in postsecondary education and the workforce. He started by outlining rapid workforce changes that are underway:

- In fewer than five years we are going to have a significant number of job openings, and most of those are going to require a postsecondary degree. The vast majority of these jobs are in science and technology.
- There is a gap of five million workers who need both credentials and high or middle skilled technical qualifications.
- A new study of small business owners showed that 22% have job vacancies.

"We need significant change for [FGLI students]. We need breakthrough ideas, rather than refinements of existing notions. We have barely moved the needle." – Dr. Robert Templin

Templin went on to say these job market challenges will be compounded by demographic shifts:

- America's demographic growth is coming from sectors of the population with a low tradition of college going and academic achievement.
- By 2020, more than half of the growth will come from Latinos, and by 2040, 75% of population growth will come from Latinos (based on a Weldon Cooper Center study).
- Many of these students are the first in their family to participate in postsecondary education.

"My [college] students 10 years from now are currently in elementary school. They are my students. I should be able to know about them. Waiting until they show up at the college or university is so inefficient." – Dr. Robert Templin

Put together, America is at a crossroads; its future success will depend on whether it can prepare the new generation of young people for the next generation of jobs. More young people should be making it through postsecondary education, equipped with valuable credentials in areas of high demand. How can this be achieved in the context of diminishing public resources?

Templin proposed a solution: community colleges can serve as anchor institutions for a [collective impact](#) strategy. The strategy involves:

- Creating a partnership between primary education, secondary education, postsecondary education, community-based organizations, and industry, with the community college at the center.
- Using intrusive case management strategies that stay with the student throughout the entire education to workforce experience.
- Building guided, integrated pathways within and across systems.
- Using information systems across institutions to help shape case management strategies.

Under the collective impact strategy, students are given the personalized support they need so that they are prepared for the next step before they leave their existing program.

Templin shared his experience implementing the strategy at [Northern Virginia Community College](#) (NOVA), in collaboration with [George Mason University](#). NOVA provides them with targeted financial planning and emotional preparation in a caring and supportive environment. Additionally, NOVA offers academic experiences that build a sense of identity and community, particularly for FGLI students who often feel like they don't belong. He explained that most students are treated as if they are George Mason students before they even leave NOVA, creating the feeling that they belong to the community before they even set foot on campus. According to Templin, these cohorts help students identify with a program and feel a stronger sense of community membership.

The full collective impact program, established by NOVA, is known as [Pathway to the Baccalaureate](#), and it has supported 40,000 students across NOVA's 8 campuses. Once students have completed the Pathway to the Baccalaureate requirements at NOVA, they automatically gain admission to George Mason University. Through this collaborative partnership, education and industry have created a jointly designed educational experience from beginning to end, in which students are supported from elementary school through college and into careers.

The program has achieved remarkable [results](#):

- 83% completion rate of a bachelor's degree within 3 years of attending NOVA.
- George Mason University now takes more transfer students than freshmen.
- Biggest growth occurred for first generation, minority students.
- With the help of community based organizations, 1,000 families were lifted out of poverty.

Templin suggested that collective impact strategies must include new mechanisms of accountability that guarantee success across systems:

- High schools should be rewarded for their work in postsecondary completion.
- Universities should be responsible for creating pathways and ensuring success of transfer students.
- Foundations can provide challenge grants that reward collective action for FGLI students.

Templin ended on an optimistic note, saying it was possible to re-design and co-design systems of public education to prepare FGLI students for the future economy. He is now working on a toolkit for community college leaders to help them adopt collective impact strategies that benefit FGLI students.

Large Group Discussion

"We started this center at the beginning with one federal grant [McNair] and we expanded it to more and more students; now we have government, institutional, and corporate funding." – Dr. Beth Olivares

A participant asked whether collective impact strategies were high or low cost. Templin explained that they are high cost, but that NOVA merged resources and only used grant funding once. There needs to be a neutral party coordinating the funding, and schools must help pay for it. Partnering with community based organizations (CBOs) such as Year Up, which brings wrap-around resources to the schools, has helped contain costs. Overall, the value of implementing the collective impact strategy outweighs what institutions are paying.

Another participant asked about how state policy has affected NOVA's work. Templin described the challenge of working with elected officials, who sometimes prioritize short-term results over long-term impact. He stated that regardless of the policy context, there must be leadership coming from schools to champion collective impact strategies in the face of state budget constraints.

One participant broached the issue of getting faculty more engaged in supporting FGLI students. Another discussed the needs to bring more businesses and employers into the conversation, with the ultimate goal of increasing family wage jobs. According to Templin, businesses need to be stakeholders; they need to put resources into helping young people. System stakeholders should give employers the chance to go into schools, judge competitions, and engage with young people.

A participant shared his concern that in focusing on filling the employment gap, we may inadvertently create the potential for a two-tiered system of education: a liberal arts track for

high-income students and a vocational track for low-income students. This participant proposed that more people should be given the option to choose between liberal arts or vocational schools, especially given the entrepreneurial skills that are promoted by the former. Templin responded that this concern about tracking is valid, but it is not an excuse for inaction. Often FGLI students find the array of choices become so bewildering without guidance and they get lost, so choice alone should not be the goal. When designing these collective impact strategies, leaders need to think about keeping options open, with on ramps and off ramps for students along the way. Students should always know what the next step is, but they should also be able to switch pathways.

Another participant asked about the challenges of coordinating data systems, especially given concerns about student privacy. NOVA and George Mason have different data systems, and students sign a release that allows their data to be seen only by their present institution. The two schools used a work-around to share data; they hired the same consultant, who could assess both data sets and draw conclusions without breaching confidentiality.

Building trust between institutions is the key to effective collective impact strategies. This takes time, and therefore, institutions must be patient and never expect immediate results. At NOVA, they have a steering committee that meets at least once a year with senior leaders from each group to talk about what is and is not working. As the leaders change, the steering committee still meets and ensures that participating institutions are committed to maintaining stakeholder relationships.

Panel #1: Perspectives from the Field

Practitioners described three local programs supporting FGLI students.

Dr. Beth Olivares, University of Rochester

Dean for Diversity Initiatives, Faculty Development and Diversity Officer, Director, David T. Kearns Center for Leadership and Diversity, University of Rochester

“If students have the right interventions and supports, with adults who come to them with the right attitude, they can succeed.” – Dr. Beth Olivares

Olivares spoke about her work at the [Kearns Center](#), whose overarching philosophy is that students at every level should be able to pursue their educational, academic, and career interests as free as possible from barriers. All efforts—beginning with students in middle school through graduate school—are tailored towards low-income, minority, and first generation students, particularly at the pre-college level where the need is the greatest. The Center works closely with the Rochester City School District (RCSD)—they work in five local high schools and have offices in two of them. Some of their programming includes:

- High school students spend six weeks in the summer at an intensive program on the University campus. They have a residence hall setup so students understand what their dorm room could look like.
- Alumni come back to talk to students as part of a vertical mentoring program.

- A banquet is held once a year where they bring all of the high school students and parents to celebrate academic achievement.
- They run a program for minority males in the city school district, where they do work-based learning, such as visiting a radio station to make music or working in a lab.

95% of the Center's [Upward Bound](#) and [Upward Bound Math-Science](#) students graduate from high school and enroll in college, compared to the 43% graduation rate of RCSD. Additionally, the Center has overseen the [Ronald E. McNair Post-baccalaureate Achievement Program](#) since 1992. 85% of their McNair Scholars enroll in graduate study compared to 45% nationally, and over 100 of their McNair Scholars have already earned doctoral degrees.

The Center has brought together the largest group of minority, low-income individuals that the campus has ever seen. It is changing the “face” of the University of Rochester.

The Center partners with the National Science Foundation, the U.S. Department of Education, the Xerox Corporation, the Ford Foundation, and private donors to serve its students. Looking ahead, Olivares hopes that there will be more coordination among foundations, and for corporate funders to understand that education systems can't change overnight.

Dr. Jennifer Smith, The University of Texas

Director, University Leadership Network (ULN), The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin)

The University of Texas has made college completion its top priority, running a number of programs to support FGLI students that have been [nationally recognized](#).

The [Texas Interdisciplinary Plan](#) (TIP) Scholars program is an academic learning community specifically for first year college students in the College of Natural Sciences at UT-Austin, elements of which have been replicated in every support program at the University. The program was created in 1999 by then chemistry professor Dr. David Laude, who is now the University's Senior Vice Provost for Enrollment and Graduation Management. The program features a nationally recognized peer mentor model, as well as integrative advising to support this group.

“When we talk about students being leaders, we talk about students re-investing in a community that is investing in them.” – Jennifer Smith

The [University Leadership Network](#) (ULN), founded in 2013, is the largest initiative for increasing 4-year college completion. ULN uses predictive analytics to build cohorts of students who are statistically the least likely to graduate. It provides holistic advising, mentoring, internships, and experiential learning opportunities for the students, under the leadership of a dedicated cohort coordinator. The program involves partnerships with other departments within the University, such as financial aid and admissions, as well as off-campus employer and community partners. Elements of the program include:

- **Financial Assistance** – In their admissions letters to UT Austin, students are told that they've been selected for the ULN and are receiving a \$20,000 scholarship, which has helped mitigate “summer melt.” There is a high level of accountability because scholarship money is distributed at the beginning of each semester, contingent on

students' completion of goals. This also makes the program more palatable with partners who worry about unnecessary spending.

- *Community Engagement* – A particular emphasis is placed on preparing students as leaders. The freshmen class alone did over 5,000 hours of community service this semester. The students build relationships that help with their professional development, and have the opportunity for self-reflection about where they are going. They become better connected to the community, and develop a desire to make an impact.
- *Peer and Faculty Mentoring* – All ULN freshmen get together every Tuesday night for a speaker series, and upperclassmen ULN students serve as professional development coaches for younger students. Students have a variety of mentors throughout the program, who serve as case managers for the students.
- *Workplace Experience and Planning* – All second-year ULN students participate in on-campus internships (there are over 400 unique, on-campus internships available). Partners across the campus sponsor the internships, which helps build a collective desire to have undergraduates graduate in four years. In years three and four, students participate in monthly programming with the opportunity to move into on or off campus internships, study abroad, or project management (paired with a nonprofit in the Austin community). Students complete a capstone assignment, and must develop “next-steps” in their last semester before graduating.

Under the leadership of Dr. Laude, the overall University graduation rate has jumped from 52% to 58%. The 2014 ULN cohort persistence rate was 92.5%, compared to the overall University persistence rate of 95.5%. This program serves as a model program being studied and replicated by other Universities in the [University Innovation Alliance](#).

Dr. Noël Harmon, Say Yes to Education

Senior Vice President, Strategic Partnerships, Say Yes to Education

The [Say Yes to Education](#) collective action program addresses the issue of educational equity in a local context. With staff currently in four different states, their work is premised on the idea of the city as the unit of change for collective impact. Before choosing a city to invest in, they spend a year using analytics to determine a city's readiness and require the city to co-invest financially in the program. Say Yes is concerned about city-wide alignment towards a shared goal, which is why they make a six-year to eight-year commitment to a community. They do not impose a model of change on a city. Instead, they make sure that the collective impact program is locally owned. They help communities develop scholarship programs, which is a challenge given the high costs involved in such an undertaking. They seed cities with some money, and they help cities identify partners who will help them fund scholarships. Say Yes makes sure that cities share the following core principles:

- Cities have to agree that postsecondary access and completion is their number one goal, and that means that they are committing to have resources re-aligned, restructured, or reallocated to make that happen.
- The big players in the city must meet every two weeks within the first year. Even the mayor comes to this meeting every two weeks because he or she has committed to this goal.
- Cities have to commit to data driven accountability. Say Yes helps them dig into their finances and pinpoint where the school system and city are in terms of funding education.

Say Yes has created an innovative [Higher Education Compact Program](#). According to their website: “In joining the Say Yes Higher Education Compact, private colleges and universities agree to ensure that students from Say Yes communities whose annual family income is at or below \$75,000 are typically eligible, at a minimum, to attend tuition-free, provided they are accepted through the institution’s regular admission process.”

Say Yes’ overarching mission is to help cities and states think about education in terms of scale and sustainability. Currently, their Community Wide Chapters include Buffalo, New York, Syracuse, New York and Guilford County, North Carolina, and their Cohort Chapters include Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Hartford, Connecticut and Harlem, New York.

Panel #2: Policy & Research Perspectives

Research and policy experts described their unique perspectives on supports for FGLI students, and remaining questions they have for better serving this population.

Dr. Lindsay C. Page, University of Pittsburgh School of Education

Assistant Professor of Research Methodology, University of Pittsburgh School of Education

Dr. Page works to understand low-cost strategies to improve student outcomes and remove barriers to postsecondary access and success. Her [research](#) focuses on students’ transition from high school to college, including the idea of “summer melt,” when students who have been accepted to college do not actually attend in the fall. Together with Dr. Ben Castleman, she has looked at programs that reach out to students in between high school and college, reminding them of deadlines, forms that need to be completed, and other processes via text message or other “nudges.” These programs are derived from a behavioral economic standpoint, based on the idea that some students (particularly FGLI students) are unlikely to ask questions, especially if they do not know where to go for the information. Page also worked with a [Dell Scholars](#) program in Austin, Texas that is having major impacts on college access and success. The program has generous financial support and continued monitoring, but does not employ a cohort model. Instead, it provides targeted, continuous support, and uses a data-oriented approach to tailor supports to where they’re most needed.

Dr. Ann Coles, uAspire

Senior Fellow, College Access Programs, uAspire

Dr. Coles spoke of the need for collective action models that utilize research and data and involve multi-sector partnerships. She founded one such strategy in Boston, [Pathways to College Network](#), which doubled the number of college graduates with credentials. They are starting to work on college readiness badges in Boston, based on a common agreement on a set of competencies for high school graduation and college admissions. She posed two questions:

1. How do state and federal policymakers engage in making the changes necessary to turn around abysmal college persistence and completion rates?
2. How can we make college more affordable for the average performing lower-income student that is not going to get accepted to an institution that will meet a student’s full financial need?

“Often the way we think about financial barriers is very narrow...We need to talk about affordability in a much more nuanced way.” – Ann Coles

Coles also mentioned how community college does not always present a more appealing alternative to students because, while they may be more affordable, they have a roughly 20% completion rate. On a more positive note, in Boston, coaches and mentors from CBOs have been successful in supporting FGLI students. Boston also did a “gateway to college” English course, where some of the high schools collaborated to create new, effective English

language arts classes. This initiative improved instruction at the high school and college level, better preparing youth for their future.

Dr. Rafael Heller, Jobs for the Future

Principal Policy Analyst, Jobs for the Future

Dr. Heller discussed research on the importance of “non-cognitive” or “soft” skills. These findings will have significant implications on how we teach, assess, and use technology. He also discussed a new project around re-thinking 12th grade and the transition from high school to college as a period where it is not clear who has responsibility for students. Heller noted “[co-design, co-delivery, and co-validation](#)” of instruction are three areas where we have to figure out how K-12 and higher education should work together productively. How do you get two sectors to work together who don’t see themselves as sharing joint responsibility? [Jobs for the Future](#) is interested in the work of intermediary and backbone organizations that help students in the absence of robust partnerships. They have begun to work on [Student Success Centers](#), especially in states that don’t have strong community college systems. Additionally, Heller explained that students should have clear, structured pathways once they enter college. These pathways give students the opportunity to carve out a community with a core group of faculty. Students become a part of a stable program and develop an expertise over time that gives their experience greater value.

Discussion

The group brainstormed potential solutions that give the best “bang for their buck” in a time of limited resources:

- Increasing access to AP, IB, and dual enrollment courses, which are backed by research.
 - This is complicated by the fact that high schools that are funded by seat time do not want to lose students to these programs because that would decrease their funding. The funding model should be tweaked.
- Giving students the chance to send college placement test scores to more schools for free.
- Early assessment in 11th grade that allows students to go directly into credit-bearing courses. This is currently being employed in California. Other programs that create greater fluidity between high school and college.
- [Stackable credentials](#), or “a sequence of credentials that can be accumulated over time to build up an individual’s qualifications and help them to move along a career pathway or up a career ladder to different and potentially higher-paying jobs.”
- Eliminating the transition zone between 11th and 12th grade, so that students are co-owned by one or more institution at one point in time.

- Workforce development programs, which currently are experiencing bi-partisan support. Those that teach employability such as Year Up have been effective.

The group discussed employability skills in greater depth. These skills help prepare people for both the workforce and college, but they are somewhat amorphous and hard to measure. There is no consensus on the best measures. However, another question could be, what are characteristics of an environment that promote skills that we think are good? Instead of assessing schools based on measurable outcomes, states could assess conditions that are conducive to those outcomes. Dr. Page pointed to research from MDRC on career academies that promote employability skills. The programs had no real impact on high school graduation and no impact on college going, but they had sizable impacts on earnings four or eight years after high school graduation.

Interpersonal skills also relate to college access. From a developmental perspective, we have to understand that speaking to a financial aid officer at a college can be mildly terrifying, especially when students do not have the skills or experience to feel comfortable.

Respondent Reflections

Khadish O. Franklin, Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education

Associate Director and Senior Researcher, Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education

Mr. Franklin provided a brief summative reflection. He commended the group for its systems level approach to supporting FGLI students. He said the burden should be placed on systems and institutions to re-configure themselves to become more successful with FGLI students. There needs to be expanded capacity in the education sector, especially since long-term success, not graduation alone, is the ultimate goal for young people.

Franklin noted equity issues must also be considered. FGLI students should not be pushed towards a narrow or second-class pathway; they should have the same opportunities as other students. Career and technical programs should be seen as appealing to all different types of students. Currently, upper class and middle class students do have workforce learning opportunities, but they are often informal. Therefore, low-income students, including FGLI students, should be given more workforce opportunities to level the playing field.

Themes for Future Exploration

Based upon small group discussion, participants developed the following topics for future exploration:

1. **Data Systems** – Coordinated information systems need to be strengthened, so that institutions can collectively track a student across institutions and respond to his or her specific needs. This is particularly essential for FGLI students, who often need greater support. Schools should use data to maximize the effectiveness of this support, without compromising students' privacy.

Data can have other uses for FGLI students: as an advocacy lever to build buy-in for collective impact strategies, or as a critical tool in surveying a community before a collective impact strategy is implemented.

There should be additional conversations among and between systems, first, on what matters most, and second, on how to measure what matters most. Questions remain about how data in one context should be marshalled to inform other contexts.

“Many students don’t stay at one institution—they swirl—and nobody knows what’s going on. Certainty they don’t.” – Dr. Robert Templin

2. **Partnerships** – Strong and sustained partnerships should be forged between primary, secondary, and postsecondary schools, policymakers, businesses, and CBOs. These organizations are often “speaking different languages,” operating on different levels, and need to be more unified in their efforts around a common, tangible goal or set of goals. Partnerships between these groups are essential for ensuring that FGLI students are supported intensively within and across institutions. Leaders in a pre-existing position of power, who make FGLI students a top priority, help partnerships reach their full potential. Dedicated administrative staff are also essential to the success of initiatives.
3. **Long Term Sustainability**
 - *Costs* – Dealing with funding for collective impact strategies over an extended period of time can be challenging. It is unrealistic for funders or policymakers involved in budgeting to expect immediate results for FGLI students; successful programs take time to demonstrate appreciable outcomes. Given this reality, how can programs gather and sustain the funds to be successful in the long-term? How can various partners each provide funding? In the context of increasingly limited state funding, how can programs survive and thrive?
 - *Leadership* – Often turnover in leadership can threaten initiatives supporting FGLI students. How can initiatives be institutionalized, with realistic commitments and goals, to ensure long-term impact?
 - *Ownership and Alignment* – Long-term sustainability requires that FGLI initiatives are aligned to the goals of the local participating institutions and promote a sense of community ownership.
 - *Scale* – Often successful programs supporting FGLI students, like those at UT Austin and Rochester, start with a single grant or a tiny staff and then scale up. How do institutions pace themselves to scale up appropriately without compromising the effectiveness of their efforts? How do institutions effectively plan to scale up?
 - *Time* – Collective impact programs are sometimes given a short time frame, as little as 30 days, to be implemented. For there to be success, more time must be afforded for leaders to engage in rigorous planning, building programs with staying power.
4. **Parents** – There is a wide variance in engagement with parents of FGLI students, and there are sometimes cultural differences that complicate the work. Lots of people view students, not parents, as a place of influence, and often parent engagement programs struggle. The policy space is also very confused about the role parents play. Therefore, it is an area for further research and discussion.
5. **Flexibility Over Rigid Barriers** – There are often too many rigid barriers for FGLI students to get through college, including but not at all limited to financial barriers. When programs put

constraints on participation, such as GPA requirements, it often hinders rather than helps student progress. In considering flexibility of requirements, we must ask the following questions: 1) Is the requirement more helpful for the program, to keep people out, or more helpful to students? 2) Do the requirements promote student success or put an artificial barrier on it? Institutions should re-evaluate their requirements, prioritizing flexibility over rigid barriers. Institutions should also be flexible with time, for instance, by using the summer to help students meet requirements.

6. **Case Management** – FGLI students should be supported by targeted case management that helps them deal with both academic and non-academic barriers to success. It should also help students understand systems; for instance, it should help students understand the career landscape and see the difference between persistence and progress towards degree.
7. **Collective Impact Strategies** – A number of collective impact strategies were discussed throughout the day including NOVA, Say Yes to Education, Lumina's [Strive Together](#) and [Baltimore's Promise](#). What are the differences among these various networks? What are the effective practices, and what practices are not effective?