



COMMON CAUSE

Community-Based Organizations
and Community Colleges Partner
for Student Success

Cheryl Almeida and Lili Allen | April 2017

FOREWORD

By Monique Miles and Stephen Patrick, Aspen Forum for Community Solutions

There is a national crisis underway that is resulting in inequitable educational outcomes for the next generation of future leaders. According to data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, less than 40 percent of first-time college students enrolled in a community college earned a credential within six years. The barriers to persistence and completion these young people face include obstacles such as low academic skills, economic hardship, and gaps in preparedness to successfully navigate the complexity of the community college system.

These challenges not only limit the educational potential of young people seeking to attain the skills requisite for successful careers, they also stymie the aspirations of community college students, who according to the American Association of Community Colleges, are disproportionately low income and first-generation to attend college.

In the face of such disparate outcomes, a small group of community-based organizations (CBOs) in the Bronx have coalesced around a common goal: to increase the number of students that obtain a postsecondary credential. The Bronx Opportunity Network (BON), facilitated by a local intermediary organization—JobsFirstNYC—is collectively aimed at partnering with two local community colleges, Bronx and Hostos, to improve the persistence and completion rates of students. According to early results, community college students from BON are out-performing their peers in persistence in college.

Building on the success of this network, the leaders of Bronx and Hostos Community Colleges each undertook a groundbreaking partnership with the BON to make changes to the colleges' institutional practices so that more students entering with the lowest skills and facing the most barriers could succeed. This paper tells the story of how the colleges partnered with the BON, and the significant reforms put into place as a result.

JobsFirstNYC is a grantee of the Aspen Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund (OYIF). The fund supports communities across the country to build out cross-system and -sector pathways to reconnect young people to education and employment. Across the Aspen OYIF network there are more stories of collaboratives led by local “backbone” partners playing an intermediary role to improve education outcomes for young people. These local leaders convene cross-sector tables comprised of youth, community-based organizations, workforce systems, K-12 and municipal leaders, along with community colleges, all aimed at improving postsecondary outcomes. From Boston to Hartford to New Orleans, community colleges are joining community-based partners to implement innovative changes similar to the story of the BON and its partners. It is our hope that these innovative partnerships will proliferate so that over time, more opportunity youth can enter into guided postsecondary pathways and get to better and more powerful outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Having absorbed the message that college is no longer optional, many high school students today make plans to attend a local community college the fall after getting a diploma. Unfortunately, a sizable percentage of them, especially low-income students—many of whom are coming from underperforming high schools or have struggled to complete high school—encounter myriad obstacles that derail their plans and further undermine their belief in themselves as “college material.” These obstacles include the lack of adequate preparation to succeed at college-level work or to negotiate the system; the difficulty of finding a trusted campus advisor to consult about family or personal issues that may make it difficult to continue; the need to earn income and the difficulty of scheduling classes around work schedules; and the unexpected expenses of transportation, books, and other fees.¹

In short, a complex set of issues arising from economic, educational, personal, and/or life circumstances is contributing to low completion rates in community colleges, especially among low-income students who test into remedial, noncredit-bearing coursework. In recent years, reformers have called for change in developmental education, and some community colleges have already begun to make improvements.² However, while instituting more accelerated ways to remediate skill gaps is critical to improving community college outcomes, this approach alone does not address the contextual factors outside as well as inside the institution that impede progress to a credential; nor does it sufficiently affect the mindset of the young people themselves, whose prior struggles with education leave them feeling discouraged about the prospect of achieving a credential or degree.

One promising approach to helping young people overcome such challenges, and for community colleges to reassess their practices intended to

mitigate against these challenges, is for community colleges to partner with local organizations and agencies who have a track record of supporting and working effectively with young people struggling to better their lives. In such arrangements, the community-based organization (CBO) may provide personal support services, life-skills training, and sometimes college “success” skills as well; the college may offer space on campus for the CBO advisors and, in some cases, credit for a college success course taught by a CBO instructor. But as revealed by the handful of such partnerships around the country, these examples are generally small grant-funded pilot programs that face challenges of both depth and scale.

This paper tells the story of a unique partnership in the Bronx, between the Bronx Opportunity Network—an alliance of community-based organizations—and the two major community colleges, Bronx and Hostos. While this partnership is still evolving, early results of the collaboration are extremely positive. With input from the CBOs, both colleges have changed institutional practices to better serve their students and collaborate with essential partners. Such changes have already resulted in exponentially more students taking advantage of free pre-college, test-prep programming before taking their placement exams. These students also benefit from a redesigned First-Year Seminar, as well as more effective and streamlined academic advisement due to stronger cooperation between academic advisors, financial aid advisors, and “success coaches” from the community.

The first section of this paper describes how the Bronx Opportunity Network (BON) evolved from a loose collection of CBOs working to support students in the Bronx to a practice and advocacy network aligned around a common mission: to prepare students to succeed in college. In the second section, we review how contextual factors at Hostos and Bronx Community Colleges prompted each college to scrutinize the fundamentals of how students enter and progress through their first year and an increased openness about partnering with community

organizations. Section three looks at institutional changes that each college has begun to implement as a result of standing committees that include both BON leaders and college staff. In the final section, directed at both CBO and community college leaders who seek to build partnerships that boost student outcomes, we discuss early lessons and implications of how this evolving model can benefit both community colleges and CBOs.

THE FOUNDATION

A Network of CBOs Collaborate

The Bronx Opportunity Network is composed of a group of seven CBOs with significant involvement in the Bronx: BronxWorks, CUNY Prep, The Door, East Side House Settlement, Good Shepherd Services, Grace Outreach, and New Settlement Apartments. JobsFirstNYC, a nonprofit backbone agency that leverages resources to bring out-of-school and out-of-work young adults into the economic life of New York City, serves as the BON's backbone partner and has played an instrumental role in facilitating the design and execution of the BON. JobsFirstNYC and the BON are part of the Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund, an initiative led by the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions.

The BON launched six years ago with an initial focus on both job readiness and college preparation. They ultimately set college completion as the prime objective to ensure youth have the education needed to succeed in the economy. Over time, the network of CBOs developed a common two-pronged approach to postsecondary prep success for underprepared youth: (1) they work to help students boost their academic skills while inspiring those students with a sense of ownership for their own learning, and (2) they provide peer mentoring supports for youth once they transition into college. Specifically, by employing these student-centered and peer mentoring strategies, the CBOs help students prepare for

college placement tests and develop the academic mindsets to persist through obstacles.

Prior to joining together, each CBO had existing relationships with individuals at Bronx and Hostos Community Colleges because the CBOs advocated for their students who were transitioning into these institutions. Over time, the BON partners recognized that their individual relationships limited their advocacy for youth as well as their ability to influence changes at the colleges. What they needed was a more collaborative strategy. The partners combined what and who they knew and began to take a collective approach towards advocating for their students, approaching key college departments their students struggled to navigate—financial aid, registrar, academic departments—as a group.

“The problem was that if students went to the wrong person/wrong time, it would make or break their college attendance. They would say—if I’m treated this way just in application, I don’t need college.”

Theory Thompson, Good Shepherd Services

In an early collective effort, the BON negotiated with the colleges for students to be able to re-test on placement exams after the summer bridge programming at any of their CBOs. The agreement by the colleges to accept the bridge programs and student re-testing constituted the first big “win” for the network, a victory they could not have achieved as individual organizations. Their collective strategy gave them more recognition for their work with young people and more influence at the colleges.

After several years of common advocacy on behalf of their students, the BON had built credibility and relationships with college staff, and—perhaps more importantly—emerging data showed that BON students were progressing more expeditiously through developmental education than other students entering at the same skill levels. However,

the BON would have remained solely an outside advocacy network for youth had it not been for a moment of opportunity inside the community colleges themselves. Change was around the corner that would have significant implications for the BON's role with the community colleges.

For a full description of the history, practices, and outcomes of the Bronx Opportunity Network, see *Innovations in the Field: the Bronx Opportunity Network*, by JobsFirstNYC. <http://www.jobsfirstnyc.org/projects-and-publications.php/jfnyc-publications>

TWO NEW LEADERS

Winds of Change at Community Colleges in the Bronx

In 2015, within one year of each other, two new presidents were brought on board at Hostos and Bronx Community Colleges (BCC). Both Dr. David Gomez at Hostos and Dr. Thomas Isekenegbe at BCC came into their leadership roles with an eye towards improving student completion. For these two leaders, the focus was no longer on how many students were admitted and enrolled, but instead on how many were retained and graduated. At the same time, other contextual factors in each college prompted close attention to the fundamentals of how students enter and progress through their first year.

At BCC, Dr. Isekenegbe became president just before the CUNY chancellor recognized promising outcomes at the BCC campus in CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) and designated BCC an "ASAP campus," with the goal that by 2019 at least 50 percent of all incoming, full-time freshmen would enroll in ASAP. Dr. Isekenegbe and his colleagues quickly grasped the challenge before them: ASAP required that students entering the program need no more than one remedial course. Yet most students entering BCC fell short of this requirement. The college needed to quickly figure out how to prepare dramatically more students to enter ASAP.

Meanwhile, at Hostos, Dr. Gomez took on the leadership mantle at a time when the college was processing new research from Columbia University's Center for Institutional and Social Change (Center), undertaken through the Ford Foundation's Corridors of College Success Initiative. Also through this initiative, the Center housed a staff person, Molly Delano, at the president's office who was tasked to help the college unpack the emerging research and act on it. Through focus groups, surveys, and interviews, the Center began to surface data that was, as Dr. Gomez put it, "startling" to the new president.

"The moment of clarity came when a young man spoke at one of the Corridors meetings about coming from Riker's Island to enroll in college, and the first person he saw was a police officer—the most unwelcoming experience he could imagine. We liked to think we were welcoming, among the most welcoming in the CUNY system. Clearly there were things we needed to rethink."

Dr. David Gomez, Hostos Community College

Overall, the Center's research³ indicated that students and other members of the surrounding community perceived Hostos as confusing and unapproachable. Community partners considered the institution's practices to be out of line with the needs of their students. Thanks to the staff person hired by the Center for Institutional and Social Change and housed in the president's office, Hostos and its college partners commenced a joint effort to address both the bureaucratic roadblocks within the college and the isolation of its community partners.

“What happened in the past was if one community partner knew one faculty member, and then that faculty member left, the relationship was gone. It was a liability. So we needed to figure out how to institutionalize the relationships between the college and the community organizations targeting college readiness, disengaged youth, undocumented population, and justice-involved populations.”

Dr. David Gomez

MAKING COMMON CAUSE

CBOs and Community Colleges

In the spring of 2015, sensing an opportunity to accelerate the pace of change, BON leaders partnered with allies within both BCC and Hostos to set up a standing committee at each college to begin aggressive reform. Initial committee members included both BON leaders and college staff, and the meetings were co-led by the community partners. The college representatives were initially handpicked from the “coalition of the willing”: those staff who already understood the need for significant changes in how underprepared students enter and progress through college. This group included staff from advising, financial aid, and stand-alone programs that promote student success.

“We found that there was pent-up interest in reform across the institution—people who had been frustrated for years at the challenges students were facing but who didn’t feel empowered to act. The committees became the gathering point for all their energy—it became the place to go to get things done.”

Jim Marley, Good Shepherd Services

Committee meetings focused on key “loss points” in entry into and progress through the college. Thanks to having the right leaders in the room, changes were implemented much more quickly than is typical in large institutions. Some of these changes had to do with what happens before students get to the front door. A key loss point in any college is the assessment of college readiness; entering students typically do not understand the importance of preparing for the entrance exam and, in particular, the risk of using up too much of their financial aid on noncredit developmental courses based on this one test.

At Bronx Community College, before the reforms, of the 2,000 students tested annually only about 2 percent were attending the college’s free test-prep sessions. By changing the messaging about the test prep to better convey the value and payoff of such preparation, the college increased the number of students taking advantage of test prep to 45 percent of the 2,000 students who underwent testing. The immediate result was that 22 percent fewer youth who participated in the test-prep sessions were placed into the lowest developmental education courses compared to the overall tested population.

“We are finding that this year people in the precollege test-prep program are doing better on the placement tests. We had 50 students last year. This year we had 900. We changed the messaging to students: ‘This is available to you without cost. If you participate you are three times more likely to do better on the test.’”

Dr. Nancy Ritze, Bronx Community College

Hostos implemented a change that made a big difference for youth entering the college from high school equivalency programs (HSE). From analyzing the Center's research, the standing committee learned that students taking the five-part HSE examination had to wait for all their test results before applying to college and taking the college entrance exam; this caused months of delay and loss of demoralized students. As a new approach, Hostos decided to accept HSE students provisionally, pending receipt of HSE scores, so students did not have to lose six months before entering college. This made students immediately eligible for first-year seminars and test prep with no wait time. As a result, Hostos admitted 300–400 students who would have otherwise deferred, and the college built additional trust with community partners.

As a key change, both institutions redesigned academic advisement so that college academic and financial aid advisors could work together more effectively with “success coaches” from the community. At Hostos, this included cross-training and creating a common glossary of terms. At BCC, this meant reorganizing the structure so that academic affairs and student services were merged. This reorganization led to streamlined services and more coherent messaging and supports for incoming students. In addition, in a significant win for the CBOs, the colleges will provide funds for BON peer leaders to serve as navigators for incoming students.

Regarding CBO involvement, both institutions improved their partnership around the First-Year Seminar, a one-semester, one-credit course that introduces students to college orientation activities and academic content, designed to help students develop the dispositions, academic habits, and general skills required to succeed in college. The seminar is taught by full-time faculty from across the domains who teach the course in an active learning environment with integrated learning strategies. Some of the faculty have developed performance tasks that allow young people to engage in reasoning assignments, even if they lack some of the basic skills. An important component of First-Year Seminar is a focus on developing students' mindsets and

motivation for learning—similar to the BON's approach.

Another key aspect of the design is a dedicated academic advisor that youth see three times during the semester. Students also have dedicated peer mentors who help with navigating the college experience. In addition, students develop academic plans that include a college major and a course of study. Learning outcomes include analytic reasoning, effective reading, and completed academic plans, among others.

Starting in fall 2016, CBO staff were trained by the colleges to deliver the First-Year Seminar. The colleges and the BON are also working together to create cohort-based First-Year Seminar classes taught by CBO teachers who know the youth well and will serve as adjunct professors.

For the BON, the challenge going forward is to ensure that the two colleges continue to see the CBOs as essential partners. CBO leaders are strategizing with the colleges about ways to ensure they continue to have a seat at the table as they consider further changes, such as offering tutoring and peer mentoring in three remedial math sections and creating a 20-hour winter course for 50 “high fail” students so they might qualify for grade reevaluation. They are eager to identify ways to have more touchpoints with the students not only at entry, but further along the pathway to completion. This requires that staff and faculty across both campuses see the value-add of community partners and their approach to supporting completion. This will be especially important for BCC students who do not enroll in ASAP due to insufficient skills and/or life challenges—the CBOs stand poised to help those students persist.

While the two presidents' paths to redesign were not exactly the same, they have become close partners and allies in their reform efforts. And they share a common focus of putting students at the center—and a common goal of markedly increased completion rates. Taken together, they describe their work as less about their individual colleges more about meeting the needs and aspirations of the Bronx community.

MOVING FORWARD

“Typically, community colleges and CBOs run parallel to each other. But the CBOs share our goal—student success—which makes us natural allies. Now we have a process to truly partner so that more of our students not only enroll, but persist and graduate.”

Dr. Thomas Isekenegbe, Bronx Community College

The initial success of efforts at Hostos and BCC speaks to the importance of putting students at the center of institutional redesign efforts that focus on dramatically improving completion rates, and of recognizing the primary role of community partners in addressing the challenges of this work. Although recognition of the potential value of community partners is beginning to grow among reform-minded community colleges, most partnerships remain relatively weak and dependent on particular relationships and one-off arrangements. For their part, most colleges are neither structurally nor financially equipped to deal with the full range of challenges their students face. At best, they still rely on their own stand-alone programs, such as having an attorney available to deal with housing issues once or twice a semester. As Dr. David Gomez said, “The only answer is to tap into the vast network of support in the community.”

The challenge for community colleges is how to connect with such networks. The Bronx colleges benefited from an existing network of CBOs, convened by an intermediary, that aligned around a common mission and approach and had taken the first step toward partnering with the colleges. These CBOs were able to bring evidence to the table that

young people participating in their bridge programs were experiencing more college success than other students with similar skill levels. Of equal importance, each college had a new leader who strived to make changes that would improve the progress and completion of their young people, while also facing pressures and demands that required new ways of working.

Finding these conditions elsewhere may not be easy, but there are other examples of community colleges that have partnered with CBOs, as well as other outside entities such as workforce intermediaries, to implement changes that help young people complete college. A number of communities that participate in the Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund—all of which have established cross-sector collaboratives focused on opportunity youth—have partnered with community colleges to bring about such changes. For example, Austin Community College agreed to lower the enrollment age and to delay the start of their College Readiness Transition summer session classes so as to improve access for recent high school graduates; the college also agreed to prioritize early enrollment of court-involved youth in future classes. In Boston, Bunker Hill Community College has created an accelerated developmental education program and is hiring its own success coaches to support young people in their progression through college. And the ACE program at Delgado Community College in New Orleans redesigned its health care certification program to allow enrollment of a wider range of students with varied skills and abilities.

Like the work of the BON, these successes were part of a collective approach to working with the colleges. CBOs typically serve as the front door through which youth enter to seek help in getting back to school or finding a job; they are on the frontlines of helping young people overcome many of their obstacles. Creating additional CBO networks could help accelerate the pace of change in community colleges beneficial to young people’s college success. Because CBOs vary considerably in their mission, size, who and how many young people they

serve, and the range of services they offer—and by necessity often compete with each other for a limited pool of funding—coalescing them into a network around a particular issue takes time and effort. Despite the challenges, CBOs often do collaborate, especially around cross-agency referrals and service alignment. The challenge is to inspire community college partnerships with this same spirit of collaborative alignment around a common approach.

As a starting point for such a collective approach, we can learn a lot from the BON's efforts to create their network. The seven organizations participating in the BON each had their own mission, histories, and ways of working, yet they established a highly successful collaboration. Key to this success were two factors: both JobsFirstNYC's convening and facilitation role as the intermediary,⁴ which was critical for both strategic planning and securing funding for the network; and agreement among the CBO network to focus on one key challenge facing their young people—making a safe and successful transition to and through college. By focusing on this issue, the organizations were able to work together without losing sight of their different missions and focus areas.

The organizations believed that by working together they could help more young people succeed at the two nearby community colleges and be more effective at supporting the colleges in identifying practices, partnerships, and services that would help young people successfully transition to and thrive in college. The seven organizations were able to forge an agreement to stay focused on the issue, hold each other accountable, act collectively, share data, and create complimentary services to support student-driven program design.

Jim Marley, a core leader in creating the Bronx Opportunity Network, sums up this lesson as: Stay focused, stay simple, and build a network based on consensus and trust.⁵

The BON's partnership with Bronx and Hostos Community Colleges shows that a collective approach can bring about greater impact and more institutional changes conducive to young people's college success. When a network of CBOs can bring many more potential students to the college, along with a deep understanding of what they need to succeed, and offer a range of programming and services to support youth while in college, it creates greater incentives for a college to engage in a partnership.

At the same time, as a core strategy for improving the progression of their students, community colleges would do well to gain a better understanding of the existing support networks in their community. As noted here, the work of the Center for Institutional and Social Change was instrumental in helping Hostos Community College leaders to understand both the disconnect between community residents and the college, and the CBOs that were poised to help bridge the divide.

The early work of the BON indicates that partnerships between community colleges and CBO networks have the potential to significantly increase the number of young people succeeding in college and to help the college more effectively align its practices to meet student needs. Sustaining this work over time—the CBO network itself, and the inclusionary reform agenda that harnesses their collective perspective and expertise—requires long-term commitment on both sides. The success of the BON suggests that the CBO and community college agendas are deeply connected and actually fuel each other. These are the critical wins for both the CBOs and the colleges.

Endnotes

1. See, for example, Wood, J. Luke, Frank Harris III, and Nexi R. Delgado. 2016. *Struggling to Survive—Striving to Succeed: Food and Housing Insecurities in the Community College*. San Diego, CA: Community College Equity Assessment Lab (CCEAL); and Radford, Alexandria Walton, Melissa Cominole, and Paul Skomsvold. 2015. *Demographics and Enrollment Characteristics of Nontraditional Undergraduates: 2011–12*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education. Available at: <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2015025>
2. See, for example, Collins, Michael Lawrence. February 2015. *Heavy Lifting: The State Capacities Required for Scaled Developmental Education Reform*. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future. Available at: <http://www.jff.org/publications/heavy-lifting-state-capacities-required-scaled-developmental-education-reform>; and Edgecombe, Nikki. 2016. “The Redesign of Developmental Education in Virginia.” *New Directions for Community Colleges*, Vol. 2016, No. 176.
3. More information about the Center’s research is forthcoming.
4. For a complete description of the BON and the role of JobsFirstNYC, see “Innovations in the Field: the Bronx Opportunity Network” by JobsFirstNYC. <http://www.jobsfirstnyc.org/projects-and-publications.php/jfnyc-publications>
5. N.A. 2016. “Lessons from the Bronx Opportunity Network on Promoting CBO-Community College Partnerships.” Washington, DC: Aspen Forum for Community Solutions. Available at: <https://aspencommunitysolutions.org/lessons-from-the-bronx-opportunity-network-on-promoting-cbo-community-college-partnerships/>

Acknowledgments

This publication was made possible through generous support from the Ford Foundation.

We would like to thank the following people for their gracious participation in interviews to inform this paper: Dr. David Gomez, Hostos Community College; Dr. Thomas Isekenegbe, Bronx Community College; Dr. Nancy Ritze, Bronx Community College; Jim Marley, Good Shepherd Services; Theory Thompson, Good Shepherd Services; Susan Sturm, Center for Institutional and Social Change at Columbia University; Lou Miceli, JobsFirstNYC; Marjorie Parker, JobsFirstNYC; Monique Miles, Aspen Forum for Community Solutions. We would also like to thank Adria Steinberg, JFF, for her thoughtful edits to early drafts of the paper.



Jobs for the Future (JFF) is a national nonprofit that builds educational and economic opportunity for underserved populations in the United States. JFF develops innovative programs and public policies that increase college readiness and career success and build a more highly skilled, competitive workforce. With over 30 years of experience, JFF is a recognized national leader in bridging education and work to increase economic mobility and strengthen our economy.

Learn more at www.jff.org.



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

TEL 617.728.4446 FAX 617.728.4857 info@jff.org

88 Broad Street, 8th Floor, Boston, MA 02110 (HQ)
122 C Street, NW, Suite 650, Washington, DC 20001
505 14th Street, Suite 340, Oakland, CA 94612

WWW.JFF.ORG

