CLOSING THE COLLEGE COMPLETION GAP:

A Guidebook For the Faith Community

Written by

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An Introduction to

CLOSING THE COLLEGE COMPLETION GAP:

A degree beyond high school has become an essential element of opportunity in America and is a proven pathway out of poverty. Faith-based institutions committed to addressing social injustice and poverty should consider the power of keeping more young people on track to obtain such a degree. These efforts have become an urgent national priority.

Last year, President Barack Obama stated, "in a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity—it is a pre-requisite." The President's call for Americans to commit to at least one year of postsecondary training by 2020 reflects the changing realities of our global economy.

The majority of our nation's young people, especially low-income Americans, are finding it difficult to complete this pathway to success. Every year, more than 90 percent of low-income teenagers say they plan to attend college, but only half of these students will actually enroll in college. Only slightly more than half who enroll will finish, and the time to degree is getting longer. Only 20 percent of young people who begin higher education at two-year institutions graduate within three years. At four-year institutions, about four in 10 students receive a degree within six years.

Overall, only 25 percent of low-income adults ever obtain a postsecondary degree and only 9 percent of low-income 8th graders whose parents did not attend college will obtain a bachelor's degree. Over the last four decades, focus has been placed on extending access to college for underrepresented groups. While access to college has increased substantially, the number who complete has not.

Because of global competition, jobs that require no college-level knowledge or skills are rapidly disappearing. Although lower-skill jobs still exist in the United States, Americans who hold them are not likely to enter or remain in the middle class. Americans who do not continue their education after high school are less likely to be employed, support their families, have quality health care,

save for retirement, or see their children complete college. Low-income youth without a college degree are at a significant risk of remaining in poverty, perpetuating the social justice divide.

For low-income Americans, the path to obtaining a college degree is steep. The educational gap between low-income children and their wealthier peers appears early and persists throughout elementary, middle, and high school. Even high achieving students from low-income families succumb to the achievement gap in high school and are less likely to begin college careers. If they do, they are more likely to "stop out" before receiving a degree. Addressing these persistent gaps has become the civil rights issue of our time. Faith-based institutions can help.

Imagine

Faith-based organizations often have a core mission – to address poverty and social injustice in their communities. We know from research that one of the most powerful ways to advance this mission is to ensure every child has a postsecondary credential of real value in the workplace. So imagine if faith-based institutions all across the United States worked to ensure that more young people in their communities completed college as a pathway to productive work and a better future. What would a network of coordinated faith-based support for closing the college completion gap look like in America? Consider this vision in which the action, resources, encouragement, and commitment of the faith community help students graduate from high school, obtain a post-secondary credential, and successfully enter the workforce:

A Vision for a Coordinated Faith-Based College Completion Strategy

✓ **A Revitalized Mission for the 21st Century.** All faith communities—churches, synagogues, mosques, ashrams, and other faith communities—view focusing on high school and college completion as integral to their core missions of addressing poverty and social injustice. They realize that this is the most highly leveraged investment they can make to reduce inequity

For low-income Americans, the path to obtaining a college degree is steep.

and target their resources toward reducing the occurrence of educational failure in their larger communities. This mission is set and supported by national and regional leadership of faith communities that ensure local congregations have the support and resources they need to do their work.

✓ **Strategic, Inclusive, Mission-Supported, and Data-Driven Partnerships.** Leaders from the civic, education, business, and foundation sectors view faith communities as critical partners in any community-wide initiative to improve student achievement. Faith leaders are looked to as partners who can understand the social and economic needs of a community and develop effective responses with educational institutions to ensure students earn the credentials they need to fill critical gaps in the workforce. Faith leaders are regarded as stakeholders who have comparative advantages to help more young people. Faith-based institutions: exist in every community; have high levels of social trust in the community; have an ability to identify and reach disadvantaged students; and have an ability to mobilize volunteer mentors and tutors. Faith-based groups should have access to longitudinal data to track initiatives they support and ensure that students stay on track throughout the P-20 educational pipeline.

✓ **Improved Collaboration Among Faith Traditions on Best Practices.** There is a national and inclusive interfaith organization that posts and shares best practices for what faith communities can do to close the college completion gap. Innovative leaders frequently collaborate with one another to share ideas about developing comprehensive plans with supports and appropriate benchmarks. They also keep the momentum of closing the college completion gap high on the agenda of faith communities.

✓ **Sustained Local Leadership.** Every faith community commits to training and developing a network of leaders within their congregations who carry out their educational work. They have designated leaders who partner with the various educational institutions in their community to ensure consistent communication. These leaders also coordinate volunteers within the community. Every faith community has a commitment to ensuring there is sustained institutional memory of their different areas of expertise so there is never a lack of strong leadership to work with schools, postsecondary institutions, the business community, and social service providers.

Consider these hypothetical examples that could become reality if the faith community is engaged in this coordinated, systemic way:

✓ **Fostering College-Going Norms.** A local church provides a summer camp called Destination Diploma and Degree that combines academic tutoring and mentoring. The camp not only raises awareness about the importance of college, but it also encourages students to apply while providing them with practical support to complete the courses they need to be college-ready. Local business and community leaders speak at the camp to inspire young people about the possibilities for future employment and civic engagement.

✓ **Increased Understanding of the College Application and Admissions Process.** A designated financial aid and admissions officer from a local postsecondary institution visits an interfaith community center regularly to assist students in applying for and renewing their FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) applications. "Nontraditional" and underrepresented students feel comfortable beginning or re-entering their postsecondary path. Faith-based communities in turn educate their young parishioners about the availability of student financial aid to attend and complete college and the requirements to gain admission to college.

✓ **Enhanced Exposure to Postsecondary Pathways.** A designated faith coordinator works with the guidance staff at high schools, middle schools, and even elementary schools, to ensure that all students have opportunities for college trips and summer bridge experiences to become familiar with what postsecondary pathways make sense for them. The faith and school coordinators continue to work together to ensure that students take courses that both interest them and prepare them for postsecondary pathways of their choosing. Faith leaders designate part of their service to highlight the achievement of a member who is undergoing or has completed their postsecondary path. Faith-based communities issue altar calls to support the goal of young people to complete high school and college, track their progress, and have ceremonies to celebrate those students in their faith-based communities who complete college.

✓ **Gaining Admission and Financial Aid.** Faith-based leaders take high school students on trips to colleges outside their regions and help them gain admission and financial aid packages in connection with those trips. Expectations are created among high school students that college is a necessary step to a better future.

✓ **Improved Student Support on Campus.** All students have a mentor that alerts the faith community if a student is in need of additional support, such as transportation, childcare, tutoring, or other critical supports. Faith communities also partner with colleges to provide pastoral counseling and support to college students, particularly in the first two years as students adjust to their new environment. The designated faith coordinator reaches out to their
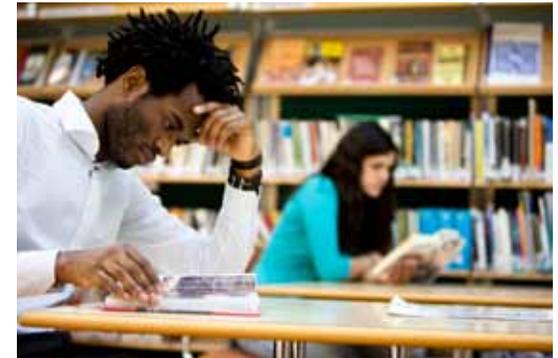
faith network of volunteers and resources and connects the student with what they need.

✓ **Embedding the College in the Community.** The faith community provides free utilities and other in-kind supports to a community college that provides courses for students who may not have the time to travel between home, work, and the college campus to take courses. The faith community works with postsecondary institutions to give high school students the opportunity to earn college credit before they have graduated from high school. This reinforces college-going norms, gives students the opportunity to engage in a challenging and rewarding academic experience, and saves students money by reducing their time to degree.

✓ **Development of College Students.** Faith communities, including local congregations and on-campus ministries, connect college students with opportunities to tutor and mentor at-risk high school students and shepherd them through the college admissions process.

✓ **Securing Employment for Students.** Faith communities bring together leaders from the business community and postsecondary institutions to identify gaps in the workforce pipeline and devise ways to address them. These leaders make a commitment to train students for these jobs and to offer them a job once they have earned their postsecondary credential.

Is the College Completion Gap Being Effectively Closed with the Help of the Faith Community? …Not yet.

Is the description of closing the college completion gap with the help and support of the faith community a reality? The problem we face is undeniable, but so are the hopeful results of community and religious institutions addressing this problem. There are faith communities throughout the country that are creating social networks for disconnected youth, providing positive role models for students, improving their self-esteem, providing academic tutoring for class subjects and state standardized tests, hosting FAFSA and college awareness nights, providing opportunities to visit college campuses, and partnering with postsecondary institutions to secure admissions and financial aid packages.

Outstanding examples of how faith-based communities are engaging to help more students earn a degree beyond high school exist, but are still not sufficient to meet a growing need. As one pastor in Ohio told us, "Faith-based organizations are a sleeping giant in our city and our country—we could rouse this sleeping giant to get more students into and graduating from college. But we need guidance on how best to do that."

The goal of *Closing the College Completion Gap* is to give faith-based institutions the tools you need to:

- rally your faith community to close the college completion gap
- understand the dimensions of the college completion gap in your region
- develop an effective plan to help usher more students through high school, and support them as they enroll, persist, and complete college
- build partnerships among the business, political, and educational communities, and be knowledgeable advocates to increase, and sustain, the number of students earning college credentials

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDEBOOK

Closing the College Completion Gap contains research-based guidance for addressing the college completion gap along with links to additional online resources.

We recognize that one size does not fit all, so you will not find step-by-step instructions for a standardized program. Instead, *Closing the College Completion Gap* provides information for developing and implementing a customized program that's right for your community. In fact, your community may already have undertaken some of the efforts we suggest, or you may be just starting out. You may want to start slowly, or you may feel ready to forge ahead with a number of efforts at the same time.

The guidebook is divided into four parts:

1. **Rallying Your Faith Community To Close the College Completion Gap**

2. **Understanding Your Community's College Completion Gap**

3. **Solutions for Comprehensively Addressing Your Community's College Completion Gap**

4. **Moving Forward to Create Lasting Change and Increase the Number of Students with College Credentials**

On the left-hand side of each page, you'll find valuable information on the topic or measure being discussed. This is accompanied by **"A Deeper Look"**— references to online resources that provide additional information.

On the right-hand side of the page, you'll see suggestions for **Specific Action** — what you can do — along with links to tools to help you do the job. These tools include:

• informational handouts to build support for community action

• guides to help students and parents choose the right colleges

• calendar of important dates in the college admissions process

• civic supports you can provide students as they enroll and persist in postsecondary education

Finally, at the end of the guidebook, we provide a list of organizations to which you can turn for assistance.

I. Rallying Your Faith Community to Close the College Completion Gap

Closing the college completion gap is one of the most powerful ways that your faith community can reduce inequity and ultimately the poverty it spawns. When individuals fail to graduate high school and college, they often remain in or return to their communities without the ability to find a job, raise their families, or be contributors to the economic, social, or civic lives of the neighborhoods in which they live. While the faith community is not the only sector that should be working to reduce educational inequities in your community, your faith community has an important role to play in closing the college completion gap and may be uniquely positioned to help.

Faith-based communities often have comparative advantages to address these issues over other institutions. They often have addressing social injustice and poverty as part of their missions; they are trusted in their communities and know about the lives and families of young people needing help; they can have a transformative effect on their congregants and neighborhoods; and they can provide volunteers, services and in-kind contributions that are invaluable to helping young people fulfill their dreams.

The ways in which faith-based communities can help are rich. The work you choose to engage in may be instilling values that are in line with educational attainment and providing social and emotional support to students in need. Or, you may choose to offer FAFSA support and SAT classes. You might even choose to provide resources to K-12 school districts and two-year and four-year institutions in your community. Whatever you choose to do, as an integral community institution, you have a crucial role to play in helping more students access college and graduate once they begin.

Working within or reaching out to your faith community and winning broad-based support is vital, but it will take effort.

This section will help you rally your faith community to close the college completion gap.

HERE IS HOW TO USE THIS SECTION

If you need to convince your faith community that there is a college completion gap that needs to be closed, go to:

Demonstrating that a college completion gap exists

If you need to highlight the national and local costs of not graduating from college, go to:

Demonstrating the costs of the college completion gap

If you need to show that faith communities can effectively address the college completion gap, go to:

Demonstrating the college completion gap is solvable

If you need to make the case that your faith community needs to take action to close the college completion gap, go to:

Demonstrating that your faith community needs to take action

If you need to gather evidence to better inform those who argue that there is no crisis or that it is not essential for students to obtain a postsecondary degree to be successful in life, go to:

Confronting skeptics

[1] http://www.completecollege.org/

[2] http://www.publicagenda.org/files/pdf/theirwholelivesaheadofthem.pdf

[3] Bowen, W.G., Chingos, M.M., & M.S. McPherson (2009). Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America's Public Universities. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

[4] http://www.civicenterprises.net/pdfs/jkc.pdf

Demonstrating that a college completion gap exists

Communities cannot address problems they do not recognize, understand, or accept, yet college completion statistics can be easy to disregard. To rally support for your action, your faith community will need to confront the harsh facts.

A good first step is to understand, and then share with others, national college completion rates and the dire consequences to individuals, communities, the economy, and our nation of failing to graduate more students.

The national numbers are startling:

- Every year, more than 90 percent of low-income teenagers say they plan to attend college, but only half of these students will enroll and only slightly more than half who enroll finish.

- Only 25 percent of low-income adults have a postsecondary degree.

- Only 9 percent of low-income 8th graders whose parents did not attend college will obtain a bachelor's degree

- Only 20 percent of young people who begin higher education at two-year institutions graduate within three years. At four-year institutions, about 4 in 10 students receive a degree within six years.

- Students from low-income families, including those who are academically high-achievers prior to college age, are less likely to attend college than their higher-income peers.

- High school graduates from low-income families who consistently score in the top-quartile on standardized tests are no more likely than affluent peers who score in the bottom-quartile on the same tests to attend college.

- The U.S. college attainment rate has held steady at 39 percent since 1970. College attainment rates are rising in almost every other industrialized or post-industrialized country in the world.

- Overall, more than 30 percent of white, non-Hispanic American adults have at least four years of college, but only 18 percent of African Americans and 12 percent of Hispanics have reached the same level of attainment, creating disparities in social justice.

{ **SPECIFIC ACTION** }

- Educate your faith community and other community leaders that a college completion gap exists.

- Develop talking points for presentations and to distribute as fact sheets.

- Use the Lumina Foundation's state level research[5] to determine how many adults in your community have college degrees.

- To see critical college completion data about your state, including how many high school freshman complete college degrees, visit Complete College America's state data site.[6]

[5] http://www.luminafoundation.org/research/state_data/
[6] http://www.completecollege.org/state_data/

Demonstrating the costs of the college completion gap

Failing to graduate from college with a degree has significant consequences for individuals and the communities in which they live.

Ability to become a productive, stable citizen

- People without college degrees are more likely to hold lower-skill jobs that inhibit them from entering or remaining in the middle class. These workers are less likely to be employed, able to raise their families, have access to quality health care, save for retirement, or offer their own children access to higher education.
- Low-income youth who do not get a college degree are at a significant risk of remaining in poverty: a head of household without a college degree is more than eight times more likely to be living below the poverty line than an otherwise comparable head of household who has a college degree.
- Youth without high school and college degrees are much less likely to be active in their communities, with lower rates of volunteering, voting, and participating in community projects. Many are just idle – both out of school and work.

Economic Impact

- The difference in lifetime earnings for a college graduate compared to a high school dropout is about $1 million.

[7] http://www.luminafoundation.org/publications/a_stronger_nation_through_higher_education.pdf
[8] http://www.thecb.state.tx.us/reports/Docfetch.cfm?Docid=1345&Format=PDF
[9] http://www.dlc.org/documents/DLC_HotJobs.pdf

- The wage gap between those who have completed some form of postsecondary education and those who have not is growing. On average, people with a bachelor's degree earn $51,206, almost double the $27,915 earned annually by people with only a high school diploma.

- Jobs that do not require education after high school are rapidly disappearing in our changing global economy: by 2018, it is estimated that 62 percent of jobs will require college education; half of these jobs will require at least a bachelor's degree.

- Jobs for community college graduates will grow at twice the national average and be higher-paying.

- At current college graduate production rates, there will be a shortage of 23 million college-educated adults in the American workforce by 2025.

{ **SPECIFIC ACTION** }

- Determine the economic costs of the college completion gap in your state.

- You can download the report card on your state's higher education system from the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education's website. Among other information, the report card highlights performance gaps between ethnicities and estimates the economic consequences of the college completion gap.[10]

[10] http://measuringup2008.highereducation.org/states/report_print.php

Demonstrating the college completion gap is solvable

The message to convey to your faith community is that while the problem we face is undeniable, so too are the hopeful results of community and religious institutions in addressing this problem.

We now have a lot of information about and insight into:

- who fails to finish college and why
- what will help students stay on the graduation path
- how the faith community affects student success
- interventions and reforms that have proven successful

One of the most powerful forces working in our favor is that so many students want to graduate from college. Of the students who do not complete their degrees, they understand the detrimental consequences of their decision. Many students have terrible regrets, particularly when they are having trouble entering the workforce and raising their families as a result of failing to complete their education.

Who "stops out" and why

Completing a college degree is a race against time. With each passing year, the chance of graduating diminishes. Along the path to graduation, many students "stop out," or leave college for a semester or year at a time, because life gets in the way, thus prolonging their road to college completion. When determining why students fail to complete their college educations, it is important to start with a picture of today's college students and the barriers they face:

- Among students in four-year schools, 45 percent work more than 20 hours a week.

- Among those attending community colleges, 6 in 10 work more than 20 hours a week, and more than a quarter work more than 35 hours a week.

- Just 25 percent of students attend a residential college.

- Twenty-three percent of college students have dependent children.

The Public Agenda report *With Their Whole Lives Ahead of Them* outlines the reasons that so many students fail to complete their college educations, despite understanding the consequences of not doing so:

- The stress of working and going to school was cited as the number one reason why students left college before completing a degree. Of these students, needing to work full-time and family commitments were major reasons they did not go back.

- Young people who left college without a degree were more likely to be paying for college themselves than their peers who completed. They were less likely to have scholarships or loans or even advice on where to get them.

- Among students who don't graduate, the college selection process was far more limited and often seemed happenstance and uninformed. They were more likely to choose their college for its convenient location than the academic reputation of the school or on recommendations from friends and family.

- Many of the reforms these students suggested to keep them in school would ease the work/school balance, including allowing part-time students to qualify for financial aid (81 percent), offering more courses in the evenings, on weekends, or in the summer so people can work while attending school (78 percent), cut the cost of attending college by 25 percent (78 percent), and providing daycare for students who need it (76 percent).

- Contrary to popular belief, students who leave college say they realize that a diploma is an asset, but they may not fully recognize the impact of not completing a postsecondary degree will have on their future.

When students "stop out"

In addition to the insights of the people who fail to complete college, there is also a growing body of research that highlights when, and why, students fail to access and complete college. This research breaks student progression in college down into four categories and discerns where the "loss points" are at each stage:

{ **SPECIFIC ACTION** }

- Read "The Other 75%: College Education Beyond the Elite" to learn more about the average college student who attends our nation's institutions of higher education.

- Educate your faith community on the "loss points" and "momentum strategies" for students enrolled in a postsecondary degree program.

Connection

✓ Poor college counseling leads to under enrollment, poor matching, and failure to obtain financial aid for which students qualify. As a result, students either do not apply to postsecondary programs and/or they delay entry.

Entry

✓ Because of poor academic preparation in high school, many students fail to complete gatekeeper courses, such as math and English, that provide the foundation for other courses. Many students must take developmental courses, which dramatically decreases their odds of enrolling in or completing credit-bearing courses.

Progress

✓ Because of complicated life circumstances, such as serving as a caregiver for small children or needing to work to pay for college, many students enroll part-time, which extends their time to degree and lowers the odds that they will obtain a degree.

Completion

✓ Limited college advising leads students to accumulate credits that are not matched to their desired degree. Complicated transfer policies also mean that many students do not receive credit for courses they have completed at another institution.

Interventions and reforms that have proven successful

We are now discovering which measures show solid evidence of success in keeping students on track to college completion during each of these critical junctures. Different "momentum strategies" have been identified that keep students on track and propel them to the next level. Some of these interventions include:

Connection

• Consistent college and career ready standards

• Foster college-going norms supported by peers and trusted adults

• Increase understanding of college requirements, application, and financial aid processes

- Dual enrollment/Early College High Schools and AP credit

- Taking college placement exams in high school

- Enrollment directly from high school

Entry

- Diagnostic assessment and placement tools

- Mandatory advising, attendance, life skills courses, and declared courses of study linked to career pathways

- Accelerated remedial education, concurrent enrollment, and supplemental instruction

- Aggressive financial aid application support

Progress

- Providing emergency aid to deal with unexpected life events

- Innovative programs that encourage continuous attendance

- Student-centered learning aided by technology

Completion

- Mandatory advising

- Learn and Earn programs that combine credential attainment and work experience in field of study toward a career pathway

Factoring in the faith community

There are many ways in which the faith community can support students in these different phases of college access and completion. In our research, the faith community was able to marshal their resources, social/emotional, academic, and financial, to meet the various needs of students. Often, the social trust that congregations have within a community allowed them to leverage multiple actors in the community, including political, business, and educational leaders, to encourage student success after high school. In all the successful interventions we saw, the faith community empowered students to believe in themselves and take charge of their futures.

Part III of this guidebook provides a detailed examination of the critical components of a comprehensive approach to closing the college completion gap.

There are many ways in which the faith community can support students in these different phases of college access and completion.

Faith communities can identify and offer support to local two-year and four-year institutions through which most of college "stop outs" occur.

Demonstrating that your faith community needs to take action

To build and sustain the coalition your faith community will need to close the college completion gap, you will need to convince them that they have an essential role to play. You will need to highlight why your resources should be targeted at college completion.

You will need to be able to:

- Identify the critical role of the faith community in closing the college completion gap.
- Confront skeptics who claim that it's not necessary for all students to have the choice to graduate from college to be successful adults.

Identifying the critical role of the faith community in closing the college completion gap

Since the 1970s, there has been little progress made in reducing poverty. Without even taking the effects of the recession into full account, there is more inequality now than there has been since the 1920s. We know that college completion is one of the most powerful ways to address inequity and ultimately the poverty it spawns when individuals fail to graduate high school and college and remain in or return to their communities without the ability to find a job, raise their families, or be contributors to the economic, or civic lives of the neighborhoods in which they live. We also know that schools and government institutions cannot do it alone.

Faith-based community institutions can have a profound effect on increasing the number of students who graduate from high school and go on to postsecondary pathways for a variety of reasons:

- They are viewed as trusted and integral institutions in neighborhoods and communities.
- They have deep relationships with their congregants and exhibit a significant power to transform lives.

- They have tremendous reach within communities, particularly low-income communities where the church is often the center of community life and may be the only formal institution that plays this role.

- They are gatekeepers for a wide array of resources, including volunteers, money, facilities, and other in-kind supports.

- They have the ability to advocate for changes that will be beneficial to student success and hold other community institutions accountable for the success of their young people.

The challenges are too multifaceted for any one community or sector to succeed at this mission unaided. Faith communities must serve as a driving force for connecting disparate institutions, as well as for marshalling and deploying community resources, from caring, loving adults to facilities for community colleges, to close the college completion gap. They should complement the work of their schools and districts, and drive and sustain solutions for the long haul.

Congregations can aid the community in analyzing the whole range of student supports in and out of school and by ensuring that they are effective, sufficient, and provided to every student who needs them. They can also aid the community in examining existing policies and practices around financial aid, remediation, supports to low-income students, and retention to see if they are supportive of graduating all students.

Faith communities can identify and offer support to local two-year and four-year institutions through which most college "stop outs" occur.

{ SPECIFIC ACTION }

Refer to Parts II and III of Closing the College Completion Gap to:

- identify what your faith community can do to complement the work of the postsecondary institutions in your community

- read about successful faith-based strategies that are closing the college completion gap in other communities

- examine existing policies and practices

- identify and support institutions through which most college "stop outs" occur

Confronting skeptics

As you work to build the will to close the college completion gap in your community, you may face skepticism and even resistance.

College completion and poverty

Some community members may not believe that closing the college completion gap is an effective solution to reducing poverty. While the overall numbers of Americans without postsecondary degrees is significant, even they do not demonstrate the significance of the gap in educational achievement between low-income Americans and their peers. Educational inequality and poverty are closely linked in this country.

The college completion gap has its roots in educational inequalities that appear early and are reinforced throughout the educational pipeline. Essentially, those Americans who could benefit the most from quality secondary and postsecondary credentials are the least likely to obtain them. Students from low-income families, including those who are academically high-achievers to college age, are less likely to begin their college careers than their more affluent peers. If they do begin their college careers, they are more likely to "stop out" of college before receiving any degree, never attend selective colleges, or "stop out" of selective colleges before receiving a degree. This is an offense to the American ideal, and one of the main reasons the U.S. now ranks lower than many of our European counterparts in promoting social mobility. The good news is that most students want to complete college and parents of low-income children trapped in low-performing schools are the most likely to recognize that the world today demands a better education than 20 years ago and that their own involvement in their child's education is essential to their child's success.

[12] www.civicenterprises.net/collegecompletiongap.pdf

The value of a college degree

Some in your community may believe that a postsecondary credential is not necessary; that students who "stop out" can still make their way in the world just fine.

Community members will be able to point to a success story or two, to someone in their family, a notable person in the community or nation, or themselves as examples of people who did not earn a college degree but went on to lead a productive and successful life. But shouldn't every child have the choice to complete college and excel? So many students do not have that choice.

While there will always be talented, hard-working people who find success after failing to complete college, those people will be harder to find in the coming years. The odds of someone forgoing education after high school and finding employment to support a family and a middle-class lifestyle are low and rapidly decreasing.

America has a skills gap in the global economy that has only been hastened by the economic downturn. Ninety-seven million people are needed in America for high skill, high-wage jobs, but only 45 million Americans have the skills needed to do the work, forcing businesses to rely on outsourcing jobs or importing skilled workers.

Yet America has an excess of workers for low-skill, low-wage jobs which are rapidly disappearing. In our current recession, unemployment rates are twice as high for those with just a high school degree compared to those with a bachelor's degree or higher. Even when employment rises again, many of the old jobs will not return. The best insurance against a changing economy is obtaining a degree after high school.

SPECIFIC ACTION

- Use the Bureau of Labor Statistics data to show skeptics the importance of getting a degree after high school, especially during an economic downturn.[13]

[13] http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t04.htm

II. Understanding Your Community's College Completion Gap

To close your community's college completion gap, you will need to develop a clear understanding of its characteristics. Ultimately, you will need to examine the extent of your community's college completion gap, the reasons behind it, existing and needed student supports, and existing policies.

HERE IS HOW TO USE THIS SECTION

If you need to learn how big your college completion gap is and which schools have the greatest number of students in need of additional supports, go to:

How big is your college completion gap? Which schools have the most "stop outs"?

If you need to conduct an in-depth investigation (working with your K-12 districts, postsecondary institutions, and possibly with a research partner) into when and why students have difficulty making the transition to college and ultimately dropout, go to:

When and why are students "stopping out"?

If you need to examine how well existing student supports address your community's college completion gap and to identify what more needs to be done, go to:

How does your community's response measure up?

If you need to review policies and see if existing policies on issues, such as remediation, credit transfer, financial aid, and funding structures that reward enrollment rather than completion need to be changed, go to:

Are there policies and practices that need to be implemented or changed?

How big is your college completion gap? Which schools have the most "stop outs"?

An important first step toward understanding your community's college completion gap is to establish its extent and location. It will be important to understand at which "loss points" we are losing students as they seek to complete college degrees. To do this you need to answer these questions:

- What percent of students who begin college from your community do not receive an on-time degree from a postsecondary institution?

- Each year, how many high school graduates enroll in college the fall after graduation? How many of them require academic remediation?

- Which colleges do most of the students in your community who do not earn degrees attend?

It will be important to answer the following institution-level questions:

- What percent of part-time students are earning on-time college credentials? What percent of transfer, low-income, and students who enroll in remedial education are earning college credentials?

- What percent of these students are succeeding in their first-year college courses, especially in math and English?

- What is the first semester retention rate for the college? For the first year?

- For all of these questions, how do these rates vary by gender, race, income, full-time/part-time enrollment, and discipline/degree?

While many states are developing longitudinal systems to track their students throughout the educational pipeline, most states do not yet have the data systems to enable two-way communication between K-12 and postsecondary institutions that would make this information easy to gather. Thus while overall college completion rates are far too low, a longitudinal look that highlights different subgroups can reveal rates that are even lower, especially for low-income students. It is important that you understand where students in your community are falling through the cracks in the educational pipeline to ensure that your actions are suited to your community.

You need not wait for your state to establish these data systems to begin your work. In the meantime, there are ways to get information to aid you in your work to close the college completion gap in your community.

There is information you can gather from public sources that will help you establish a ballpark figure of how many students are failing to connect, enter, progress in, and complete college, and begin to help you answer the more detailed questions above:

- the number of 9th graders who enter college the fall after graduating from high school
- the number of 9th graders who graduate with a bachelor's degree in four years
- the number of 9th graders who graduate with an associate's degree in three years
- the percent of young adults who have a college degree

The difference between the number of students enrolled in 9th grade and the number who enroll in college after graduation will give you an idea of how many students are failing to begin their college careers. It will be especially important to pay attention to the number of students who enrolled in college the fall after graduation. Among low-income students who are accepted into a four-year college, nearly a third fail to enroll. As a faith community, you should begin tracking the students you invest in to identify points at which they could benefit from your support.

You should also ask your school districts what schools its graduates attend for postsecondary education. In districts where the college completion gap is especially wide, students who graduate from high school cluster in a few colleges with low graduation rates, where they fail to succeed. Identifying these schools will also be crucial to you as you begin your work to close the college completion gap.

When and why are students "stopping out"?

To close its college completion gap, your community will need a detailed understanding of when and why your students are "stopping out" of college. This will require an in-depth investigation, the involvement of your school district and postsecondary institutions, often an outside research partner, and perhaps six months to a year to complete.

You should not wait to launch your efforts to close your community's college completion gap until

you have this data. There is much you can do and much progress you can make while it is being collected and analyzed. However, it will be important to know when and why your students are dropping out to refine your solutions and maximize their impact.

When are students "stopping out"?

To get a handle on the college completion gap, you need to learn how far students are from graduation when they "stop out." Using the loss and momentum point framework when you work with your local postsecondary institutions, you can determine:

- The percentage of students who complete 20-30 credits in the first year
- The percentage of students who earn summer credits
- The percentage of students who enroll full-time
- The percentage of students who enroll continuously without "stop outs"
- The percentage of students who register on-time for courses
- The percentage of students who maintain adequate academic performance

These factors have been identified as indicators of success and predict with high validity whether a student will "stop out" of college. Other important factors to consider are, how far away do students live from the campus they attend? Do they have childcare needs? Did they need to take remedial education courses once they enrolled? How selective is the postsecondary institution they attend? All of these questions are important to answer to understand your community's college completion gap.

Why are students "stopping out"?

There are several categories of reasons for students to "stop out" of school. One or more of these factors may contribute to a student's decision to "stop out" and can serve as a guide when you are crafting your response to close the college completion gap.

{ SPECIFIC ACTION }

- Determine how many high school students in your community obtain a degree after high school.

- Visit the state data page of Complete College America to gather statewide data on how many 9th grade students are successfully beginning and completing college credentials and how many adults hold these degrees. This site also compiles graduation rates for two-year and four-year colleges in the state.[14]

- Visit the Lumina Foundation's state data page to gather this information at the county level.[15]

- Identify which postsecondary institutions in your community have a high number of students who "stop out."

- Use the Education Trust College Results Online website to evaluate the graduation rates of the colleges and universities your students attend outside of your state.[16]

[14] http://www.completecollege.org/state_data/
[15] http://www.luminafoundation.org/research/state_data/
[16] http://www.collegeresults.org/

- **Inadequate academic preparation.** Research estimates that less than half of high school graduates graduate with the skills necessary to succeed in college. At colleges with the lowest college graduation rates, a significant portion of the student body requires significant remediation in basic skills, such as reading, English usage, and mathematics. At many colleges, the way this remediation is delivered—it is required before the student can take courses in academic departments—discourages students from continuing in school and increases their time to degree. If a student of color tests into more than one developmental course, they only have a 9 percent chance of ever moving into credit-bearing courses.

- **Confusing financial aid programs.** While financial aid is available for low-income students, and many of the most expensive universities offer significant financial support to these students, those students who "stop out" of college are less likely to understand how to apply for financial aid and will fail to apply to more selective schools due to sticker shock. Therefore many students attend schools that are less selective or are not a good fit for their future goals.

- **Difficulty balancing work and school.** The average college student works at least part-time. More than half of students at four-year colleges work more than 20 hours a week, three out of five community college students work more than 20 hours a week. One in five college students have the additional burden of caring for dependent children. Despite their best intentions, many students cannot keep up the balance between work and school and choose work for the immediate financial rewards.

- **Disconnect from the postsecondary institution.** When students are not connected to their campus, they are more likely to "stop out." If they must commute long distances, attend part-time, or hold part-time work off campus, they are significantly more likely to "stop out" of college. Similarly, if students do not receive necessary guidance from staff members about which courses are required to complete their program of study, they are more likely to accumulate credits that do not match to degree attainment.

It is important to develop a good estimate of the percentage of students who "stop out" for these various reasons. This will help your faith community pinpoint the kinds of prevention, intervention,

[17] http://newsroom.dc.gov/file.aspx/release/9956/DoublingNumber_FINAL.pdf
[18] http://www.bigpicture.org/2010/01/the-summer-flood-the-invisible-gap-among-low-income-students/
[19] http://www.aei.org/paper/100019

and recovery programs that will be best to meet students' needs. For example, you may provide academic tutoring to students to help them through development education courses, guide students through applying, and re-applying, for financial aid, or work with your college partners to provide career coaches and mentors for students.

Getting the answers

Data analysis of "stop out" statistics will provide valuable insight on where along the educational pipeline, and for what reasons, students lose their way. Another important way to learn why students are leaving school is to ask them. There are several ways to do this — surveys, interviews, and focus groups.

Surveys, of course, are a uniform set of questions asked of a group. The questions are structured so the answers can be tallied at the end of the survey.

Interviews are questions asked one-on-one, and focus groups are group interviews of a particular segment of people, such as "stop outs."

Whatever your method for capturing responses, you want to make sure you talk to enrolled college students, those who are on the verge of "stopping out," and those who have already "stopped out." It will be important to get their insights on what reasons they identify for why they failed to complete and what supports they think would have enabled them to complete the requirements for their degree.

{ **SPECIFIC ACTION** }

- Ask students in your faith community what struggles they and their peers face on the road to obtaining a college degree.

- To guide the development of your own survey, interview, or focus group questions, see: *With Their Whole Lives Ahead of Them*[20]

- Work with a staff member in the admissions and financial aid, diversity, or other relevant office in the postsecondary institutions in your community to determine what supports their students need to complete their degrees.

[20] http://www.publicagenda.org/files/pdf/theirwholelivesaheadofthem.pdf

How does your community's response measure up?

To address its college completion gap effectively, your community will need to analyze how effective its current response is. Fundamentally, you need to know if current student supports are sufficient to enable its students to access college and succeed once they get there.

You will want to examine your K-12 schools, community colleges, and four-year colleges and universities, existing wraparound student services, and out-of-school supports.

- Are current supports directed at the right students at the right time?
- Are current supports comprehensive and effective?
- What other responses are needed?
- Which efforts aren't working and need to be changed, modified, or abandoned?

Are current programs directed at the right students at the right time?

If students successfully navigate certain key transition points, their odds of graduating from college significantly increase. These transition points are:

✓ transitioning from high school into college after being accepted into college

✓ transitioning into credit-bearing courses by quickly completing developmental education prior to fall enrollment, either through a summer bridge program or college credits earned in high school

✓ successfully completing the courses they enroll in their first year

✓ successfully completing 75 percent of required courses on time for their degree program

At each transition point, many students will need both academic and social supports. Throughout the process, students will need to see clear pathways to a degree that will help them earn a wage that can support themselves and their family.

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[21] http://www.csus.edu/ihelp/PDFs/R_Steps%20to%20success_10_09.pdf
[22] http://www.all4ed.org/files/archive/publications/remediation.pdf
[23] http://www.publicagenda.org/theirwholelivesaheadofthem

[**A DEEPER LOOK**]

To read about how tracking milestone achievements can improve student success at community colleges, see:

Steps to Success: Analyzing Milestone Achievement to Improve Community College Student Outcomes[21]

To read about how much states spend on remedial education at the community college level, see:

Paying Double: Inadequate High Schools and Community College Remediation[22]

To read more about why some students say they fail to complete college, visit Public Agenda's website.[23]

You will want to determine whether your community's academic, social, and other supports are:

- targeting when and where students are falling off the pathway to postsecondary success, including where students falter in middle and high school

- providing crucial information needed to apply for college and financial aid

- reconnecting adult students to educational programs that offer clear pathways to credentials that will enable them to have jobs with a family sustaining wage

- detecting and responding to academic, emotional, and financial struggles once students are enrolled in college

Are current programs comprehensive and effective?

- Do current efforts reinforce and support one another, or do they duplicate one another or even work against each other?

- Do remedial education programs accelerate academic catch-up of students, enabling them to take credit-bearing courses, or are students merely being trapped and discouraged by them?

- Which efforts have demonstrated a substantial impact on reducing the "stop out" rate, increasing the graduation rate, or improving college readiness and preparing students for adult success? These are the strategies that you will want to build on and weave into the additional actions you take.

- Compare existing student supports to the levels and types of student needs.

- Learn the percentage of students in your community who are unable to commit fully to college because they do not have access to reliable transportation or daycare.

{ **SPECIFIC ACTION** }

- Catalogue all the supports and wraparound services provided to students and parents in your community.

  Include student supports specifically targeted toward college persistence and completion as well as efforts to improve overall student involvement, parent engagement, high school success and transitions into college.

Are there policies and practices that need to be implemented or changed?

As a faith community, you occupy a unique role within the community to advocate for policies that will be helpful to students who want to pursue and persist in postsecondary pathways. You exhibit a powerful voice in the community with a significant reach that could make a big impact on closing the college completion gap. There are some policies that could be helpful to be implemented or changed at the district, college, or state level. These include:

Summer bridge programs. Research estimates that less than half of high school graduates are prepared for college courses. While summer bridge programs can be extremely useful to students, especially low-income students, making the transition from high school to college, they are relatively rare for this population, especially for those students who attend less selective institutions. If they do not do so already, you should urge the postsecondary institutions in your community to institute a summer program to help students acclimate to the college campus, its academic demands, and make connections with other college peers.

College and work readiness standards. Students who must take remedial education courses are significantly more likely to "stop out" before obtaining a degree than their peers who do not need to take these courses. In many states, the coursework required for high school graduation does not match the requirements for entry into the state's public university system. Your community and state should set college readiness standards and communicate them with your communities. They should provide early assessment opportunities for high school students and ensure that high school and college entrance expectations are aligned.

Remedial education. On campuses with low graduation rates, a significant portion of the student body lacks basic academic skills, such as reading, English usage, and mathematics. While states and colleges should ensure that students are placed in courses that are appropriate for a

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[24] http://www.jff.org/sites/default/files/AtD_brief_success_082609.pdf
[25] http://www.corestandards.org/

student's skill level, retaining students in remedial education can be discouraging and weaken their persistence by prolonging their time to degree. Colleges should track its students to determine whether they should remain in developmental courses or if transitioning them into regular courses with academic support would prove better.

Retention policies. Even after enrolling in college and completing the first semester or two, low-income, under-prepared, and first-generation students are still at a significant risk of not continuing their degree programs. Overall, two in 10 first-generation college students "stop out" before their second year of college. Less than half of first-time community college students persist to their second year of college. These students in particular should be anchored on the campus by the support of faculty and peer mentors who guide the students through social and academic difficulties and provide guidance when the students are applying for summer jobs and internships and re-applying for financial aid. Faith-based communities and mentors, of course, can themselves play a significant role in providing support to college students.

Longitudinal data. States should continue to encourage their P-16 councils to develop longitudinal data systems that will enable the community to determine where along the educational pipeline individual students falter. This will be especially important in examining the critical transition between high school and college, where too many low-income students lose their way. It will also be crucial for keeping track of students who transfer between colleges or enroll part-time. Sharing information between these important pieces of the educational pipeline will help foster closer relationships between secondary school districts and their postsecondary institutional counterparts and ensure that no student is lost even if they attend college in another district. This data should also measure achievement points strongly linked to student success.

Rewarding persistence in addition to enrollment. States should revise their funding structure to community colleges and four-year institutions on the basis of how many of their students not only enroll, but also return after their freshman fall and freshman spring. States should also fund colleges on the basis of how many of their students meet intermediate milestones that are strong predictors of degree completion, including the percentage of students who enroll full-time, the percentage of students who enroll continuously without "stop outs,"and the percentage of students who have a low rate of course dropping and failure.
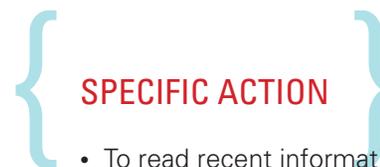
{ SPECIFIC ACTION }

- To read recent information on the steps your state is taking to close the college completion gap, download the full state reports from Complete College America's website.[26]

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[26] http://www.completecollege.org/state_data/

III. Solutions for Addressing the College Completion Gap

The college completion gap will not be closed in your community through a single policy change, quality college prep courses, student mentoring and leadership development, or by providing postsecondary institutions with access to your facilities for courses or your pews for information sessions. The college completion gap in your community will only be closed through thoughtful weaving of multiple institutional improvements, educational supports, and policy changes. The completion gap will be closed by ensuring that every student has the necessary supports to stay on track.

As a community of faith, your role will be to insulate the educational pipeline, serve as knowledgeable advocates for changes that will improve student success, and/or engage in smart partnerships to get students the supports they need to succeed academically. All of these measures will need to be fueled by the necessary resource allocations, effectively targeted at the students in need, and guided by a measurement system that lets you know what's working and what's not.

HERE IS HOW TO USE THIS SECTION:

If you're ready to develop a set of coordinated improvements that work together, go to:

Developing a comprehensive set of community-wide solutions

If you need to develop a system of coordinated supports for students throughout the educational pipeline, go to:

Developing comprehensive student supports

If you need to learn about how to foster a college-going culture in your faith community, go to:

Fostering a college-going culture

If you need to facilitate college access for students in your communities, go to:

Facilitating college access

If you need to learn about forming partnerships with postsecondary institutions in your community, go to:

Forming partnerships with postsecondary institutions

Developing a comprehensive set of community-wide solutions

While your solution strategy must reflect the specific and unique challenges your community faces, you can refer to established models to get your work started. These models highlight the role that faith-based organizations play in larger community plans to close the college completion gap. Their successes will prove helpful to you as you consider ways your faith community can make an impact on closing the college completion gap in your community.

Ready by 21, Credentialed by 26[27]

Ready by 21, Credentialed by 26 is an initiative of the Forum for Youth Investment that challenges leaders in education, business, government, and community-based organizations to align resources and work together to ensure that more students successfully make it through high school and college with a credential that prepares them for work and life. Originally focused on preparing college- and work-ready students, the organization has recently expanded its model to include the completion of a postsecondary credential, given its increasing importance. The faith community is integral to providing students with the wraparound supports they need in this model.
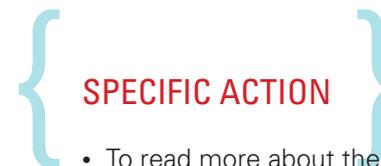
{ **SPECIFIC ACTION** }

- To read more about the key design features of a community-wide initiative, see Jobs for the Future's Key Design Features of a GED to College Pathway.[28]

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[27] http://www.forumforyouthinvestment.org/readyby21/home
[28] http://www.jff.org/sites/default/files/GEDtocollege_design_elements_072109.pdf

GED to College: Building On Ramps to Postsecondary Education for Low-Income Young Adults[30]

Jobs for the Future is working to increase the range and number of high-quality pathways into and through postsecondary education for low-income people who have dropped out of high school. Currently, while 60 percent of young people who enter a GED program pass the examination, only 10 percent of them ever complete a postsecondary degree or credential. Since January 2009, the organization has investigated a total of 40 sites around the country to identify promising models that engage low-income, disconnected young people and prepare them for entry, persistence, and completion in postsecondary programs. They are working with YouthBuild USA and the National Youth Employment Coalition to strengthen their programs for postsecondary access and completion for their students in 15 sites throughout the country.

[29] http://www.forumforyouthinvestment.org/readyby21/examples
[30] http://www.jff.org/projects/current/education/ged-college/841

PROFILE:
EBENEZER UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
BURLINGTON, NORTH CAROLINA

Ever since Larry Covington took over as senior pastor of Ebenezer United Church of Christ 15 years ago, he has placed improving the education of the community's children at the center of the church's mission. Founded in 1882, Ebenezer is an interdenominational Christian Church and is located in an unassuming building in Burlington, NC, a small city 40 miles west of Raleigh-Durham that boasts a population of just over 50,000. Although the physical structure of the church is modest in size, its connection to the community is deep and touches every institution of education and higher learning in the Alamance-Burlington area. Although the church's activities are wide-ranging, all of them have their roots in improving the education of children, disconnected youth, and adults. Under Covington's leadership, Ebenezer has spearheaded programs and partnerships that support and supplement the educational pipeline from age two all the way through postsecondary pathways.

According to Covington, a self-described educational advocate, actively engaging in the education of the citizens of Burlington fulfills his church's mission, which not only aims to embark on a holistic approach to improve the lives of their own congregants but also to fulfill their civic responsibility to respond to the needs of the community in which they are housed by making a substantial, sustained impact. Although Burlington is a mid-size town, the population has grown by more than 13 percent since 2000, and Covington affirms that they are not immune to the troubles of bigger cities, such as gangs, high dropout rates, and crime. In Burlington, nearly 30 percent of families with children under the age of 18 currently live below the federal poverty line, and only 20 percent of the adult population holds a bachelor's degree or higher. Covington emphasized that "education is an excellent passport out of poverty" and so it is fundamental to every service they provide.

Operating with a full-time staff, Ebenezer runs many programs that take place in every corner of the church. They run a daycare center called Excel Christian Academy for children ages two through first grade that uses the fully accredited Accelerated Christian Education curriculum. They operate mentoring programs for boys and girls called Boys to Men, which works with boys ages 10-18 who are referred to the church from the court system, and Girls as Precious Pearls, respectively. In addition to talking about relationships and social identity in groups and with their mentors with

> " Education is an excellent passport out of poverty. "
>
> — Senior Pastor, Ebenezer United Church of Christ

whom they are matched for at least a year, the children also participate in goal workshops where they research colleges they plan to attend and the requirements necessary for admission. The church operates a 10-week camp in the summer for students in grades 5 through 8 that focuses on science, math, reading, and physical education. Additionally, they run a summer camp for teenagers called Destination Diploma and Degree that combines academic tutoring and mentoring. The church also hosts college fairs and college exposure trips for children in the community. The church also has two computer labs that are open to the entire community.

In addition to running programs out of their church, Ebenezer has ties with educational institutions that run deep. As part of their partnership with the Alamance-Burlington School System, the church is currently piloting a dropout prevention program for students who are suspended from school for three to 10 days. As part of this partnership, they have also adopted three low-performing schools that feed into each other—Eastlawn Elementary, Broadview Middle, and Hugh M. Cummings High Schools. At these schools, church members serve as mentors and tutors for at-risk youth and parent advocates. Through a partnership with Alamance Community College, the church provides in-kind supports, namely free rent and utilities, for the college's ESL and GED programs. Ebenezer has also partnered with Elon University's college access program, the Elon Academy, to help them recruit from underrepresented groups. The church also has partnerships with Alamance Citizens for Education, which raises awareness, coordinates community resources, and garners community support—including from the business community—to ensure that all children in the community receive a quality education. Ebenezer also partners with Triumph, a non-profit created in 1999 that provides support to students, and their families, who have significant behavioral difficulties and who had been pushed out of traditional schools, and summer and after-school programs.

For all of these partnerships, the church has become known as a community partner and is regularly sought out by community leaders. Covington has relationships with the mayor and state legislators and has been asked to run for a seat on the school board.

When asked about how the church engages in all of these activities, Covington said that they start with a vision (i.e., lowering the dropout rate in Burlington), collaborate with professionals and experts in the church and community to fill in the details of a plan to realize that vision, and they narrow in on target groups (i.e., suspended students on the verge of dropping out). They then share that vision with relevant stakeholders. Next, they turn to the congregation and local community

groups, such as the National Caucus of the Black Aging—a group that mobilizes elderly black volunteers for 20 hours a week—to staff the projects. Depending on what the program is, they charge able participants a minimum cost to fund part-time directors.

Most of the church's programming is supported by charitable donations from its congregation and business leaders. Covington estimates that in his congregation of 1,300, approximately 40 businesses are represented that make up the difference in their funding shortfalls. Although the church is not opposed to grants (they have a small grant from the United Way), Covington asserts that he will not let the absence of a grant stop his vision for the community. Covington asserts that the church operates with a "shoe-string" budget but achieves maximum results.

Ebenezer is a classic example of a church that is actively engaged in its community: they garner respect in the broader community, they provide social and emotional support to members of the church, and they have the ability to mobilize volunteers and engage community leaders around a common cause. Above all, Ebenezer demonstrates the power of a charismatic leader to rally a church around an important issue, secure significant community buy-in, and have a structure in place to ensure the supports reach the children most in need.

Developing comprehensive student supports

The college completion gap has its roots in educational inequalities that appear early and are reinforced throughout the K-16 educational pipeline. As we have demonstrated, students from low-income families are underrepresented at every milestone in the educational pipeline. If they do enroll in college, it is clear that these students could benefit from additional supports to succeed in school and earn a postsecondary degree.

These supports, which should be provided at the elementary, middle, high school, and postsecondary levels, will include a combination of wraparound services; mentors; tutors; adult advocates; transportation support to and from college; daycare services for students with dependent children; and enhanced parental involvement in the college process for younger students. These supports not only need to be available, they also need to be coordinated with each other and linked with the student's school experience.

Establishing a relationship with the educational institution of interest

In order to ensure that students in your community are receiving the vital supports they need to be successful academically, you will first need to establish a relationship with the educational institution of interest, whether that is a local school, the entire K-12 school district, or local community college or four-year institution.

Low-income students in particular are disconnected from the supports they need to successfully make the transitions into elementary school, into middle school, into high school, and ultimately into and through college or postsecondary training, when compared to their wealthier peers. By establishing a partnership with an educational institution of interest, you can determine where the holes are in your community's educational pipeline that prevent more students from graduating from high school and from accessing and graduating from college.

K-12 partnerships

Establishing a relationship with a K-12 district would ensure that low-income students have the supports they need to successfully complete high school and make the critical transition from the summer after graduation to fall enrollment.

It is important that whatever your actions are, they are based on a needs assessment developed by your institution and the education institution you are partnering with.

These partnerships could also be aimed at disconnected youth and adults to help them re-enter the educational pipeline.

For students to graduate from high school prepared for college, work, and life, research asserts that students need caring adults in their lives, safe places that offer constructive use of time, a healthy start and healthy development, an effective education that builds marketable skills, and opportunities to help others by making a difference through service. It is important that whatever your actions are, they are based on a needs assessment developed by your institution and the education institution you are partnering with.

SPOTLIGHT: THE MICAH INITIATIVE

The Micah Initiative, a partnership among churches, synagogues, and mosques and other faith communities and the Richmond Public Schools, is an example of how religious non-profits partner with K-12 school districts to ensure that students have the supports they need to succeed academically. Micah provides volunteers and financial support to those schools that are struggling the most. The faith leaders partner heavily with Communities in Schools, which is present in 26 of the schools with the highest need in the district. There are 48 schools in the Richmond Public School system. In four of these high-need schools, half of the salary for the Communities in Schools site manager is provided by the religious partnership. Micah also saturates the schools with long-term volunteers who serve as tutors and mentors to children. At Woodville Elementary, for example, with a 98 percent poverty rate and high crime area, Micah provides more than half of the volunteers that serve the 530 students. The school's January 2010 partnership report shows that there are 112 volunteers for the school, 64 of which come from Micah partners. These volunteers serve as tutors, mentors, classroom assistants, scholar trip chaperones, and on citizens' advisory groups.

{ SPECIFIC ACTION }

- To evaluate your work with K-12 systems, visit the America's Promise Alliance's website[31], which outlines the supports that children need to succeed as adults and provides examples of communities that are successfully engaged in this work.

- Go to the Alliance for Excellent Education's website for data that allows you to identify high schools with both very low and high graduation rates in your community.[32] This will help you target the high schools, and consequently their feeder middle and elementary schools, that have students who need your help the most.

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[31] http://www.americaspromise.org/
[32] http://www.all4ed.org/promotingpower

A DEEPER LOOK

To learn more about creating a comprehensive student support system, see:

Communities in Schools (CIS)[33]

Communities in Schools uses research-based high school dropout prevention strategies and connects community resources with schools to help young people learn, stay in school, and prepare for life. Each year, more than 2 million young people in 27 states and the District of Columbia have access to integrated student support services through CIS. CIS has independent evaluations confirming the effect of their efforts in reducing high school dropout, a key condition, of course, to ensuring more students stay on track to fulfill their college dreams.

To learn more about reconnecting disconnected youth to the educational pipeline, see:

Early College High School Initiative[34]

Since 2002, the partner organizations of the Early College High School Initiative have started or redesigned more than 200 schools in 24 states and the District of Columbia. The schools are designed so that low-income youth, first-generation college goers, English language learners, students of color, and other young people underrepresented in higher education can simultaneously earn a high school diploma and an associate's degree or up to two years of credit toward a bachelor's degree tuition free.

Gateway to College[35]

Portland Community College created the Gateway to College program in 2000 to help reconnect high school dropouts with their education. Through the program, students complete their high school diploma requirements at technical and community colleges while simultaneously earning college credits toward an associate's degree or certificate. The program has evolved from a single-

[33] http://www.cisnet.org
[34] http://www.earlycolleges.org/
[35] http://www.gatewaytocollege.org/

site program into a national network of 27 colleges in 16 states, partnering with more than 110 school districts.

To learn more about how early college high schools increase student achievement among low-income and minority students who have previously underperformed academically, see:

Innovations in College Readiness: How Early College Schools Are Preparing Students Underrepresented in Higher Education for College Success[36]

To learn more about ways the faith community is providing wraparound support to community college students, see:

The Circles Campaign[37]

In 2007, Move the Mountain Leadership initiated the Circles Campaign, which gets commitments from the entire community, including the faith community, college faculty, and other community-based groups to build circles of support around students in community colleges to help them get out of poverty. Circles is the U.S. pilot ministry with the poor for the United Methodist Church. Circles also has pilots led by Lutheran Social Services, Catholic Charities, United Way, Goodwill, and Community Action Partnerships. The faith community is instrumental to building circles of support for families in poverty in this model. There are currently 56 pilot programs in 24 states underway throughout the United States.

For more information on how community colleges are providing support to struggling students, see:

The Opening Doors Program[38]

Developed by MDRC, the Opening Doors Program targets community college students on academic probation and provides them with additional academic support and study skills training. Research has found that the program significantly increases the average number of credits earned by participants, their likelihood of earning a GPA above 2.0, and their likelihood of passing all of their classes.

[36] http://www.jff.org/sites/default/files/Innovations_in_College_Readiness_PDFVersion_102909.pdf
[37] http://www.movethemountain.org/circlescampaign.aspx
[38] http://www.mdrc.org/project_31_2.html

Parental engagement

The role of parents in the educational achievement of their children is profound. Students with involved parents, regardless of their family income or background, are more likely to earn higher grades and test scores, enroll in higher level classes, attend school and pass their classes, develop better social skills, graduate from high school, attend college, and find productive work. The opposite is true for students whose parents are less engaged.

In many communities, the faith community facilitates communication between parents and schools. They also provide families with the resources they need, from daycare assistance to career development, to focus on their student's academic success. Improving the lives of parents is one of the most significant ways in which your community can break intergenerational cycles of poverty. As a faith community, you are uniquely poised to engage in this area.

Specifically relating to college, research shows that children whose parents did not attend college are unlikely to do so themselves. In fact, only 9 percent of low-income 8th graders whose parents did not attend college will obtain a bachelor's degree. Research shows that parents, especially low-income parents, want their children to attend college because they understand the changing realities of our global economy. However, many of them lack the necessary information to aid their student in doing so. Given the connection that your congregations have to students and their families, your community could serve as a crucial conduit of information on the college admissions process.

[39] http://piqe.org/

Fostering a college-going culture

Establish a college awareness campaign

Students who leave college realize that a diploma is an asset, but they may not fully recognize the impact failing to complete a postsecondary degree will have on their future. They are also less likely to have grown up in households where the importance of college was extolled, and they are less likely to say that they always knew they would continue to college.

It is important that you emphasize the importance of receiving a postsecondary credential to their future success, given that receiving a credential after high school is one of the most powerful predictors of economic success. As a faith community, you should issue an altar call every year to encourage students to pursue postsecondary pathways with the support and guidance of your faith community.

As you begin to evaluate what form your college awareness campaign will take, it will serve you to look to established campaigns that couple their information with application support:

- College Summit[40] is a national non-profit that that helps high schools increase their college enrollment rates by building a college-going culture. The organization focuses on the transition between high school and postsecondary education, a critical time for low-income and first-generation college students, even those who have already been accepted. Their approach includes postsecondary education planning curriculum for high schools, intensive summer workshops for students, on-going counselor and teacher development, training and support for students who serve as peer advisors, and data tracking, so that schools and postsecondary institutions know where College Summit students are in the pipeline.

- College Goal Sunday[41] is a statewide volunteer program that provides free information and assistance to students and families who are applying for financial aid for postsecondary education. Originally begun in Indiana, the campaign now relies on 9,000 trained volunteers each year. In 2009, it served more than 42,000 students in 37 states. The program is specifically

{ **SPECIFIC ACTION** }

- Develop a systematic approach for serving families. To create a model for serving families, download the Partners for Sacred Places' guidebook on serving families.[42]

- To aid parents specifically with helping their child gain access to and succeed in college, visit the Education Trust's website for guides for Hispanic parents[43] and African American parents.[44]

[40] http://www.collegesummit.org/
[41] www.collegegoalsundayusa.org/
[42] http://www.sacredplaces.org/pdf/guide_srv_fam.pdf
[43] http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/publications/files/Hispanic%20Parent%20Guide(web).pdf
[44] http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/publications/files/AA%20Parent%20Guide(web).pdf

geared to reach youth ages 18-24 who are racial or ethnic minorities, first-generation college students, or from families earning less than $40,000 a year.

- National College Advising Corps[45] is a national organization that places recent college graduates as college advisers in low-income high schools and community colleges to provide the advising and encouragement students need to navigate college admissions. They currently have 14 partner colleges throughout the country, including Brown University, University of Utah, University of Georgia, and University of California, Berkeley.

Mentoring with college success as a goal

Students who "stop out" of college are more likely to have a college selection process that is limited and often seems happenstance and uninformed. They are also more likely to go into college without specific career and job plans, other than hoping for a better job or a better future. They are also more likely to go to a school that is nearby, regardless of whether that school has a low graduation rate or offers the programming necessary to meet their future career goals.

College students who "stop out" are also less likely to have been encouraged by their families or teachers and guidance counselors to attend college. Empowerment is a crucial element of academic success, particularly among low-income and first-generation students, and research reaffirms that having a strong relationship with a supportive adult can have a significant impact on college enrollment.

Disseminating information alone may not be enough to encourage a student who is the first in their family to go to college to apply. As a faith community, it is important that you marry these two activities. It is important that your mentoring ministries include messages of college attendance and completion and that these messages begin early and are sustained throughout the middle and high school years.

While early exposure to college attendance is important, it is crucial that the college support you

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[45] http://www.advisingcorps.org/

provide to students during the high school years not end after graduation. For many low-income students, the summer between graduation and fall enrollment is a time marked by a lack of support from parents and high school and college officials as they continue to make fundamental decisions about where, and whether, to attend college, even after they have been accepted. As a faith community, it is important that college selection become part of your mentoring ministries to ensure that students have the support they need during the critical transition between high school and college.

[46] http://depts.washington.edu/uwdrmprj/about/

[47] http://www.knowhow2go.org/

[48] http://www.caresmentoring.com/

[49] http://www.advisingcorps.org/

[50] http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/

[51] http://www.collegeboard.com/student/apply/the-application/23626.html

{ SPECIFIC ACTION }

- For an example of a step-by-step guide on how to apply to college, when to apply to scholarships, and what steps students need to take to graduate from high school college ready, go to the University of Washington's Dream Project website.[46]

- Go to KnowHow2Go to figure out ways to align your mentoring ministries with college access and success support.[47] You can also connect with a local chapter of the National Cares Mentoring Movement[48], which recruits mentors with college access and success specifically in mind.

- To connect your students to local college mentors, visit the National College Advising Corps website to see how to connect with a chapter in your community.[49]

- Go to the National Center for Education Statistics' website to help students plan which colleges will be the best for them to attend.[50]

- For a calendar of important dates in the college admissions process, visit the College Board's website.[51]

Facilitating college access

Partnering with National College Access Network members

Low-income students are less likely to have information on financial aid and how to apply for it. Every year, more than a million students who might qualify for aid fail to pursue it. They are more likely to be paying for college themselves and attribute their "stopping out" to not being able to keep up with the work/school balance necessary for them to fund their education. Low-income students are also less likely to have the support they need to perform well on standardized entrance exams, such as the ACT, SAT, ACCUPLACER, and COMPASS.

As a faith community, connecting your students to these resources can make a significant dent in helping students access college, and receive the financial, academic, and emotional support they need to complete once they begin.

Partnering with a local organization that is dedicated to college access, persistence, and success has a two-way benefit: the faith-based institution gains access to these services for their youth and the college access organization is enabled to serve a larger group of students who may be most in need. These partnerships allow your institution to help your youth obtain a postsecondary credential, even if you do not have the capacity to engage in all of these activities on your own.

> Students participate in "inspire" moments, where business leaders speak to them about their professions and jobs with practical advice about what students need to learn to get those jobs.

PROFILE:
CINCINNATI YOUTH COLLABORATIVE
CINCINNATI, OHIO

In the mid-1980s, Procter and Gamble CEO John Pepper became concerned with the lack of skilled employees in the Cincinnati region from which his and other companies could draw. He also saw alarmingly high dropout rates in the Cincinnati Public Schools. In 1987, he convened a steering committee of 30 community leaders, including religious and education leaders, in an unprecedented partnership called the Cincinnati Youth Collaborative. The goals were to: reduce rising "failure and dropout" rates in the Cincinnati Public Schools; help every youth in Cincinnati

Public Schools graduate from high school; increase the number of students attending college; and ensure more youth could successfully enter the workforce. College completion was an implied, but not expressed, part of their mission.

The results have been encouraging. Eighty-six percent of high school students participating in CYC programs have been promoted to the next grade; 95 percent of seniors in CYC programs have graduated from high school; and 89 percent of these seniors have applied to college. CYC is now interested in tracking college persistence and completion rates. In Cincinnati, nearly half of the adult population has graduated from high school and never obtained a college degree.[52] Although faith-based institutions and congregants from local churches have been playing a significant role in these efforts, CYC board member and Assistant Pastor and Director of Outreach Tim Senff of Crossroads Community Church, a non-denominational church in Cincinnati, said, "faith-based organizations are a sleeping giant in our city and country -- we could rouse this sleeping giant to get more students into and graduating from college."

Core to this success has been the CYC's Mentoring and College Access and Readiness program that enables important interventions in the lives of young people grades 3 through 12 by providing mentoring and college readiness services. CYC brings together more than 1,700 volunteers (including 350 volunteers from Crossroads Community Church who tutor and mentor youth in three CYC schools) and 100 local businesses and organizations to help young people graduate from high school and successfully make the leap forward into postsecondary education or rewarding employment. CYC provides services and programs that focus on college preparation, including: academic planning; financial aid advising; college planning; college advising; college campus tours; college entrance exam preparation; and scholarship searches.

Students participate in "inspire" moments, where business leaders speak to them about their professions and jobs with practical advice about what students need to learn to get those jobs. Students are also regularly asked, "Which college are you going to?" Significantly, CYC provides more than 1,500 low-income, first-generation college-going students from the Cincinnati Public Schools opportunities to visit public, private, four-year, and two-year colleges, including half a dozen

[52] American Community Survey Estimates, 2006-2008. Of those over 25 years old, 28.7 percent have a high school degree as their highest degree obtained. An additional 17.2 percent have some college, but no degree, including associate's, bachelor's, or graduate or professional degree.

HBCUs, in all cases, colleges that are all outside of the Cincinnati region. In addition to meeting with admissions officers, students engaged in campus activities and overnight visits. In some cases, students are offered on-the-spot admission and financial packages.

CYC has implemented various programs, such as Educational Talent Search funded by the U.S. Department of Education that identifies and encourages, through Talent Search Advisers on-site in the Cincinnati Public Schools, more than 1,200 students to complete secondary school and take the next steps to enter college. CYC is one of several partners involved in the University of Cincinnati's GEARUP program (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) in which college advisors help qualified students prepare, pursue, and succeed in postsecondary education. Federally funded, GEARUP connects the University of Cincinnati with CYC; Cincinnati State Technical and Community College; Cincinnati Public Schools; and Parents for Public Schools of Greater Cincinnati.

CYC also has AmeriCorps College Advisors—Project REACH (Realizing Educational and Career Hopes)—who are recent college graduates engaged in one or more years of national service through the AmeriCorps program who work in Cincinnati Public Schools and in CYC's community college resource centers to prepare students to go to and succeed in college. The advisors are trained to mentor first-generation and low-income students and their families on the college planning and preparation process. They use themselves as examples of peers who, notwithstanding tough circumstances, graduated from college. The "Whiz Kids" program, which consists of 75 churches and more than 1,100 volunteers, provides mentoring and tutoring in more than 35 schools in Cincinnati and follows students through high school. They are interested in expanding this program to foster a culture of college completion.

A DEEPER LOOK

To read about how a local college awareness campaign has increased the college application, acceptance, and persistence rates for low-income students, see:

Evaluating a College Information and Awareness Campaign: The Texas GO Center Project[53]

[53] http://www.stanford.edu/~jcunha/Cunha_Miller_GO_Center_Report.pdf

SPOTLIGHT: PEACE COMMUNITY CENTER, TACOMA, WA

Peace Community Center, a literal and figurative extension of Peace Lutheran Church in Tacoma, WA is situated within the heart of Hilltop, a neighborhood with a high concentration of low-income and minority youth. When the church, which is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year, opened the doors of the community center, they decided that education would be their primary focus because the other activities in which they had been engaging, such as a feeding program, were not making a sustainable impact in the community. The center currently has 48 students in college who have garnered nearly $1.5 million in scholarships to support their goal of a college education. The center provides its students with tutoring and other academic supports (facilitated by AmeriCorps national service volunteers), a course on financial aid and life skills including work on a project of social significance to Tacoma, and trips to college campuses. They are also planning to extend their visits to historically black colleges and universities next summer.

Forming partnerships with postsecondary institutions

Partnering with postsecondary institutions in your community

Among the most successful activities that will enable more students to complete college once they begin originate in a partnership between a faith community and a local postsecondary institution. As a community of faith, you should consider partnering with religious institutions of higher education in your community. You should also explore ways that you can form a seamless pipeline between your faith community and on-campus ministries and diversity offices at schools your students attend.

Not only do these partnerships provide the postsecondary institution with the resources they need to better serve their students, including wraparound supports for their students, but they also enable that institution to better serve the community in which it is housed. Often, these institutions gain access to underserved populations in the community that may be otherwise intimidated to set foot on a college campus or pursue a degree after high school. Whatever the activities, the most high impact partnership your faith community can make on graduation rates is through a direct partnership with a community college or four-year college or university.

PROFILE:
NORTHWEST LEADERSHIP FOUNDATION—ACT SIX
PACIFIC NORTHWEST, WASHINGTON STATE

Since 1989, the Northwest Leadership Foundation has sought to encourage, develop, and strengthen leadership for the spiritual and social renewal of Tacoma, Washington and the other urban centers of the Pacific Northwest. The Foundation is one of 54 scattered throughout the United States and around the world that seeks to turn urban centers into places of peace and prosperity, rather than places of violence and scarcity. To achieve this goal, NLF works with people of faith and goodwill, including religious and secular institutions, develops programmatic responses to the needs of the community, and develops the capacity of faith communities to work on these problems. The Foundation is both intentionally religious and doggedly committed to measurable, effective outcomes.

Currently, NLF administers 12 programs that deliver both direct and indirect services to the community, including working with churches to help them see their neighborhood as a place for which they can care, providing alternatives for teens in the juvenile justice system, school-based mentors to local schools, and grants to local churches to help them initiate and sustain efforts that improve the community (Peace Lutheran Church's Peace Community Center is one of their grantees). NLF has received funding from the U.S. Department of Justice and from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Each year, they reach 1,200 individuals through their direct services and 10,000 through their indirect services.

One of their initiatives that is showing success in getting students to successfully complete college is the Act Six Leadership and Scholarship Initiative. Recognizing that enrollment and retention rates in higher education remain uneven across ethnic groups, NLF taps into the resources of faith-based colleges and urban churches and develops the leadership skills of their scholars so that they not only graduate from college, but return to their communities to contribute to their social and spiritual revival.

Act Six employs a four-part strategy: recruit and select diverse, multicultural cadres of promising urban leaders; provide training during their senior year in high school to prepare them for academic

success and develop them as leaders; send the cadre together to college with four-year full tuition scholarships; and provide support and ongoing leadership development opportunities. When students apply to Act Six, they are applying to one of the Foundation's partner colleges: Whitworth University, Gonzaga University, Pacific Lutheran University, Northwest University, and Trinity Lutheran College. After the seven to 11 scholars are accepted into the program, they undergo a seven-month training that includes practical college readiness (time management, financial planning, writing skills) and community development, race dynamics, and intercultural communications. The full four-year scholarship is funded by federal and state grants in addition to a significant financial contribution of the college partners. While the students are on campus, they are connected to an Act Six coordinator and four-year faculty mentor. During the year, NLF staff members make a couple of visits to campus and help scholars secure internships and jobs during the summer and other breaks.

Over the last seven years, Act Six has trained 107 scholars in 12 cadres from Tacoma, Seattle, and Spokane. The four-year college graduation rate for Act Six participants is 87 percent; 94 percent of their scholars have graduated in five years. In Tacoma, more than half of the adult population has graduated from high school but not obtained a college degree.[54] Seventy-nine percent of these students are first-generation college goers and 64 percent come from low-income families. Thirty-six percent of these students are African American, 25 percent are mixed heritage, 19 percent are Asian/Pacific Islander, 14 percent are Hispanic, 6 percent are Caucasian, and 1 percent are American Indian. Distinct from similar programs that couple financial, academic, and social support, Act Six also emphasizes creating leaders who will give back to their communities. Currently, 62 percent of the initiative's first graduates are working or serving in their home communities, including a student who is serving as a college advocate for students as an Upward Bound instructor in Tacoma, one who is serving as an AmeriCorps and VISTA member at the Peace Community Center in Tacoma's Hilltop neighborhood, another who is teaching at a local high school and serving as a College Bound instructor, and yet another who works as a program assistant at NLF's ProTeen Center, which provides positive alternatives to detention for court-involved youth in the area.

{ **SPECIFIC ACTION** }

- Connect with the college access network affiliate in your community. Visit the NCAN website for a full list of members.[55]

[54] American Community Survey Estimates 2006-2008. Of adults 25 years and over, 29.1 percent hold a high school diploma and have no college experience; 24.2 percent have some college experience but have not obtained a degree, including an associate's, bachelor's, or graduate or professional degree.

[55] http://www.collegeaccess.org/member_directory.aspx

NLF and Act Six demonstrate the power that faith-based institutions can have when they partner together to leverage their resources and become a sounding board for the community at large. By investing in their community's young people, and getting significant buy-in from colleges and the surrounding community, the initiative is making a sustainable contribution to the social, economic, and civic fabric of the Pacific Northwest.

Community Outreach and Recruitment

One of the most highly leveraged ways that your faith community can expand access to college for low-income students in your community is to open your doors to community colleges and four-year institutions that are delivering information on financial aid and the admissions process. Because a faith community is often a safe space, it can be especially helpful in connecting "non-traditional" college students who may be first-generation college goers, older than traditional college students, or re-entering college after a long absence. Your faith community could even consider lending some of your space to be an official satellite of a college's main campus for these purposes, or as sites for Adult Basic and Literacy Education (ABLE), General Education Development (GED), or English as a Second Language (ESL) courses.

SPOTLIGHT: ALAMO COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT

The Alamo Community College district in San Antonio has instituted community education centers to tap into underserved populations. These centers serve as satellites to the main campus where students can complete admissions processing, including taking entrance exams, completing the FAFSA, and filling out other necessary financial aid forms. One of the centers is housed at St. Paul United Methodist Church, where the center has an MOU with the church. From 2000 to 2008, the centers successfully increased the recruitment of low-income, educationally disadvantaged, minority, and first-time-in-college students. A total of 51,142 prospective students visited the centers during this period, with 25,155 successfully enrolling in one of the Alamo Colleges. Technology awareness and computer accessibility has been provided to more than 15,318 individuals from the surrounding communities. These partnerships with community-based organizations, including St. Paul, were an intentional strategy to ensure delivery of services to meet the needs of the community. St. Paul provides the Alamo Colleges with free office space, access to building facilities, parking, and storage space.

Workforce Strategies

Serving as a link between the educational and business community can be some of the most highly leveraged activities your community's congregations can engage in to close the college completion gap in your community. In these partnerships, the faith community maps the job market to see which sectors the business community cannot find skilled workers in. Then they work with community colleges to aid students through their educational journey and gain commitments from the business community to hire these students once they have completed their degrees.

For more information on other programs that work at the community college level to usher students through their coursework and give them work experience, see:

Year Up[56]

Founded in October 2000, Year Up is a one-year intensive training program that provides young urban adults 18-24 with a unique combination of technical skills, college credits, an educational stipend, and a corporate internship. Year Up's student retention rate is 83 percent. Eighty-seven percent of graduates have been placed in full- or part-time position within four months of graduation.

To read more about how combining work experience with college credits is creating a pathway to postsecondary degree completion for young adults, see:

Dollars and Sense: How "Career First" Programs Like Year Up Benefit Youth and Employers[57]

SPOTLIGHT: CAPITAL IDEA AUSTIN[58]

Started in the late 1990s, Capital IDEA originated out of conversations in churches and schools of Austin Interfaith, a multi-ethnic, multi-issue coalition of 30 religious congregations, public schools, and unions that work together to address public issues that affect the well-being of families and neighborhoods in their community. The religious leaders in Austin Interfaith were startled to find that many of their neighbors were holding two or three jobs and still not earning a living wage. In conversations with business leaders, employers told them that they found themselves short of skilled workers, especially in occupations such as nursing, electronic technicians, and computer support specialists. After these conversations, Capital IDEA secured commitments from both community colleges and the business sector: if they assisted community colleges in training low-income students in the industrial fields that were experiencing shortages and job growth, business leaders would hire them. Fulfilling this commitment includes an intensive 12-week, 30-hour-a-week development education course for participants. This course remediates students from as low as the fifth grade; most of these participants pass college entrance exams within one year. Nearly all pass within two.

Once these students have enrolled in community college, they satisfy Texas Success Initiative standards at three times the rate of students in regular developmental coursework. Since their founding, Capital IDEA has helped 700 families obtain jobs with a living wage. Currently, 624 participants, all of whom were living at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty income guidelines, are actively enrolled in educational sponsorship. The organization's one-year retention rate is 87 percent and the average starting salary of their graduates is nearly $19 an hour. Capital IDEA is part of a growing network of successful workforce strategies initiated and sustained by interfaith organizers. Other programs include,

- Project QUEST in San Antonio[59]
- Project Arriba in El Paso[60]
- Project QUEST: Dallas/Collins*
- Capital IDEA Houston*

[56] http://www.yearup.org/
[57] http://www.jff.org/sites/default/files/DollarsSense_052510v3.pdf
[58] http://www.capitalidea.org
[59] http://www.questsa.org/
[60] http://www.projectarriba.org/

*These programs are newly underway.

IV. Moving Forward to Create Lasting Change

In order to make a sustainable impact in the lives of those who need your help the most, you will need to build committed support within your faith community to closing the college completion gap. You will also need to ensure that your community of faith partners with other sectors in the community to maximize your efforts to create lasting change.

This section explains how you can create a lasting, community-wide commitment.

HERE IS HOW TO USE THIS SECTION:

If you are ready to engage in work to close the college completion gap and need guidance on how to transform your vision into concerted action, go to:

From vision to action

If you're ready to identify ways to ensure that progress continues, go to:

Preparing for long-term action and success

{ SPECIFIC ACTION }

- To discern which postsecondary institutions in your community need your assistance the most, gather research on their graduation rates.[61]

- Connect with the Lumina Foundation's Achieving the Dream partner colleges.[62] These institutions have been charged with advancing the student success agenda and in helping state and national efforts to close achievement gaps and increase the attainment of degrees and credentials, and with working with community-based organizations to expand their outreach within the community.

[61] http://www.collegeresults.org/
[62] http://www.achievingthedream.org/

From vision to action

As a community of faith, whatever actions you decide to take to close the college completion gap should originate from a vision that you and your faith community arrive at that is based on the needs of your wider community. Once you have crafted your vision, it is important to tether it to a concrete plan of action to ensure sustained progress on closing the college completion gap in your community.

✓ **Start with a vision for closing the college completion gap** that is compatible with your mission as a community of faith. This vision could be to increase the number of low-income students who apply to college with all of the necessary information on admissions and financial aid; or providing daycare assistance to young parents who are working toward postsecondary degrees. Whatever your vision for contributing to closing the college completion gap, it should originate within your faith community, be based on the needs of your wider community, and begin with the end in mind.

✓ **Recruit leaders and build teams** that will fill in the logistical details of the vision and execute various aspects of your plan. You should draw upon the talents of your congregants, including retired schoolteachers, business leaders, and civil servants, and the wider community to ensure that your vision can be effectively and efficiently executed. These teams should be composed of people with a variety of outlooks and experiences. While they should all be committed to closing the college completion gap, they should reflect your community. They should include youth who are preparing to go to college as well as those adults who are already attending. Their viewpoints will be crucial as you determine what supports and interventions will be effective to close the college completion gap in your community.

✓ **Narrow in on target groups.** The college completion gap is a complex and multifaceted problem. While it must be addressed comprehensively, no faith community can tackle the entire problem on its own. It is important that you focus on target groups, for example, youth who are struggling in high school and could benefit from a program that allows them to obtain high school and college credentials simultaneously, adults already in the workforce who could benefit from postsecondary training to increase their earning power, or local students who have recently graduated from high school and are in their first year of college. How much you narrow in on target groups should be contingent on your financial and human capacity.

- ✓ **Identify partner organizations** within the community that share your vision and are committed to closing the college completion gap. These organizations can be the local K-12 school district, a local community college, a historically black college or university, other communities of faith, a national college access network member, or other youth development and youth-serving non-profits. Whichever group your organization aligns with, it is important that your vision for supporting our nation's young people and closing the college completion gap align. It is also crucial that you assign a point person from your faith community that will be charged with facilitating communication with the partner organization of interest.

- ✓ **Turn to your faith community and local community groups to staff projects.** One of the most valuable traits of a faith-based institution is the ethic of service to which their congregants adhere. When staffing projects you should draw upon your community, in addition to other volunteer organizations committed to your goals.

- ✓ **Identify funding and other community resources,** like internship opportunities, that you can provide to the students of your faith community that will smooth their postsecondary journey as your faith community engages in other initiatives to close the college completion gap.

- ✓ **Advocate for change** at the community level that will institutionalize practices that are successful in enabling more low-income students to take control of their lives after high school and eliminate policies that reward enrollment rather than persistence and completion.

Preparing for long-term action and success

Setting benchmarks and timelines to achieve goals

The likelihood of ongoing, sustained progress in closing the college completion gap will be greater if markers of an effort's progress — benchmarks — are in place and linked with timelines. For each effort undertaken, establish short-, mid-, and long-term benchmarks, each of which should address measurable, meaningful, and varied features of the effort.

Measuring progress against benchmarks will require you to get information and feedback consistently as you go forward. Regularly checking outcomes and impact against benchmarks will reveal which in- and out-of-school activities are effective and which wraparound supports are making a difference, and which of either of these need to be modified or eliminated.

For the greatest success, everyone needs to take responsibility for meeting benchmarks and achieving progress. As a faith leader, you should hold yourself and other community leaders accountable for building a momentum of college completion in your community and commit to make any adjustments necessary along the way.

Keeping everyone's eyes on the long-term reward

As you and your faith community become deeply involved in your work, the amount of effort required and the size of the challenge you face may seem overwhelming. You may become frustrated and disengage. You should take several steps to make sure enthusiasm and progress remain at a high level for the long haul.

- **Revisit goals and priorities**. As you learn which efforts are working, which are not, and what resources are available, you can take satisfaction in your success and streamline plans to make workloads more manageable.

- **Organize and prioritize goals** to better match your time and financial resources availability. What can be done well in the short-term to accomplish results by reallocating existing resources? What can be done well in the mid-term that may require more significant changes in resource allocation or in policies? What initiatives will take several years of preparation before they can be implemented effectively?

- **Consider long-term leadership and staffing** from the outset and along the way. For the long-term, who will oversee your work? How will work progress and be recognized? How will issues and transitions in leadership be managed? Are relationships growing between your faith community and the leadership of other existing organizations in the community?

Training and Assistance

At every step, remember you are not alone. There are people and organizations at hand and across the country that are more than ready to support your success.

If you and your fellow congregants have questions and/or need assistance with your efforts to close the college completion gap, you can turn to the groups listed below. They are experienced, respected providers of technical assistance to states, communities, schools, and districts.

America's Promise Alliance
1110 Vermont Avenue, N.W., Suite 900
Washington, DC 20005
202-657-0600
http://www.americaspromise.org

Communities in Schools
2345 Crystal Drive, Suite 801
Arlington, VA 22202
703-519-8999
http://communitiesinschools.org

Community Action Partnerships
1140 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 1210
Washington, DC 20036
202-265-7546
http://www.communityactionpartnership.com

Community College Research Center
525 West 120th Street, Box 174
New York, NY 10027
212-678-3091
http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/

Data Quality Campaign
One Dupont Circle, NW, Suite 340
Washington, DC 20036
202-251-2612
http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org

The Forum for Youth Investment
7064 Eastern Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20012
202-207-3333
http://www.forumforyouthinvestment.org/readyby21

Goodwill Industries International
15810 Indianola Drive
Rockville, MD. 20855
800-741-0186
www.goodwill.org

Jobs for the Future
8 Broad St., 8th Floor
Boston, MA 02110
617-728-4446
http://www.jff.org/

Leadership Foundations of America
717 Tacoma Ave South, Suite A
Tacoma, WA 98402
253-272-0771
http://www.leadershipfoundations.org

Move the Mountain Leadership Center
416 Douglas Avenue, Suite 205
Ames, IA 50010
888-232-9285
http://www.movethemountain.org

National CARES Mentoring Movement
230 Peachtree Street, Suite 530
Atlanta, GA 30303
404-584-2744
http://caresmentoring.com

National College Advising Corps
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Jackson Hall
Campus Box 2200
Chapel Hill, NC 27599
919-843-8116
http://www.advisingcorps.org

National Youth Employment Coalition
1836 Jefferson Pl., NW
Washington, DC 20036
202-659-1064
http://www.nyec.org/

National College Access Network
1001 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 632
Washington, DC 20036
202-347-4848
http://www.collegeaccess.org

Partners for Sacred Places
1700 Sansom Street, 10th Floor
Philadelphia, PA 19103
215-567-3234
http://www.sacredplaces.org/

Project GRAD USA
4265 San Felipe, Suite 900
Houston, TX 77027
713-986-0499
http://www.projectgrad.org

Sojourners: Christians for Justice and Peace
3333 14th Street NW, Suite 200
Washington, DC 20010
202-328-8842
http://www.sojo.net/

The Corps Network
1100 G Street, NW, Suite 1000
Washington, DC 20005
202-737-6272
www.nascc.org

Youth Transition Network
1225 W. Main St.
Suite 101, PMB 254
Mesa, AZ 85201
602-441-2240
http://www.ytn.org

YouthBuild USA
58 Day Street
Somerville, MA 02144
617-623-9900
http://www.youthbuild.org