



High Expectations & Strong Supports Yield Postsecondary Success

Figure 2

Ready by 21, Credentialed by 26
 This is the second in a series of publications focused on postsecondary success, supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

In this Issue

On the Ground: YouthBuild Brockton.....2

Research Update.....5

Voices From the Field: Ann Coles.....7

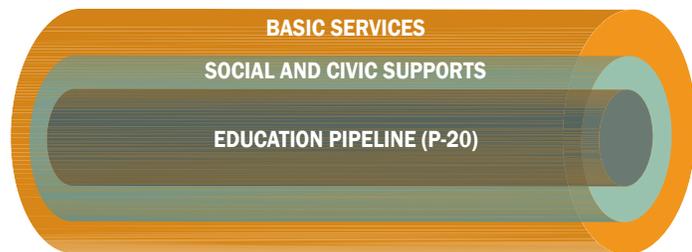
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Supporting Student Success ⁱⁱ	
Academic Supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proactive academic advising • Learning communities and other cohort models • Accelerated/contextualized remediation
Social and Civic Supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High expectations • Positive relationships • College know-how • Service-learning/leadership development
Basic Supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial aid • Emergency funds • Health care • College-friendly employment • Access to housing, food, transportation, child care

Increasing the number of Americans with a postsecondary credential has been identified by President Obama as well as education and business leaders across the country as critical to our nation’s success in the 21st century. However, a full-scale increase in the number of young adults who successfully make it through the education pipeline and attain some postsecondary credential will require a complex combination of changes at the individual, institutional, system, community and policy levels.

Many local, state and national leaders are working to address the pressing need to tighten key joints in the education pipeline by aligning curriculum, standards, and assessments across K-12 and postsecondary systems. But helping thousands more young people successfully make their way through the education system and into secure employment, especially low-income and first generation college students,

Figure 1



will require more than just tightening these joints. We must *insulate* the pipeline with the range of supports necessary to ensure success (see figure 1).ⁱ

The good news is we know a lot about the supports needed to help young people get to and through higher education (see figure 2). Even more good news is that strategies for improving the delivery of these supports are being tested, with promising results, in CBOs, community colleges, and four-year institutions all over the country. But once the current flurry of attention, funding, pilot sites and demonstration programs passes, the pressing questions will be less about strategy and more about sustainability.

At the end of the day, what does it cost to effectively insulate the higher education pipeline? Are partnerships between colleges and CBOs sustainable? Will shifts toward performance funding policies make higher education institutions less willing to serve vulnerable students? What will help incentivize institutions to really do what it takes to help disadvantaged students succeed? While the field doesn’t yet have firm answers to all of these tough questions, many smart people and institutions are grappling with them. Two guides, forthcoming in 2011, promise to yield particularly useful lessons: one from Jobs for the Future on cost models for community college-CBO partnerships and one from YouthBuild USA on the characteristics of effective partnerships.

Our primary goal in this document is to demonstrate that it is, in fact, possible to insulate the education pipeline for older, vulnerable youth and to provide the range of supports necessary for their postsecondary success. In **On the Ground** we describe how YouthBuild Brockton is partnering with Massasoit Community College to move from dropout recovery into postsecondary completion. In **Research Update** we discuss what research tells us about how specific supports – academic, social, financial and otherwise – can help young people succeed in postsecondary education. And in **Voices from the Field**, Ann Coles, senior associate at the Institute for Higher Education Policy, reflects on supporting student success and what it will take from an institutional, community and policy perspective to expand access to these kinds of supports at scale.

ON THE GROUND: YOUTHBUILD BROCKTON

Traditionally, YouthBuild programs are places where disconnected youth come to work toward their GED or high school diploma and develop marketable skills while building homes for low-income people. There are over 273 local programs and YouthBuild USA supports the national network. Since 1994, over 92,000 YouthBuild students have earned their GED or high school diploma and built over 19,000 units of affordable housing.

In December 2008, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, YouthBuild USA launched a Postsecondary

YouthBuild USA Postsecondary Education Pilot Sites & Community College Partners

Metro Atlanta YouthBuild AmeriCorps (GA)
& Atlanta Metropolitan College

YouthBuild McLean County (IL)
& Heartland Community College

YouthBuild Brockton (MA)
& Massasoit Community College

YouthBuild Columbus (OH)
& Columbus State Community College

Portland YouthBuilders (OR)
& Portland Community College

YouthBuild Philadelphia Charter School (PA)
& Community College of Philadelphia

Operation Fresh Start (WI)
& Madison Area College

Education Initiative designed to dramatically increase the number of YouthBuild students who earn a postsecondary degree or credential. At each of seven local pilot YouthBuild programs, dedicated transition coordinators support students on every possible dimension – inside and outside the classroom.

During the first two years, the pilot programs have achieved remarkable success. In less than 24 months, they have increased GED/diploma rates by 20 percent and increased postsecondary placement rates by 18 percent. Furthermore, almost two-thirds of the first cohort continued on into a second year of postsecondary education – almost triple the national average for low-income, first generation students. We felt this success begged a closer look.

The first impression you get walking into YouthBuild Brockton is of a 50-person extended family, epitomizing the comprehensive, student-centered approach that lies at the heart of YouthBuild and the Postsecondary Initiative. In their efforts to move students through the final sections of the education pipeline (from K-12 through postsecondary education and into the workforce) the program provides a structured educational experience insulated with key social, civic, and basic supports. To deliver this experience, YouthBuild Brockton partners with Massasoit Community College (MCC), which serves over 8,000 students and boasts a 55 percent second-year return rate (much higher than average).

Meeting Basic Needs

Some of the solutions offered by YouthBuild Brockton are focused on simply making participation in postsecondary education feasible, given the complexity of students' lives. As one YouthBuild student put it, "You feel cared for, nurtured, valued, and are pushed to become the best you can possibly be. The support I received from the staff members enabled me to become a strong, capable and efficient student."

Health and safety. Staff members work tirelessly to help students with basic health and safety issues: everything from housing, to child care, transportation and food. For some of these needs, students get help navigating public systems like MassHealth and food stamps. In the case of housing, YouthBuild works with its parent organization, Old Colony YMCA, to give students access to safe, affordable housing as well as a host of other activities and opportunities. When needs arise for services students can't get by other means, YouthBuild provides them. This includes ongoing mental health care and case management.

Accessibility. YouthBuild Brockton also makes structural decisions that help remove barriers and accelerate success. For example, in 2006, when they needed to secure a new location, staff chose a site that was a short, transfer-free bus ride from MCC, as opposed to the 45 minute, three-transfer ride from the previous location.

Emergency resources. Many YouthBuild pilot sites maintain “last dollar funds” for postsecondary initiative students. These resources are set aside to prevent small expenses or temporary cash shortfalls from permanently derailing a student. Funds are often used to make up small differences in financial aid awards and the cost of tuition, to float some cash for books and supplies for a student who can’t wait for a reimbursement check, or to help with small but essential items like eyeglasses. Last semester, a last-dollar fund provided \$65 for emergency child care to a student during finals week. She completed her exams, passed all three classes, re-enrolled and was doing well this fall semester. These funds have become ever more important in the current economic climate.

“You feel cared for, nurtured, valued, and are pushed to become the best you can possibly be. The support I received from the staff members enabled me to become a strong, capable and efficient student.”

Creating Social and Civic Connections

Staff members spend a great deal of time addressing issues that fall somewhere in the vast space between basic needs and academic success. This includes some practical supports like college and career counseling, and some less tangible strategies like creating positive social norms, setting high expectations, engaging youth as leaders, and creating opportunities for sustained positive relationships.

College and career counseling at Brockton and other YouthBuild Postsecondary sites covers a range of issues that affect access and persistence in college. Students go on school visits, speak with representatives from various institutions, get help filling out the FAFSA and other paperwork required to enroll, and learn about the full cost of attendance (not just tuition). Guest speakers, employer site visits and “career clusters” support exploration of different fields.

Coaches understand the skills needed to be successful in different careers and track employment trends in the community so they can help students find options that

combine their interests and skills with value in the labor market where they want to live. One postsecondary counselor recently found out Floral Design was one of the fastest growing careers in his community. “I feel a little weird recommending students become florists, but it can provide them an interesting career and a family sustaining wage, so I ask them to consider it!”

Though the intensity itself is impressive, it is the *integration* of college and career advising at YouthBuild Brockton that is most notable. Few young people, even the most privileged, experience synergistic college and career counseling. At YouthBuild, career counseling is viewed through the lens of postsecondary success, and college counseling is focused on pursuing a direct path to a rewarding career and family sustaining wage. One Brockton staff noted, “I don’t care if you want to be a landscape architect, a lion-tamer, or a phlebotomist, you tell me what you want to do, and I’ll find a postsecondary pathway that’ll help you make it happen.”

High expectations and positive social norms. The goal of postsecondary completion is woven into every aspect of the program, from day one until the students graduate with some kind of credential. One wall is devoted to a massive mosaic with framed copies of every GED certificate earned by YouthBuild Brockton students, and students know the goal is to fill the opposite wall with postsecondary degrees and certifications. The importance and expectation of postsecondary completion permeates every classroom, every construction site, and every interaction staff have with students and families. The whole environment is engineered in formal and informal ways to reinforce the idea that postsecondary education is important and that these students are capable of succeeding.

Leadership development. Youth empowerment and youth involvement in programmatic and organizational decision-making are core tenets of the YouthBuild approach. Sometimes significant programmatic changes are made based on student input, such as the recent switch back to a one-week classroom/worksites rotation. In addition to student and alumni involvement in site-level decision making, a national postsecondary student advisory group, VOICES, was created with representatives from all seven pilot sites. One YouthBuild Brockton graduate joined the advisory group to show his peers, “...yes, I came through similar struggles as you, but it is possible and imperative to live a positive life. I feel it is my duty to continue using the opportunities I’m given to help as many people as I can.”

YouthBuild believes each student brings valuable experience and capacity to the table and that they must play an active

role in their own success and that of their peers. This asset orientation is clear and unique; the mainstream conversation about helping low-income students learn and succeed in higher education is largely focused on addressing problems and deficits. As one student explained, “When I came to YouthBuild, nothing in my past followed me.”

Supportive relationships. Strong, supportive relationships with positive adults and peers are the bedrock of YouthBuild programming. These relationships cut across all three layers of the insulated pipeline – academic engagement, social and civic support and basic support. Every YouthBuild Brockton student has at least three adults on site who know him or her well, set high expectations, give unconditional emotional support, provide structure to support development and learning, and are deeply committed to their success. One transition counselor said her goal is to make sure students understand, “No matter what happens, no matter how derailed they get, they can come back to YouthBuild and pickup EXACTLY where they left off.”

Ensuring Academic Engagement

Prior to the Postsecondary Education Initiative, YouthBuild Brockton focused on moving students into full time construction jobs after earning their GED. Now, all students who earn their GED transition immediately into a college preparatory classroom led by an instructor who describes herself as “living and breathing all things postsecondary education.” The curriculum emphasizes vocabulary development and current events, with a special focus on critical thinking based on an instructional approach created by the Youth Development Institute in New York. One student likened the general emphasis on mental toughness to “academic boot camp.”

Addressing remediation needs. To assess academic readiness and pave the way to postsecondary success, YouthBuild Brockton works with MCC to give practice placement tests so students can see how they perform without heavy consequences. At some YouthBuild postsecondary sites, students are coached and supported to remain in the college preparatory classroom until they can place out of all (or nearly all) remedial coursework, since few students who enter college with remediation requirements ever complete a degree. This is one of the many ways YouthBuild works around traditional postsecondary pathways that have proven largely ineffectual for disadvantaged students.

Summer bridge programs, where incoming students are introduced to college academics and campus life, are an

important component at all YouthBuild postsecondary sites. In conjunction with MCC, YouthBuild Brockton has an intensive, ten-week summer bridge program (most bridge programs last one-two weeks). Staff characterize the program, which includes five weeks of full-time classroom work followed by five once-a-week workshops leading up to the start of the fall semester, as an extended overview of and intensive preparation for college life. The director of the program at MCC says it was designed to help prevent external factors from threatening success, “by creating different pathways for students to pursue credits, having a staff team dedicated ONLY to postsecondary education transition work, and giving students a single point of contact to navigate all on-campus systems.”

“No matter what happens, no matter how derailed they get, they can come back to YouthBuild and pickup EXACTLY where they left off.”

Though the summer bridge program has many components, YouthBuild and MCC staff members agree the most important thing it does is begin extending the supportive relationships students have built at YouthBuild to counterparts on the MCC campus. College administrators across the country are frustrated by the fact that on-campus services like tutoring and counseling are often under-utilized, particularly by students who need them most. Many colleges and access programs, including YouthBuild Brockton, have found that when students are introduced by a trusted adult to a specific person in an on-campus support center, they are much more likely to use services when they need them. Mark Showan, Executive Director at YouthBuild Brockton, says the relationship students develop with their on-campus advisor is critical. “They know her, like her, and trust her even before they start classes... and we have another set of eyes and ears at the college looking out for our students.”

Ongoing advising. Most YouthBuild postsecondary sites continue providing academic support to students after they transition into college coursework, offering tutoring, campus check-ins, and academic advising. Some sites help students develop timelines and plans for tackling tests, assignments, and projects. A few sites even help students think through their schedules down to the hour, building in time for commuting, work, class, studying, family time, and leisure. When asked if that level of case management was a little too much, a transition counselor at YouthBuild McLean County replied, “It’s necessary. Expectations are high, support

is intense, and failure is not an option.” One YouthBuild Philadelphia student said, “...I thought academics would be the hardest part, but the hardest part is time management and being responsible for your own learning... It’s really all about making a commitment to do the work... But it helps a lot to know that I have a support network in YouthBuild that I can fall back on...”

Getting Beyond Pilots

YouthBuild is expanding their Postsecondary Education Initiative to five more sites in 2011 and hopefully another seven in 2012. And specific practices that have been successful at pilot sites are being integrated into other YouthBuild sites all across the country.

The innovation at YouthBuild Brockton is not that they provide high-quality, comprehensive supports in the context of a single program. Many CBOs, afterschool programs, and community schools have done so for years, with varying degrees of success. The innovation at YouthBuild is that they make the full range of basic, social, and academic supports available to transition age youth (often up to age 25) as they make their way through the entire upper portion of the education pipeline – from K-12 completion through postsecondary education, and into the workforce.

A success story like this begs an important question: Are comprehensive programs with intensive wrap-around supports the only way to improve postsecondary education completion rates for vulnerable youth? The jury is out on that question. We may be able to change the odds by weaving together supports from a variety of institutions, programs, and services. We may be able to improve and expand the delivery of supports on higher education campuses. We may be able to rely on some combination of these strategies.

“Expectations are high, support is intense, and failure is not an option.”

One thing is clear however. Students that are academically engaged, socially connected and supported, and able to meet their basic needs are likely to succeed in higher education. YouthBuild Brockton is demonstrating this with a high-risk population. These are youth that many, quite frankly, have already given up on. Given dismal postsecondary success rates for low-income, first generation and other disadvantaged youth in this country, this is a lesson we cannot afford to overlook.

Considering Cost

YouthBuild programs will receive up to \$100,000/year for three years to implement the pilot. Pass-through funds cover a dedicated staff position as well as partnership activities, data and tracking, materials, and executive leadership. Sites also leverage local funding, and Segal AmeriCorps awards help students cover their tuition costs. Through this combination of sources, current pilot sites are helping anywhere between 40 and 200+ students pursue a postsecondary credential.

Many assume wrap-around supports are prohibitively expensive. Jobs for the Future is developing a per-student cost model (forthcoming in 2011), but the investment to date, along with YouthBuild USA’s expectation that annual costs will drop as the work is integrated into the YouthBuild approach suggest the financial barriers may not be insurmountable.

RESEARCH UPDATE

A new generation of research on student success is underway. Building on a rich body of knowledge about higher education, this promises to add considerably to our understanding of what approaches and policies work to improve student success, and also how they work, for whom, and under what conditions. Newer research is looking at completion as an outcome, building on earlier efforts to identify factors that facilitate or interfere with access and retention.

That said, we already know quite a bit about what it takes to support academic success for low-income youth, and that knowledge should be front and center in policy and practice conversations about improving their postsecondary completion rates. Here we highlight specific findings related to some of the strategies employed at YouthBuild Brockton.

Academic Support

Academic engagement is a strong predictor of motivation, persistence and success in higher education.

- Improving academic preparation and in particular, reducing time in remedial coursework is key to increasing completion rates.ⁱⁱⁱ

- When remediation is necessary, accelerated and contextualized models have been tested with some degree of success^v, as have dual enrollment programs where students earn college credit while completing high school.^v
- Learning communities with thematically linked coursework are particularly promising and have increased engagement of low-income students in many different postsecondary settings.^{vi}
- Proactive or “intrusive” academic advising also appears promising, especially in the context of learning communities or other models that get advisors into the classroom. Peer tutoring programs that create supportive opportunities to review course content have also shown positive results.^{vii}
- Transparent and more prescribed pathways that limit choices within majors can help students avoid costly mistakes and understand and fulfill degree requirements in a timely way.^{viii}

Social and Civic Engagement and Support

The strategies described above have an academic focus but many are about helping students develop a sense of belonging on campus. Not surprisingly, research shows that positive relationships with faculty, staff and fellow students are critical to success in higher education. Specifically:

- Access to caring, knowledgeable adults helps students overcome a range of challenges that can derail progress.^{ix} Through the deployment of support specialists, advisors, transition counselors, or resource specialists, many promising efforts are underway to reduce student-counselor ratios (often in the ballpark of 1,000 to 1 at community colleges) and otherwise increase student connections.
- Development of “college knowledge” – the nuts and bolts of how to register as well as less tangible aspects of the structure, values and norms of college is critical, especially for first generation students. While early exposure is important, student success courses or first year seminars that teach study skills and help students navigate the campus experience are increasingly common and when well designed, show promise for increasing retention and completion rates.^x
- Community service activities linking volunteerism and coursework have increased social integration and retention rates for low-income minority students.^{xi} Programs like Gateway to College and YouthBuild also work to create campus leadership and governance roles

for vulnerable students. Drawing on the basic tenets of youth development, these strategies rarely come up in discussions about postsecondary completion and warrant further study.

Basic Support

Almost a quarter of today’s college students have dependent children, and more than half of all community college students work more than 20 hours a week. Many students leave school because despite financial aid, trying to manage life and school, especially with inadequate resources, becomes too difficult. Though these and related barriers to student success are well documented, solutions that address the basic fact that many students live in poverty are not yet widely accessible or well-researched.

- Evaluations of Gateway to College, the New York City Partnership for College Access and Success, and new efforts like the YouthBuild Postsecondary Initiative, suggest that retention rates for disconnected youth increase with access to comprehensive supports like health care, transportation, and emergency funds.^{xii} A rigorous study of enhanced community college student services suggests that even fairly light-touch efforts can have positive effects.^{xiii}
- Preliminary data on partnerships between Single Stop USA and several large community college systems to offer comprehensive financial resource centers suggest they hold promise for increasing retention.^{xiii}
- College-friendly jobs like work-study have a track record of increasing retention rates.^{xv} Learn and Earn models and partnerships with external employers that create accessible jobs also have the potential to engage students in their own learning and lead to career development and long-term employment.^{xv}

From Research to Practice

Naming specific supports and organizing them into categories (like academic, social and basic) can help stakeholders understand what it takes to support student success, but this summary suggests that when it comes to practice, *integrated* approaches hold significant promise. In other words, integrating social supports into the academic experience through strategies like learning communities and bridge programs is important, as are accessible employment opportunities that connect to students’ academic interests. This call for integration reflects what we know about learning and development and responds to the reality that many of today’s students spend limited time on campus, making it critical that supports be streamlined to facilitate success.

Research to Watch

Pathways to Postsecondary Success

An interdisciplinary team at the University of California is working on this five-year (2008-2013), mixed methods study of youth in poverty, to better understand the knowledge and tools needed to maximize postsecondary opportunities for low-income youth. Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the research is guided by an asset-orientation, suggesting we must understand and learn to build on strengths that currently exist within youth's families and communities.

<http://ucaccord.gseis.ucla.edu/>

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

A Conversation with Ann Coles

What kinds of supports can help ensure young people – especially low income, first-generation students – successfully attain a postsecondary credential?

The Pathways to College Network uses an integrated framework for academic and social support developed in the 2009 paper *Removing Roadblocks to Rigor*. There we recommend interrelated, coordinated strategies in five areas: emotional support, informational support, instrumental support, appraisal support and structural support. These need to work in tandem with academic rigor and should reflect the principles of youth development. We use a unified definition because social support creates the conditions that allow students to take advantage of academic support strategies.

How are higher education institutions working to “insulate the education pipeline” and provide supports to ensure student success?

In Boston we have schools developing bridge programs, enhancing case management and tutoring, launching career seminars, focusing intensively on the first year experience, building learning communities, getting faculty to be academic advisors and mentors, providing dedicated studio and study space for commuter students. But no one that I know of has a system that is truly integrated across the different supports. In many cases colleges have support services that students are not using, so rethinking the way services and supports are evaluated, organized and delivered is critical. Many schools have no way of tracking the use of support services. Each office that provides a service might track it, but nothing is tracked across offices.

The resource issue is obviously huge. Beyond providing more financial aid, what can schools do to support students?

Financial literacy and support is critical. In the Boston area, financial aid directors are starting to work on two issues. First is standardizing financial aid award letters so they are understandable and students can more easily evaluate their aid packages. Second, schools are developing a financial literacy curriculum to help students understand how to manage money so they can be more in control of their finances. Campus sensitive employment is another real opportunity. Students who have jobs on campus have higher persistence rates, and they like college more.

Do you think community based organizations can play a role in helping to insulate the pipeline?

Community based agencies often have trusting pre-existing relationships with students and may have a more nuanced understanding of some of the issues vulnerable students face. Having services provided by outside agencies might be part of the solution, but they typically lack resources to sustain their work and don't always have leverage with the higher education institutions. U-Mass Boston is embedding a community based person into their own system and structure. She reports to people in academic support services but is employed by the nonprofit. The question is, how do you sustain and institutionalize that kind of support?

What is it going to take to really move the dial on student success?

We can put better state policies in place, but you have to have the implementation commitment on regional and local level. We need leadership from highly respected community leaders who can educate the broader community about the importance of focusing on student success. At same time, we need people working in the trenches. And we will only be effective if higher education, non-profits and business are working on this together.

Ann Coles, Ed.D., is a senior associate at the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) and a senior advisor for college access programs at TERI, a Boston-based nonprofit promoting educational opportunities to change people's lives. Coles also serves on various national groups, including the advisory boards of Scholarship America, College Goal Sunday, and the American Council on Education. She previously served as vice chair of the College Board trustees and was a founding board member of the Council for Opportunity in Education and ACCESS, Inc., a financial aid advising and last dollar scholarship program for Boston public school students. Coles holds a doctorate from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

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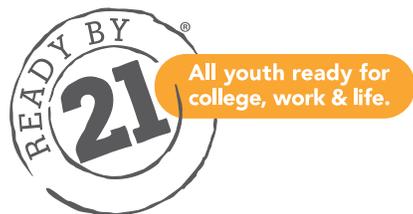
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