

1

Building Commitment to a Postsecondary Systems Change Agenda

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS
ISSUE BRIEFS SERIES
NOVEMBER 2013



OMG CENTER FOR COLLABORATIVE LEARNING



About the OMG Center

Headquartered in Philadelphia, PA, the OMG Center for Collaborative Learning (OMG) provides evaluation and philanthropic services to social sector organizations. Our areas of focus include “cradle-to-career” education, asset development, community health, diversity leadership, and arts and culture, among other fields. For 30 years, our clients have been major private and community foundations, government organizations, and national and regional nonprofits. Within the field of postsecondary access and success, OMG has worked on an array of major national and regional initiatives for organizations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Lumina Foundation for Education, the Citi Foundation, the Strive Network, Achieving the Dream, Campus Compact, and the California Career Advancement Academies.

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Acknowledgements

The OMG Center thanks the many organizations and individuals who contributed to the development of this Issue Brief. First, and foremost, we recognize our partners at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for generously investing in efforts to improve postsecondary success, so that every student has a chance to succeed in college, and beyond. We also extend our sincere gratitude to our colleagues at the National League of Cities and MDC Inc., with whom we worked closely over the course of this initiative, and whose insights and expertise as intermediaries were central to its success. And finally, we must certainly salute everyone who dedicated time and resources to Community Partnerships initiatives in the following cities:

Amarillo, TX	Jacksonville, FL	Phoenix, AZ
Boston, MA	Louisville, KY	Portland, OR
Brownsville, TX	Mesa, AZ	Raleigh, NC
Charlotte, NC	New York, NY	Riverside, CA
Dayton, OH	Philadelphia, PA	San Francisco, CA

The individuals and organizations that forged partnerships in each of these communities are singularly committed to establishing a legacy of college success, and we celebrate them for those efforts. We are also grateful for their contributions as thought partners, and their insights have helped the OMG Center shape and refine what we learned over the course of the initiative.

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Introduction

Nationally, 52% of 2011 U.S. high school graduates and GED earners from low-income families enrolled immediately in a two- or four-year college, compared to 82% and 66% of their high- and middle-income counterparts, respectively (U.S. Department of Education, the Condition of Education, 2013). Once they enroll in college, low-income youth face a number of academic and non-academic obstacles, making it more difficult to succeed. Given the increasing demand for a workforce with postsecondary credentials and the rising costs of a college education, low-income youth in the U.S. are faced with significant challenges in their pursuit of living wage employment. Postsecondary completion continues to evolve as a hot bed issue nationally, at the state level, and in individual communities.

As philanthropies and nonprofits have acknowledged the scope of these challenges, so too have they recognized that simply creating new programs, while important, will not solve the problem. Larger system and structural barriers need to be addressed if more students are going to earn postsecondary credentials and degrees.

Philanthropies and social investors are recognizing that “place matters,” and see the potential of place-based strategies for catalyzing system changes. Local communities offer a scale at which cross-sector, systemic challenges can be addressed, and provide opportunities to affect significant numbers of students. In fact, at the time of writing this Issue Brief, we can account for more than 20 national initiatives supported by federal government and national philanthropies that focus on “place-based” strategies.

This Issue Brief presents lessons from our three-year evaluation of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s Community Partnerships portfolio and illustrates how communities can implement multi-sector strategies to shift local systems and improve student postsecondary completion.

About the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s Community Partnerships Portfolio

With a 2025 goal of doubling the number of low-income students who earn a postsecondary degree or credential with genuine value in the workplace by age 26, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation invested more than 20 million dollars in the Community Partnerships portfolio. The objective was to understand what it takes for cross-sector partnerships to advance a community-wide postsecondary completion agenda that instigates system-level changes (described in the following section) and ultimately improves postsecondary completion outcomes for students.

OMG’S EVALUATION

The goal of our developmental evaluation was to gain a clearer picture of how communities build partnerships; engage stakeholders; use data; and create, align, and shift policies and practices to increase postsecondary success. Our methodology did not entail judging the effectiveness of communities’ approaches against a predetermined set of measures.

From 2009-2013, seven communities received Community Partnerships funding through two sister initiatives — Communities Learning in Partnership (CLIP) and Partners for Postsecondary Success (PPS) — to develop and implement a multi-sector strategy that included community and four-year colleges, K-12 school districts, municipal leaders, local businesses, community-based organizations, parents and students, and others. Communities also received support from an intermediary partner who provided technical assistance and coaching support throughout the grant period: the National League of Cities’ Institute for Youth, Education, and Families worked with CLIP cities and MDC Inc. worked with PPS cities. An additional eight communities were involved in the portfolio as affiliate cities, participating in regular convenings, phone calls, and webinars with the seven implementation sites.

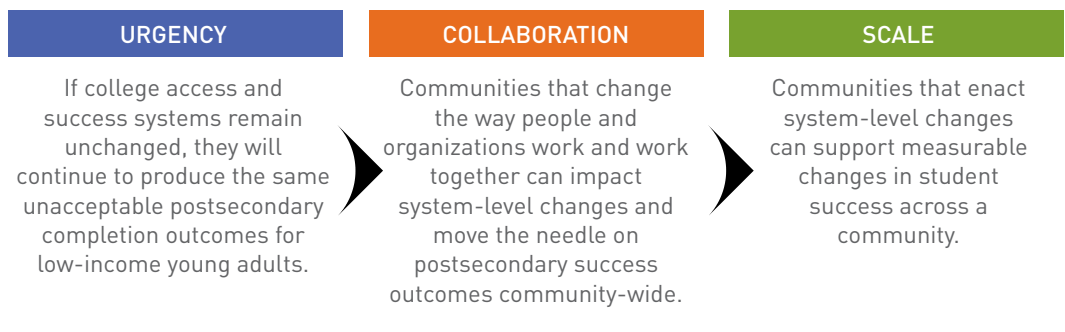
COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS PORTFOLIO COMMUNITIES

<p>CLIP Mesa, AZ New York, NY Riverside, CA San Francisco, CA</p>	<p>CLIP Affiliate Sites Boston, MA Dayton, OH Jacksonville, FL Louisville, KY Philadelphia, PA Phoenix, AZ Portland, OR</p>	<p>PPS Amarillo, TX Brownsville, TX Raleigh, NC</p> <p>PPS Affiliate Site Charlotte, NC</p>
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About the Community Partnerships Theory of Change

The Community Partnerships sites used a loosely defined Theory of Change (TOC) to help communities set parameters to plan and implement their respective postsecondary success strategies.

Three basic premises drove the Community Partnerships investment:



The TOC stipulated that cross-sector partnerships would use data and leverage key stakeholder commitment to align policies and practices to promote postsecondary success. In other words, evidence of systems change would emerge across four mutually reinforcing areas, illustrated in Figure 1. If we saw evidence of change across these four areas, then we would know that the “system” had in fact shifted.

FIGURE 1: COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS AREAS FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE



This Issue Brief focuses on the area of **BUILDING COMMITMENT**, and addresses two questions:

1. **WHY** is building commitment important for place-based investments?
2. **HOW** can communities successfully build commitment to a postsecondary systems change agenda?

Why is Building Commitment Important?

As communities undertook the Community Partnerships work, the need for a wide range of “commitments” emerged — including from different organizations and individuals in different roles — to support and meet a variety of partnership needs. What has proven most important is that building commitment is a means to an end — a way to keep stakeholders informed, help them shape the community completion agenda, and get them to act differently at the most critical points in time.

As a rule, building commitment focused on three distinct, yet complementary approaches:

FOCUS	PURPOSE
1. Build public awareness, particularly in communities where college access and success was not an existing imperative	To bolster public will to take action — individually and in support of broader systems changes; expand the relevance of postsecondary success to new parties
2. Expand and deepen connections to other stakeholders within partner organizations	To support successful implementation of specific partnership activities, as well as expand organizational commitment
3. Engage key community leaders/champions	To help champion and validate the completion agenda and the cross-sector approach

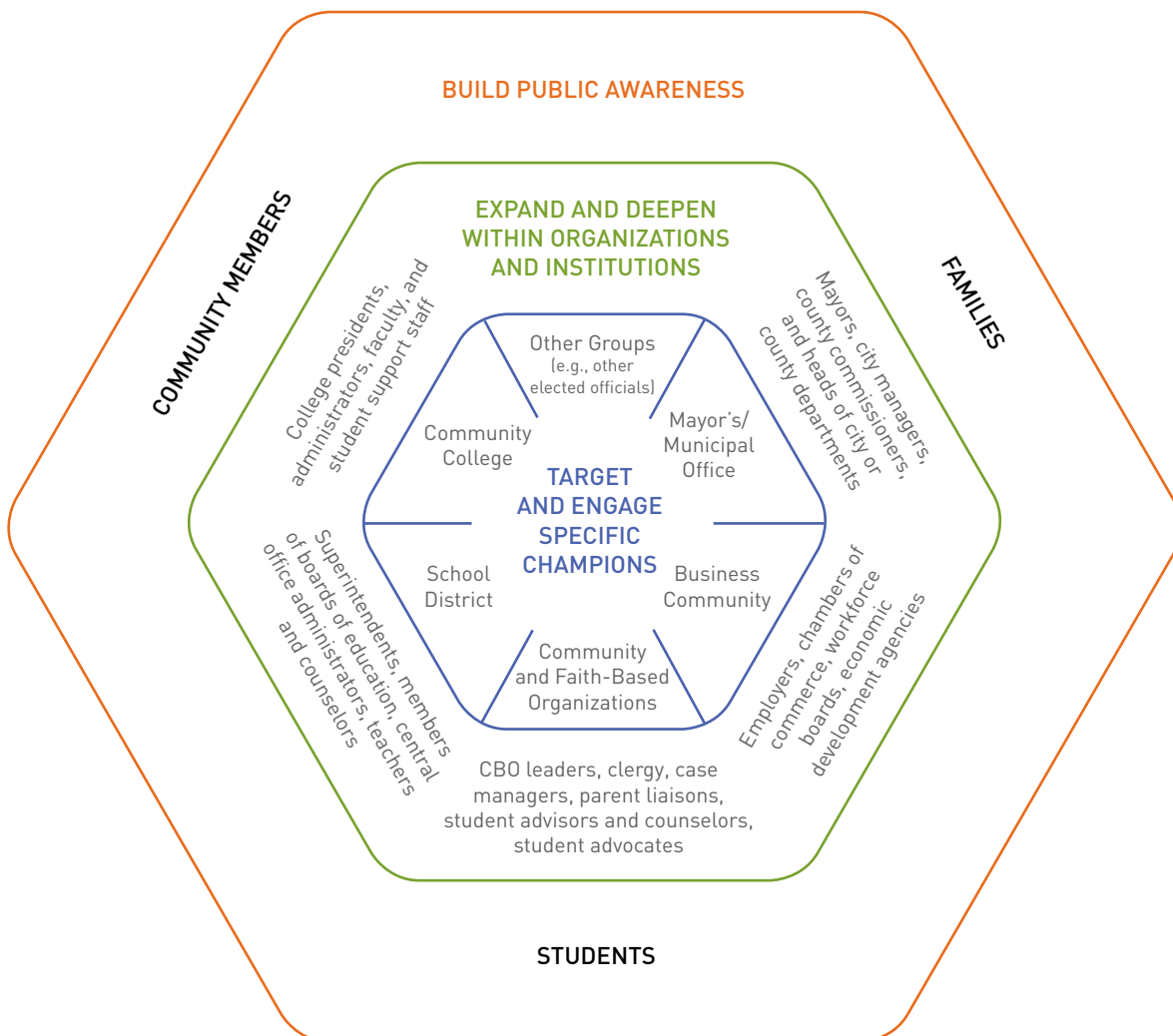
While some communities focused their initial efforts to build commitment on a narrow set of stakeholders, others engaged a broader group. Regardless of the number of stakeholders, the communities that leveraged the assets of a broad diversity of individuals and organizations made the most progress in establishing a recognized and respected postsecondary completion agenda. In the end, building commitment is not necessarily about the number of individuals involved, but the variety of stakeholders engaged and their ability to align potentially disparate agendas in support of college completion. Many of the communities saw a direct correlation

between their approaches to building commitment and their ability to drive community-wide action in support of a shared postsecondary success agenda.

Building commitment is a fluid process. As priorities shifted — due to changes in community contexts — stakeholders came and went, and partners cultivated relationships with new organizations and individuals to meet different needs at different points in time.

The sites undertook three approaches to building commitment and targeted a cross section of stakeholders (Figure 2). While the sites engaged the requisite education groups (e.g., teachers, administrators, college presidents, and faculty), they also tapped into the interests and passion of broader networks, including social services; businesses; and workforce, economic, and community development groups. The goal was to move the perception of college completion away from a narrow education agenda, to a community imperative with ramifications for a wide variety of individuals and organizations.

FIGURE 2: THREE APPROACHES TO BUILDING COMMITMENT



How Can Communities Successfully Build Commitment?

Of the lessons learned from the Community Partnerships evaluation, four have important ramifications for building commitment:

- **Build** brand credibility — beyond simply establishing a logo and tagline
- **Connect** to existing community collaboratives, where it makes sense
- **Understand** “what’s in it” for the partnership and individual partners
- **Engage** the ultimate beneficiaries of the postsecondary success agenda

INITIATIVE BRANDS: COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP IMPLEMENTATION SITES

Amarillo, TX:
No Limits No Excuses

Brownsville, TX:
All In Brownsville

Mesa, AZ:
Mesa Counts on College

New York, NY:
Graduate NYC!

Raleigh, NC:
Raleigh Promise

Riverside, CA:
Completion Counts

San Francisco, CA:
Bridge to Success

Build brand credibility — beyond simply establishing a logo and tagline: Create a believable brand that represents the partnership and its completion agenda. Brand credibility comes from authentic partner engagement, early tangible wins, and messages that are strong, data driven, and solution oriented.

Many sites embarked on branding campaigns — complete with logos, taglines, websites, and high visibility marketing events — to build awareness and recognition in their communities. In addition to creating a public persona for their partnership work and the completion agenda, partners relied on three strategies to increase the credibility of their brand.

Engaging in behind-the-scenes relationship management to ensure strong, aligned buy-in and visible public support from partners: Communities made sure they had the support of instrumental partners and leaders — including mayors, school district superintendents, and community college presidents — before going public, especially prior to events that involved the release of data. In Riverside, CA, the city’s two school district superintendents, the mayor, and the local community college president had the opportunity to review, provide input, and “sign off” on the city’s report card and goals prior to its public release. To secure support, the sites often engaged in careful relationship management and leveraged one-on-one connections with key stakeholders. In San Francisco, CA, in preparation for a mayoral election, members of the Executive Team ensured that the policy advisors of each candidate were familiar with the completion agenda. As a result, the incoming mayor was knowledgeable about, and supported, the work of the partnership. In the most successful sites, partners managed relationships with stakeholders with whom they had existing connections, shared levels of authority, expertise, and trust — for instance, business leaders engaged other business leaders, CBO executives engaged their peers, and university provosts engaged colleagues in academic affairs. Once partners secured

the necessary buy-in, they took special care to ensure that key institutional leaders demonstrated visible support, and were publicly recognized for this support during town hall meetings, media events, and community convenings.

Elevating early “wins” as evidence that the partnership was “doing things differently:”

Many Community Partnerships sites had seen collaborative efforts come and go, mostly because these efforts rarely moved past information sharing, or added little value to the partner organizations or communities. To showcase the action-oriented nature of their partnerships, and demonstrate that their efforts focused on changing the way “business was done,” communities secured small, tangible “wins” to point to as early signs of success and change. These activities, which included announcing the addition of new partners, co-hosting public events, releasing a community report card, and implementing new practices or modifications in policies, helped partners build confidence and satisfaction, and signaled the potential of cross-sector collaboration to external stakeholders.

Leading with data-driven, solution-oriented messages: In each community, the partnerships established data indicators to draw attention to educational outcomes, postsecondary enrollment, and postsecondary completion rates. The partnerships infused their messages with solutions to move these indicators in the right direction. For instance, in its Community Indicator Report, the All In partnership in Brownsville, TX, was careful to pair each data point with a specific set of “All In Strategies” and a narrative about “What is All In Doing About It.”

Putting Lessons into Practice

- ✓ Before launching a public campaign, create a comprehensive list of the community’s individuals and organizations who need to be “in the know” and supportive of the work
- ✓ Identify outreach strategies that draw on the unique networks and expertise of existing partners
- ✓ Assign partners to cultivate and manage relationships with stakeholders deemed most critical at different points in time
- ✓ Acknowledge key partners and leaders that are supporting the effort — at the beginning and throughout the initiative
- ✓ Identify and implement quick wins that the partnership can demonstrate as evidence of early progress and action
- ✓ Create structures, processes, and time for discussing data and public messages before rolling them out
- ✓ Ensure that for every data point shared publicly, there is a defined approach to help move that data point in the right direction

Building a Brand in Riverside, CA

Completion Counts in Riverside benefited from the confluence of an early policy “win,” strategic data use, and substantial political backing to advance its postsecondary agenda. Early on, the partnership solidified buy-in among university, city, and school district leaders. With these key players, including the mayor, serving on the partnership’s Executive Committee, education leaders worked quickly to implement a significant policy change — a two-year “guarantee” that local high school graduates could earn an associate’s degree or transfer to a four-year college within two years. Through this tangible success, the partnership was in a stronger position to begin building commitment at the local level, including among parents, students, and members of the faith community. Shortly thereafter, the partnership released a public report card outlining baseline education data, along with student-level goals for 2020.

Connect to existing community collaboratives, where it makes sense:

Identify and assess existing cross-sector, education-related efforts; leverage these to accelerate progress.

The Community Partnerships work did not begin in a vacuum. Some communities entered the initiative with pre-existing community postsecondary completion initiatives or focused on complementary issues, such as youth or workforce development. Other communities started with a more nascent completion agenda, and, in some cases, had little to no history of participating in cross-sector partnerships.

Communities conducted an environmental scan of existing efforts to 1) identify leverage opportunities, and 2) assess the viability of those opportunities. As a result, partnerships reached a broader set of stakeholders to promote and advance their agenda. Some of the most common leverage points included:

- A mayor’s broader education agenda
- A city or county’s strategic plan
- Another institution’s (e.g., workforce development agency) agenda that aligns with postsecondary completion
- Existing collaboratives or entities that convene around postsecondary completion or other aligned education, workforce, or regional competitiveness issues

In Mesa, AZ, for example, “Mesa Counts on College” partners worked with a coalition of social service providers to embed educational goals into their organizational service plans. In New York City, the Department of Education recognized the partnership as an important lever and opportunity, as they were shifting their priorities from high school graduation to college readiness and success.

In communities where a variety of collaborative efforts already saturate the landscape, new initiatives risk becoming “just another partnership” if purposeful efforts to connect to existing work do not occur. On the other hand, forcing connections that are

not a good fit can delay progress. When considering whether to connect with existing opportunities, communities should identify specific factors to determine whether the arrangement is worth pursuing, or if merging agendas or partnership structures might prove too burdensome. Important considerations include:

- **Legal structures, accountability mechanisms, and other guidelines in place for existing efforts:** Does the flexibility exist to incorporate a postsecondary completion focus and/or new partners?
- **Agenda alignment:** Do the agendas of existing and new players intersect in a way that suggests restructuring and integrating efforts, or are separate, aligned efforts enough?
- **Willingness of those at the table to change:** Are the existing stakeholders willing to do things differently or stop doing other things in order to prioritize a postsecondary completion focus?

Although integrating efforts to minimize duplication and competition may seem intuitive, pursuing parallel or connected efforts may be a more appropriate strategy to move work quickly.

Putting Lessons into Practice

- ✓ Conduct a thorough environmental scan to understand existing initiatives — who is doing what? for how long? what is their target population?
- ✓ Identify which initiatives are most aligned with the partnership
- ✓ Understand prospective partners' goals, operations, membership composition, and processes; assess whether these can be changed to better align with the partnership's work
- ✓ Engage stakeholders in conversations about combining efforts or agendas to assess appetite, alignment of vision, and organizational/partner capacity
- ✓ Develop action steps to coordinate efforts, including possible partnership reorganization and internal and external messaging about these efforts

Understand “what’s in it” for the partnership and individual partners:

Be clear about whose commitment is necessary and create “asks” that match stakeholder needs and capacities

Communities that were most successful in building commitment understood, managed, and balanced stakeholder interests (what’s in it for individual partners) and the assets they could bring to the agenda (what’s in it for the partnership). Working to ensure that stakeholders bring value to the partnership’s efforts, and that the partnership brings value to these individuals, is a fine art. Throughout implementation, sites became clearer about the support they sought from stakeholders, as well as how best to gain that support by appealing to individuals’ needs and interests. In Riverside, efforts to bring community college faculty and secondary school educators together around curriculum alignment were successful when the conversation focused on what

IDENTIFYING THE RIGHT “ASKS”

Successful “asks” that communities made of stakeholders included:

- Requesting that community leaders publicly endorse the completion agenda
- Engaging businesses in developing and providing new internship and mentorship opportunities for youth
- Leveraging institutional leaders to support policy changes and resource allocations
- Working with multiple levels of leadership in institutions to support new policy implementation
- Using data capacity within institutions to create shared data systems

both groups were accountable for and interested in: seeing students perform well academically.

Initially, partners often took on an “all hands on deck” approach to their work, inviting anyone who would listen to join them. While this approach sometimes helped sites identify engaged stakeholders, it often left stakeholders underutilized, as partners failed to identify how stakeholders could help them. Over time, partners began developing more specific (and successful) approaches.

Just as partners must understand where they need stakeholder support, stakeholders need to understand where they fit into the partnership’s agenda. And they are more likely to support that agenda when they can see how it adds value to their work. While some stakeholders may be altruistic (especially in the beginning), long-term commitment to a postsecondary success agenda is more likely when stakeholders understand how their involvement can benefit them, as well.

Putting Lessons into Practice

- ✓ Understand key stakeholders’ interests and values, their organizational agendas, and for what activities they are being held accountable
- ✓ Engage with stakeholders to understand the competing priorities they face
- ✓ Develop “asks” that align with stakeholders’ personal and professional goals, or alleviate political and professional pressures. Help stakeholders see the benefits of their involvement — to themselves and to their organization.
- ✓ Be clear about requests of stakeholders — develop shared expectations of the “ask”
- ✓ Ensure that expectations are realistic, reasonable, and align with stakeholders’ capacities, influence, decision-making authority, and availability

Engage the ultimate beneficiaries of the postsecondary success agenda: Solicit the knowledge and expertise of a wide range of stakeholders, especially students, families, and practitioners. Keep testing ways to ensure that engagement of various stakeholders is authentic, and not simply symbolic.

The Community Partnerships portfolio was designed to understand who can instigate a college completion agenda in a given community. CLIP’s assumption was that community college leadership, paired with the local school district(s) and mayoral leadership, could drive and sustain the agenda. PPS sites tested the role of local philanthropy, a United Way, and a four-year institution as catalysts of change. The answer, of course, is that no silver bullet or magic array of partners exists; different partners offer different assets to the agenda.

While a single group or group of influential partners can help navigate the development of an agenda in a community, broadening and diversifying the range of individuals and organizations involved in shaping the completion agenda can lead to innovative and more effective change strategies. Developing a completion agenda with a small, core group of individuals, and then sharing it with a broader group of stakeholders, does little for shared ownership and buy-in. Rather, engaging people

from organizations responsible for carrying out and responding to change strategies — and including those who directly benefit from these strategies (e.g., high school and college counselors, faculty, teachers, front-line staff, students, and parents) — is critical to success.

Although partnerships often engage individuals and organizations with the best of intentions, CBOs, college staff, teachers, students, and parents typically lack influence within the system, and they end up on the periphery of conversations. These stakeholders too often find themselves on the receiving end of a one-way dialogue, or in siloed conversations separate from core partnership conversations. Making the feedback of these stakeholders relevant and critical to the partnership can offer opportunities for more creative and rigorous thinking.

Putting Lessons into Practice

- ✓ Consider whom the completion-related policy and practice changes will affect
- ✓ Identify mechanisms that exist or need to be created to engage the perspectives of these individuals
- ✓ Involve these stakeholders in agenda and action planning that is respectful of their expertise, capacity, and availability
- ✓ Set clear decision-making processes and parameters so stakeholders understand how their input will be used; where appropriate, engage diverse stakeholders as decision-makers, not just contributors
- ✓ Engage stakeholders in an ongoing process of assessment and refinement, so they continue to learn and shape the completion agenda and its implementation

Listening to Community Voices in Amarillo, TX

The No Limits No Excuses partnership in Amarillo includes a collaboration of stakeholders such as local K-12 and higher education institutions, workforce entities, faith leaders, social service organizations, philanthropy, and organizations that focus on education about and solutions to poverty. Using input gathered from these 21 community partners and supplemented by a series of community conversations in targeted neighborhoods, and individual outreach to families, No Limits No Excuses designed a holistic approach to postsecondary completion. This model includes clear pathways to academic and workforce success with a focus on removing barriers such as hunger, transportation, and child care issues. This strategy would have been difficult to achieve without such an inclusive group of individuals advising and engaged in the partnership process.

Some Concluding Thoughts

Although initially treated by sites as one of the more ambiguous tenets of the Community Partnerships Theory of Change, “building commitment” emerged as central to their efforts, rather than as an afterthought. As a result of their strategies, communities have helped build a lasting postsecondary success agenda and created avenues for identifying and adopting new policies, practices, and broader buy-in to support their implementation.

In the current funding environment, sustainability is at the forefront of every investment and social change initiative. The experiences of the Community Partnerships sites suggest that building the commitment of a diverse set of stakeholders in support of the completion agenda and partnership can become a *de-facto* sustainability strategy. By engaging a variety of stakeholders in this work, communities have begun to change the way they do business. We have already seen stakeholder commitment evident in changed job descriptions, reprioritized institutional agendas, reallocation of resources, and the development of new service offerings and student supports.

As communities and funders continue to support postsecondary completion across the country, they must consider key questions as they create and strengthen strategies to build commitment and, ultimately, catalyze systems change.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR COMMUNITIES

What does stakeholder commitment look like?

What stakeholders will help support:
(1) a lasting postsecondary agenda,
(2) new changes to policy and practice, and
(3) effective implementation of strategies?

How does the postsecondary success agenda align with the interests of these stakeholders?

CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUNDERS

How can funding mechanisms create incentives for commitment beyond the “usual suspects?”

How can community partners play a role in developing and setting the investment strategy?

- How can this process in and of itself act as an engagement strategy?
- How can community knowledge strengthen and inform the investment strategy?



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