

Charting a Path to College and Beyond:

How Charter Schools Are Increasing College Access and Success Rates for Low Income Students

Purpose of this Report

College access and persistence are particularly complex challenges for low income students, and many charter schools are attempting to design and implement effective support systems for these students and their families. The intention of this report is to share emerging practices and lessons learned from charter schools' efforts to help underrepresented students enroll in and graduate from college. This issue has gained increasing focus in the K-12 and higher education communities as the gap in college completion rates between low income and higher income students grows.

Charter schools are increasingly confronting the challenges of the high school-to-college transition as the number of seniors graduating from their ranks grows rapidly. In California alone, the number of charter schools serving high school seniors has more than doubled since 2003, and senior class enrollment has grown by 75 percent in the same five-year time period.¹ Through its work with charter secondary schools, the Low Income Investment Fund (LIIF) has seen a number of successful initiatives by these schools to address these challenges. LIIF has produced this report to provide some instructive models and lessons for charter schools grappling with the question of how to increase college access and success rates for the students they serve.

Despite widespread agreement about the value of higher education, most students in the United States do not complete college. Only 35 percent of all students and 20 percent of low income students will earn a college degree by age 26.

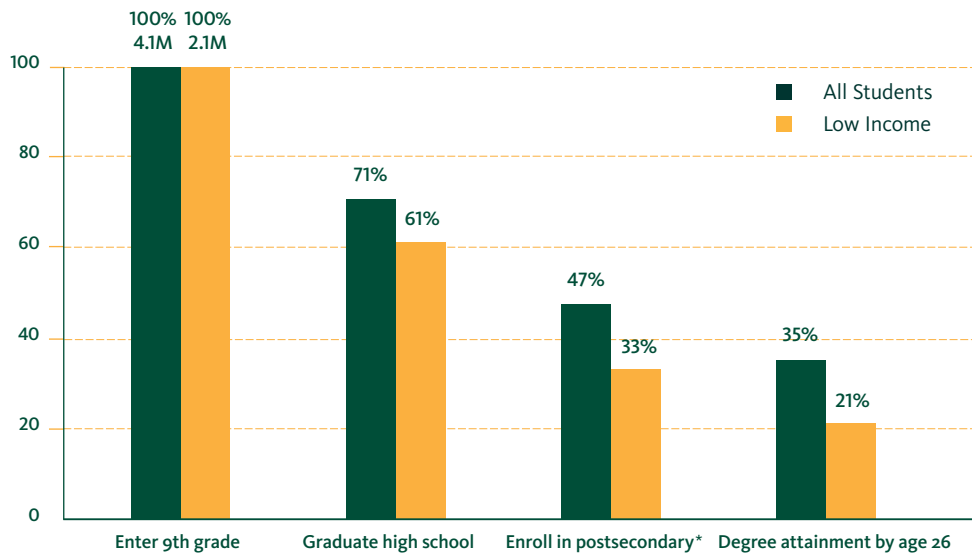
Introduction

WHILE JOB SECURITY and a family-sustaining income used to be easily attainable with a high school diploma, today’s job market requires an increasing level of skill and knowledge. By 2022, one in three new jobs in California will require an associate’s degree, bachelor’s degree or higher, according to a report by the California Business Roundtable and the Campaign for College Opportunity. Currently, college graduates earn over 60 percent more than high school graduates, and college graduates are nearly twice as likely to be employed.² Higher levels of educational attainment not only have significant implications for an individual’s opportunities and achievement, but have an impact on future generations as well.

A study by the Center for American Progress found that a parent’s level of educational attainment is the single most important indicator of a child’s future success.³ The evidence clearly suggests that education, and a college degree in particular, plays a critical role in improving the life circumstances of individuals and breaking the cycle of poverty for generations to come.

Despite widespread agreement about the value of higher education, most students in the United States do not complete college. As shown in Figure 1, only half of all high school students eventually enroll in college, and only 35 percent will earn a college degree within six years. Among low income students, one in three will enter college, and only 20 percent will earn a degree by age 26.⁴

FIGURE 1: College Enrollment and Graduation Rates for Low Income Students



*By fall semester of their high school graduation year

Note: There are many ways to calculate the education pipeline (this figure uses NELS data, updating the high school grad rate with more recent high school data (Urban Institute, Manhattan Institute, NCES). Most methodologies show a similar picture.

Source: W. Bedsworth, S. Colby, and J. Doctor. *Reclaiming the American Dream*. The Bridgespan Group, 2006.

BARRIERS TO COLLEGE ACCESS & PERSISTENCE

WHY ARE SO FEW STUDENTS enrolling in college, and what factors underlie the high attrition rate for those students who enter college but never graduate? While there is no single answer to these questions, research on this subject reveals a number of common barriers that hinder postsecondary degree attainment.

LACK OF ACADEMIC PREPAREDNESS FOR POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Research on college access overwhelmingly indicates that academic preparation is the single most important determinant of a student's likelihood of graduating from college. According to a study by the Bridgespan Group, "Students who meet even the most lenient definitions of academic preparedness have an 85 percent chance of entering college and a 50 percent chance of earning a four-year college degree, while students who do not meet this standard have only a 14 percent chance of college completion."⁵ However, research shows that fewer than 32 percent of U.S. high school graduates are academically prepared for college.⁶

In addition to college persistence rates, this standard of education affects students' ability to be successful in the workforce. A 2006 study by ACT, Inc., examined the link between college and career readiness skills and found that "whether planning to enter college or workforce training programs after graduation, high school students need to be educated to a comparable level of readiness in reading and mathematics. Graduates need this level of readiness if they are to succeed in college-level courses without remediation and to enter workforce training programs ready to learn job-specific skills."⁷

FINANCIAL BARRIERS

Affordability is another major roadblock for many students and their families. Over the past twenty-five years, college costs have increased at a much greater pace than family income, while need-based financial aid has decreased significantly.⁸ More recent data show that college costs as a percentage of income are rising steeply for low income families. From 1999–2008, the net cost of a year at a public university rose from 39 to 55 percent of median income for families in the lowest income quintile. At community colleges, long seen as a safety net, that cost was 49 percent of the poorest families' median income in 2008, up from 40 percent in 1999.⁹ In addition, government support for low income students has diminished both directly through changes in financial aid policy and indirectly through the decreased purchasing power of federal grants.¹⁰

UNFAMILIARITY WITH THE APPLICATION & ADMISSIONS PROCESS

College application and admissions processes can be daunting for any student. This is even more true for the student whose family and friends also may be unfamiliar with the requirements and necessary steps for application. Preparing for college entrance exams, selecting schools, and completing college and financial aid applications all require a high degree of preparation, planning and information gathering. Additionally, families may be unprepared for the costs associated with outside test preparation courses and test and application fees. Without structured support to help navigate this complex and often overwhelming process, students can limit their postsecondary options or may make uninformed choices that can result in a poor college fit. "There is widespread agreement that the complexity of the current Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is a barrier to college access and success. One indication is the large and growing number of lower income college students who do not apply for aid, even though they are likely eligible for a Pell grant: an estimated 1.5 million in 2004 alone," according to Lauren Asher, Vice President of the Institute for College Access & Success.



SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL ISOLATION

The presence or absence of social networks also plays a critical role in determining a student's likelihood of college enrollment and persistence. Research shows that students' aspirations for attending college and their likelihood of graduating are strongly influenced by the support and encouragement they receive from significant people in their lives.¹¹

A study by the American Council on Education found that students who had a majority of friends who were planning to attend college were four times more likely to enroll than students whose friends did not plan to pursue a college degree.¹² One study of "first-generation college students" (students who are the first members of their immediate families to attend college) found that parental encouragement and support had the most significant impact on students' college-going aspirations and enrollment patterns.¹³ According to a study by the American Federation of Teachers, "First-generation students tend to report receiving less encouragement and support from their parents to go to and prepare for college than students whose parents have college degrees."¹⁴ This same report describes several factors for lack of parental encouragement and support, including language difficulties, lack of information about higher education, financial instability and time constraints – barriers that can make it difficult for low income families to help their children on the college path.¹⁵

Charter schools not only serve a high percentage of low income students, but they also have the freedom to innovate in their educational practices and the flexibility to respond quickly to new needs and opportunities.

CHARTER SCHOOLS & COLLEGE SUCCESS PROGRAMS

CHARTER SCHOOLS have a unique role to play in addressing issues of college success for low income students. Charter schools not only serve a high percentage of low income students, but they also have the freedom to innovate in their educational practices and the flexibility to respond quickly to new needs and opportunities.¹⁶ For example, as awareness of the loss of students through the educational pipeline has increased, many college preparatory charter schools across the country have begun to redefine the relationship between K–12 and higher education by bridging the gap between high school and college. While most high schools typically end their involvement once a student receives a diploma, a growing number of charter schools are beginning to recognize that raising college completion rates requires a continuum of support to help smooth the transition from high school to college and careers.

This report examines the college success programs of four charter schools located in underserved communities in California and Texas, as well as one national network of college preparatory high schools. These schools serve a student population that is predominantly low income, minority and first-generation college-bound. At each school, between 60 and 95 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, meaning that their families' incomes for 2008 were less than \$39,220; over 90 percent are Latino or African American; and more than 85 percent of students come from families in which no member has attended college.¹⁷

While longitudinal data on college enrollment and persistence of charter school students are limited given the short history of most charter schools, early results indicate that schools with strong college-support systems in place are seeing results.¹⁸ The schools cited in this report have college enrollment and college graduation rates at least 27 percent higher than their respective state averages.¹⁹

All of these schools have implemented comprehensive college counseling and/or alumni support structures to help students graduate high school ready for college and to earn a bachelor’s degree. As these schools continue to innovate and refine their college readiness and alumni support programs, their early successes, challenges and lessons learned provide instructive models for other charter schools seeking to increase college persistence and success for the students they serve.

SOLVING THE COLLEGE ACCESS & PERSISTENCE PUZZLE: PROVIDING A CONTINUUM OF SUPPORT

WHILE NO ONE PROVEN formula exists, research and practice indicate that, when integrated into a comprehensive college support program, the components in Figure 2 can have a profound impact on college acceptance, enrollment and graduation rates. The following sections highlight a few of the models used by charter schools, and the steps they are taking to help pave the way for a successful college experience.

BUILDING A COLLEGE GOING CULTURE

RESEARCH SHOWS that students who understand the relationship between a college education and their future career goals are much more likely to earn a postsecondary degree than are those students who do not make this connection.²⁰ Yet, many high schools, particularly those that serve high percentages of low income students, do not have the support systems in place to encourage students’ college-going aspirations.

What does a school that promotes college access and success look like, and what are the key ingredients for building a college-going culture? They include setting high expectations for student achievement at the secondary and postsecondary level, providing access to clear information about the college application and admissions processes, exposing students to a broad range of colleges and universities, and facilitating ongoing dialogue about the college experience and the benefits of a college degree.

FIGURE 2: Components of College Success Programs

BUILDING A COLLEGE GOING CULTURE	ACADEMIC PREPARATION	NAVIGATING THE APPLICATION, SELECTION & ADMISSIONS PROCESS	ALUMNI SUPPORT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Owning" the college dream • Exposure to college life • Family engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rigorous college preparatory curriculum • Time management and study skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic advising • Test preparation • Selection and admissions guidance • Financial aid education and support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing communication with alumni • On-campus support networks • Alumni outcome tracking

"[W]e don't talk at parents and just give them policies and procedures. We put them in circles and ask questions like, 'What are your aspirations for your child?' or 'What was your experience like in school?' or 'What was your experience of immigration in your family?' [This] builds trust that extends beyond the traditional way parents relate to their child's school."

– REF RODRIGUEZ
Co-CEO, Partnership to Uplift
Communities Schools

OWNING THE COLLEGE DREAM

"There's a difference between wanting to go to college and someone telling you you want to go to college. Because when you go to college for reasons you don't know why, then you drop out... It's like a promise you're keeping that's not yours."²¹ This first-generation student speaks to one of the key drivers of postsecondary success – recognizing the value of obtaining a college degree and the unique opportunities it presents. Downtown College Prep (DCP) is a charter high school in San Jose, California, where nearly 100 percent of students are the first members of their families to go to college. DCP counselors and teachers identify the act of internalizing the college dream as a fundamental piece of the college success equation. All freshmen participate in a college readiness course in which they explore essential questions for college entrance: "What does it take to be competitive for admissions into the college of my choice?" and "What are the academic, extracurricular and financial requirements for college admissions and success?" DCP students also discuss family history, career aspirations and future life goals. The purpose of these discussions is to get students excited about college and to understand how higher education can have an impact on their career choices and life outcomes.

EXPOSURE TO COLLEGE LIFE

Spending time on university campuses and getting a first-hand experience of college life plays an important role in helping students understand the path on which they are embarking. DCP hosts a four-day trip for the entire junior class to several California State University campuses. During their senior year, students with a grade point average of 3.0 and above make another trip to University of California campuses and private colleges. Schools visited in recent years included Loyola Marymount University and University of California campuses in Merced, Los Angeles, Santa Cruz and Davis.

At the California Academy for Liberal Sciences (CAL S) Middle School, a charter school in Los Angeles that is part of the Partnership to Uplift Communities (PUC Schools) network, sixth-graders spend several

days at Pitzer College. The students live in the dorms, eat meals in the dining halls and have access to a variety of recreational and academic resources on campus. Not only do these trips help students gain a more concrete understanding of what a college campus looks and feels like, but it also puts them in touch with some of the emotional challenges common to the transition process: dealing with a roommate or feeling homesick or isolated.²³

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Engaging families in discussions about the college experience helps ensure that students have the support they need to make a successful transition. DCP, CALS and YES Prep, a network of college preparatory charter schools in Houston, Texas, communicate extensively with families about common issues for first-generation college students who move away from home and enter the college environment. As Citlali Ramos, DCP's College Counselor, explains, "Families are supportive of the idea of their kids having a better life, but it's scary to think about what will happen to them. They are starting from ground zero in terms of their knowledge of the college experience. We need to educate them about all the nuts and bolts, such as what a dorm is, where they eat and what classes they take.... Once they understand [their children] will be okay, they become more engaged and supportive."

At YES Prep, college counselors conduct workshops for students in their senior year and their families to address separation anxiety and the "letting go" process. "The key is to get the dialogue going. Lack of communication about letting go is one of the biggest reasons for the lack of family support," says Donald Kamenz, YES Prep's Director of College Initiatives. At the outset of the workshop, participants fill out questionnaires about their concerns and thoughts on the transition: "What do you fear the most about the prospects of next year?" "What could your child do to make it easier for you to accept his/her leaving?" Families and students discuss their responses, which helps them express their feelings and develop proactive coping strategies.

ACADEMIC PREPARATION

AS DISCUSSED previously in this report, strong academic preparation is the most important determinant of college success. Yet, even the most academically prepared students often struggle with the transition to college if they have not mastered critical life skills such as time management and study habits. At CALS Early College High School, all students take honors-level courses, and the curriculum is designed to ensure that all students have completed the basic University of California admission requirements by the end of senior year. Most juniors also enroll in "University 101," a seminar designed to equip students with research, time management, financial literacy and other skills they need to be successful in college and their careers. Furthermore, all students are required to take concurrent enrollment courses taught by university and community college faculty. These courses fulfill high school graduation requirements and also satisfy lower-division requirements at University of California or California State University schools, as long as the student receives a grade of C or better. The school partners with Los Angeles City College and Los Angeles Trade Technical College to provide these courses to its students. By the end of 12th grade, students can earn up to 35 college credits and fulfill all state university admission requirements.²³

NAVIGATING THE APPLICATION, SELECTION & ADMISSION PROCESS

APPLYING TO COLLEGE involves navigating a complex array of tests, paperwork, procedures and choices. Completing this process requires a significant level of savvy and organizational ability and can be particularly overwhelming for students and their family members who have no prior exposure to college. Effective college success programs must provide a structured and ongoing set of resources to help students select postsecondary institutions that are good fits and complete college applications and admissions requirements.

View Park Prep, a charter high school in Los Angeles that is part of the Inner City Education Foundation network (ICEF), offers a comprehensive college counseling program to all students beginning in the ninth grade. "Navigating the college application and admissions process is very complex, and we want our students to have options," says Kathy Dominguez, Director of College Counseling and Financial Aid at View Park Prep. The school's program provides intensive support for everything from test preparation to applications, selection and admissions.

ACADEMIC ADVISING & TEST PREP

Starting in the ninth grade, View Park Prep students meet with academic advisors to review their course schedule and ensure they are taking the courses required for admission to selective universities. Ninth-grade students receive guidance on the timing and registration process for the PSAT. Staff members assist 11th-graders with registration for college entrance examinations. Onsite SAT and ACT test preparatory classes are offered as well.

APPLICATION SUPPORT

At View Park Prep, juniors participate in a college readiness seminar and attend parent meetings to discuss the application process. Students also have an opportunity to hear from college admissions representatives from schools such as the University of California at Berkeley and Cornell University about their admissions processes. Ms. Dominguez created a handbook for parents and students that outlines the application process, including timelines, application and entrance exam information; examples of different colleges and what they offer; and college interview tips. In addition, the school offers an essay workshop in the summer before senior year, during which admissions representatives review college essays and provide students with feedback. By the end of the three-day workshop, most students have completed their personal statements.



"The reality is that kids who've been successful in college have caring adults or mentors supporting them."

– DONALD KAMENTZ,
Director of College Initiatives,
YES Prep

SELECTION & ADMISSIONS GUIDANCE

Counselors at View Park Prep work closely with students to help them understand their options and select schools that will be a good fit with their goals, interests and record of achievement. All juniors are assigned reading, such as *Colleges That Change Lives: 40 Schools That Will Change the Way You Think About Colleges*, and are asked to research colleges and universities with which they are unfamiliar. In addition, students complete a survey to help them think about the most personally important factors in selecting a college: "What's your ideal learning environment?" "What size school do you envision yourself at?" and "Is athletics important?" College counselors meet with students regularly to make recommendations, and whenever possible, put them in touch with admissions representatives or other contacts at the colleges and universities students are considering.

FINANCIAL AID EDUCATION & SUPPORT

Without guidance and support, managing the financial aid process can be a complex endeavor that often leads eligible students to forgo available funding. High schools can play a critical role in helping students fund their college education by giving them the appropriate tools and information. For example, YES Prep holds one-on-one meetings and workshops with students and parents about financial aid procedures and family budget considerations. As part of a required senior seminar, all YES Prep students complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), the application used by nearly all colleges and universities to determine eligibility for federal, state and college-sponsored financial aid. Completing the application is complicated and time-consuming, so students benefit from having knowledgeable counselors on hand to answer questions and demystify the financial aid process.

In addition, YES Prep staff also provide advocacy and other support for students who do not receive adequate financial aid. For example, a YES Prep graduate attending Yale University had a \$2,000 shortfall in the financial aid package she received.

Donald Kamentz, YES Prep's Director of College Initiatives, contacted the school's financial aid office to request additional funding. The request was granted and the student is now in her senior year at Yale. With support from YES Prep, this same student was also able to secure well-paying summer jobs to help cover her living expenses.

ALUMNI SUPPORT

ADMISSION TO COLLEGE is only the first of many steps toward obtaining a bachelor's degree. While most high schools end their involvement with students upon graduation, many students need ongoing support to ensure a smooth transition into and through college.

Delaying postsecondary enrollment significantly reduces the likelihood of starting or completing college. A recent longitudinal study by Big Picture Schools, a national network of over 50 innovative urban high schools (many of which are charter schools), found that at least one-third of seniors seriously reconsidered their college plans during the summer after graduation, and one in five decided not to begin college at all. These findings shed light on the realization that "college acceptance may not be enough to guarantee college access and completion, particularly for students who may be the first in their families to pursue higher education."²⁴ Students who are the first generation attending college are less likely than their peers to plan to enroll in college immediately after high school, 68 percent to 91 percent, respectively.²⁵

Once students are enrolled, retention can be a serious issue. Isolation and academic challenges are just a few of the many reasons students decide to take time off and often do not return to college. Other reasons students cited for taking time off during college in the Big Picture Schools study included family-related illness, financial or legal problems, and pregnancy and the associated pressures of juggling schoolwork and parenting responsibilities.²⁶ This study indicated that in order for students to succeed in college, they must have a continuous support structure in place.

ONGOING COMMUNICATION & ON-CAMPUS SUPPORT

YES Prep has developed a comprehensive alumni support and transition program that follows students from enrollment into college and throughout their college years with the goal of ensuring that 90 percent of YES Prep alumni graduate from college or are on track to graduate. The program includes alumni events, mentoring and/or counseling, ongoing communication, site visits, and incentive awards.

YES Prep organizes a series of alumni events throughout the year, including an alumni college forum, a professional development day and curriculum panels. These gatherings provide an opportunity for alumni to reconnect with one another and share their college experiences with each other and with students still in high school. YES Prep also connects alumni with community mentors and university personnel to help smooth the transition to college and mitigate the sense of isolation and feeling of being overwhelmed that first-year students commonly experience.

Additionally, YES Prep builds community and facilitates ongoing communication with alumni through email; newsletters; and online tools such as Facebook, MySpace and an alumni portal on the YES Prep website. One student noted, “The YES community really keeps me going, and I know I keep them going. That’s been one of the biggest sources of support. Even alumni from younger classes who I don’t know will find me on Facebook.”²⁷

YES Prep staff even goes so far as to conduct site visits each fall and spring to meet with students who show signs of needing additional help. The Director of College Counseling and Alumni Programs also meets with all students who are not currently enrolled in school to ensure that they are getting the support necessary to enroll the following semester.

ALUMNI TRACKING

Creating systems to gather data about students and alumni is an important step for high schools that are working to design effective support programs. Tracking longitudinal student data can be challenging

because of limited resources and the complexity of maintaining contact with students in numerous locations. However, while still in the early stages, a few charter schools have developed and launched systems that can be instructive models for other schools grappling with this issue.

Big Picture Schools recently launched a network-wide system to track student progress for 12 years after graduation from high school. The system gathers information on college persistence; academic and career progress; civic involvement; and student-reported quality of life outcomes, including relationship satisfaction and overall happiness. The tracking system consists of a series of web-based surveys deployed annually beginning in students’ senior year of high school with responses going directly into a database. In addition to standard surveys, Big Picture Schools gathers information via platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which are popular with young adults.

Survey questions explore whether students are connected to supportive adults and how closely they communicate with their parents about academic, financial and personal concerns. They also ask questions designed to encourage students to share how their social and academic transitions to college are going, such as how challenging they find the academics, whether they have developed a personal relationship with a faculty or staff member, and how comfortable and welcome they feel at college.

Staff training includes data collection and interpretation and report preparation to guide future program improvement. The schools will use this data to learn which conditions support students’ successful transitions to college and careers, inform school improvements, and support the alumni’s continued personal and professional development.

While initial results are promising, the implementation process has not been without its challenges. It has been particularly difficult to ensure that all schools maintain updated contact information, initiate surveys and reminder emails, and encourage alumni to respond. “Principal buy-in is a crucial factor in ensuring high response rates, and a system-wide coordinator is key to this kind of endeavor,” explains Big Picture co-founder Elliot Washor.²⁸



STAFFING & FUNDING COLLEGE SUPPORT PROGRAMS

IMPLEMENTING COLLEGE access and support programs requires a significant investment of time and money. Most charter school budgets cannot easily absorb the additional costs of hiring counseling staff and building program infrastructure, which makes it difficult to scale and sustain such programs. And given that college counseling and alumni support are relatively new functions for most charter schools, even planning out a realistic staffing structure and budget can be a daunting task. Following are some guidelines based on the models designed by the schools profiled in this report and others around the country.

STAFFING STRUCTURE

According to interviews with several staff members, the ideal student-to-counselor ratio is 40 to 50 seniors to one counselor, which translates into approximately two full-time counselors for a 400-student school (with 100 seniors). In addition, if a school is part of a charter management organization, it is critical to have one or more home-office staff members laying the groundwork for systems development and providing overall coordination and support. At PUC, for example, two home-office team members have played an instrumental role in implementing college counseling and alumni tracking systems and developing core policies and procedures to ensure that the college counseling and alumni support programs function smoothly over the long term. These individuals “have built structure and systems that can ultimately be taken over at the school level. These positions have helped lay a foundation for a program that can be built upon in subsequent years,” says Pete Cordero, PUC’s Director of Special Projects. While such roles vary significantly from one organization to another, the level of staffing at the home office has an impact on an organization’s ability to scale services and be responsive to student and alumni needs. YES Prep, for example, has the highest staff-to-student ratio of any organization profiled and, as a result, they have developed an extremely robust and extensive set of student support services.²⁹

Another key function is alumni support. To handle this job effectively, a 400-student high school ideally requires a full-time manager or director of alumni support. In some cases, a college counselor may also do alumni outreach, but doing this well requires a lower student-to-staff ratio given the extremely time-intensive nature of supporting alumni. Since most schools do not have money in their budget to fund such a position, thinking about ways to collaborate with other schools is a potential option. For example, PUC and ICEF teamed up with another Los Angeles CMO to share a full-time staff person to coordinate their alumni tracking efforts. Beyond cost-savings, this approach has yielded some unexpected benefits, including sharing best practices between schools and connecting alumni from different schools with one another. However, as the schools grow, the job often becomes unwieldy for one person to handle. Justin Berry, the current alumni support coordinator for the three CMOs, indicates that he is handling his maximum at four schools with alumni classes. “Doing alumni tracking and support well requires building relationships with students while they are still on campus. The students I’m really able to help are the ones I know well. The others are very difficult to stay in contact with. And beyond a certain number, it’s impossible to build and maintain relationships with everybody,” says Mr. Berry.

FUNDING

Adding permanent staff at the school site level is always a challenge, particularly in states like California with low per-pupil funding and high real estate costs. This means thinking creatively about how to fund positions that can support the school’s college preparatory mission. Pete Cordero, PUC’s Director of Special Projects, estimates that college counseling and alumni support staffing for a 400-student school costs from \$150,000 to \$200,000 annually, which assumes two full-time college counselors (with alumni support responsibility) and part-time support from the home office. This is a significant expenditure for any school, and very few schools have been able to hire up to this level of capacity. However, some schools and CMOs have been successful at raising outside funding to support start-up costs for components such as the development and implementation of a web-based alumni tracking system or to cover the first few years of

MORE INFORMATION about the schools and organizations profiled in this report can be found on the following websites:

Big Picture Learning
www.bigpicture.org

CALS Early College High School
www.pucschools.org

Downtown College Prep
www.dcp.org

View Park Prep
vp.phs.icefla.org

YES Prep Public Schools
www.yesprep.org

salaries for college counselors. Other schools, like CALS Early College High School, are able to cover all of their college support-related functions through operating income. They accomplish this through a combination of resource-sharing (as described above with their alumni tracking arrangement) and cost-savings derived from their early college model. The school actually saves money on teacher salaries by giving their students access to community college courses taught by college faculty.

While there is no easy solution to the question of how to build capacity within already tight budgets, funders and legislators at the state and national levels are becoming increasingly interested in the issue of college persistence.

ADVICE & LESSONS LEARNED

INCREASING COLLEGE participation and graduation rates is not an easy task. It requires an extensive array of support that typically begins before a student even enters high school and often continues well beyond the college years. In addition to the general themes identified throughout this report, following are some specific ideas for college access and support programs for charter schools.

Building a College-Going Culture

- Partner with local junior colleges or universities to allow high school students to start earning college credits and to gain exposure to college culture.
- Develop and implement summer opportunities at local colleges.
- Implement a college advising program beginning with freshmen and sophomores.
- Discuss the process of transitioning to college with high school students and their families.
- Link current students with school alumni.

Academic Preparation

- Provide the most rigorous program possible and complement it with outside academic programs (e.g., summer and weekend opportunities).
- Maximize available college preparation courses at the collegiate level (e.g., bridge programs, academic prep work/remediation courses).

- Create a syllabi bank for college courses in which alumni are enrolled to inform teaching staff.
- Expose students to real world experience through internship programs to help them make the connection between college and career pathways.

Navigating the Application, Selection and Admissions Processes

- Provide courses on the college admissions process during the junior and senior years of high school.
- Conduct one-on-one meetings with students and families to help them understand their college options and identify schools that are a strong fit.
- Hold informational meetings for students and parents in the evenings to educate them about financial aid procedures and family budget concerns.
- Hold individual meetings with students, their families and college counselors to review financial aid options and awards.
- Develop a scholarship program to help with students' unmet needs, test preparation and application expenses.

Alumni Support

- Provide support for students during the summer before entering college, specifically following up to ensure they attend summer orientations at their respective campuses. Keep the dates on hand and follow up with students afterward.
- Ensure that students enrolled in college are fully informed of the academic and personal counseling resources available on their campuses.
- Connect new college students with a local friend or mentor.
- Identify the most effective ways to communicate with alumni (e.g. website, email, Facebook/MySpace, in-person gatherings).
- Develop a system for collecting longitudinal alumni data, including information that will help assess the effectiveness of current college preparedness and alumni support strategies.



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16. Nationally, 54 percent of public charter school students are from low income families. *Annual Survey of America's Charter Schools, 2008*. The Center for Education Reform, 2008.
17. Data for school demographics are based on interviews with school staff.
18. Through the 2008 academic year, the schools profiled in this report have graduated between two and eight senior classes.
19. Based on data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS 88:2000) and self-reported student and alumni data from participating charter schools.
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27. Interview with YES Prep alumnus.
28. E. Washor, K. Arnold, and C. Mojkowski. "Data: Now What? Data Beyond High School." *Educational Leadership* 66, no. 4. (December 2008/January 2009).
29. YES Prep has a Director of College Counseling and Alumni Programs and two full-time college counselors for each school, plus a Director of College Initiatives at the home office (serving five schools).

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