

# **SCALING SUCCESS SERVICES: How 4 Organizations Built Impactful Partnerships with Higher Ed**

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## **Introduction**

Strategic partnerships between community-based college success programs and higher education institutions can play a critical role in students' degree completion and workforce readiness. Developing such partnerships is not easy. However, when done with knowledge of the elements that make partnerships effective – namely a foundation of trust, mutual benefit, and mutual responsibility – they can significantly benefit college success programs and the students they serve.

This paper describes partnerships between four community-based organizations and higher education institutions based on interviews with staff directly involved. These organizations participated in the Success Replication Project organized by the National College Attainment Network and funded by the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation. The organizations' common goal is to improve students' college persistence and postsecondary completion rates. They use different strategies to achieve this goal, and so provide a mix of options for organizing and maximizing such partnerships. Three of the organizations profiled for this paper (Operation Jump Start, Project GRAD Houston, and Ready to Rise) have memoranda of understanding (generally referred to as an MOU), signed by organization and college leaders, outlining the partnership agreement. The fourth organization (DC Prep, PrepNext) involves informal relationships with individual college staff members who take an active interest in their students and help in a variety of ways. The paper also briefly discusses the challenges faced by PrepNext and another organization (Capital Partners for Education) with developing partnerships.

Drawing from the experiences of these organizations, the paper offers recommendations for community-based organizations interested in developing effective partnerships with colleges and universities. The recommendations encompass how to identify potential college partners and find someone to approach about partnering, initiating a conversation to explore the feasibility of a partnership, developing a proposal for how the partnership will work, and nurturing the partnership over time.

## **Operation Jump Start – Long Beach, CA**

Operation Jump Start (OJS) began partnering with California State University Long Beach (CSULB) in 2009 when OJS decided to expand its services by continuing to support students beyond high school. In need of additional staff capacity, OJS approached the CSULB School of Social Work about serving as a field internship site for students. Subsequently, OJS signed an affiliation agreement with CSULB outlining what they would provide interns, including the ways they would help interns develop social work competencies in prescribed areas (Attachment A.) OJS also agreed to engage a licensed clinical social worker to serve as the students' field instructor and supervisor.

Since then, OJS's college success program has been staffed by 10-12 CSULB graduate and undergraduate social work interns. The graduate student interns provide students with social and emotional support, which OJS considers critical to their college success. Interns work 16 hours a week and have an average caseload of 25 students, each of whom they support throughout the academic year. They check in with students every other week by phone, video chat, and/or text, offering support and help with problem-solving. The interns document their interactions with students in the OJS data management system, allowing for a relatively seamless transition for students to a new intern the following year. Undergraduate interns work for eight to 10 weeks. They help with data entry, manage phone calls, and support student events. Along with graduate interns, they also facilitate college success workshops for 11th and 12th graders. While the interns are not paid employees, they receive a stipend at the end of the year, lunches, and gift cards during the holidays.

OJS and CSULB benefit from their partnership in significant ways. OJS benefits by having near-peer advisers supervised by an experienced social worker to support their students. CSULB benefits by having an agency where students can participate in internships that give them experience with real-life clients and the opportunity to develop clinical and case-management skills. Most importantly, the social work interns provide students valuable assistance with meeting the challenges they face in college that OJS would not have the capacity to offer otherwise.

### **Project GRAD Houston – Houston, TX**

Project GRAD Houston's (PGH) higher education partnerships originated in the late 1990s. At that time, PGH awarded scholarships of up to \$4,000 over four years to college-ready Houston public school graduates. Since Project GRAD Scholars were bringing thousands of dollars to local colleges, when PGH's president asked these institutions to partner with them, their leaders readily agreed. While PGH ended the scholarship program in 2010 due to lack of funding, the partnerships continued.

Today, Project GRAD Houston partners with three metro area community colleges. PGH has an MOU called a "Partnership Agreement for Support Services" with each college spelling out what the partnership involves (Attachment B.) Houston Community College provides PGH free office space within its main administrative offices in exchange for PGH leaders serving as "in-house" consultants on issues related to first-generation students. Lone Star College and Lee College provide space for PGH's GRADcafés, which offer free college and career information and advising to residents of the surrounding communities. In exchange, PGH conducts outreach to students referred to as stopouts from the partner institutions to encourage them to return to college.

The day-to-day work of PGH's partnerships involves helping students enroll and persist in college. All students complete a Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) waiver before enrolling, permitting the colleges to share the names of students' academic advisers and information about how they are doing with PGH. Houston Community College designates an academic adviser to serve as the liaison to PGH. This person provides PGH advisers with the information they need to stay on top of students' academic progress and offer advice tailored to students' needs. Colleges also provide space where PGH advisers can meet with students on campus.

The partnership with Houston Community College (HCC) extends beyond direct services for students. PGH leaders work with institutional leaders to address systemic issues that present challenges for students. One example is HCC's FERPA waiver. HCC had three different versions of the waiver, which

students found confusing. PGH called attention to this situation and persuaded HCC to consolidate the three forms into one to be used campuswide. Another example is HCC's financial aid refund policy. Depending on when students started classes, some were not getting their refunds until the semester was almost over. PGH worked with HCC to modify this policy so that all students would get their money when they needed it.

### Ready to Rise – Tacoma, WA

Launched in 2017, Ready to Rise (RTR) partners with four public universities and three community colleges in Washington state, with the goal of serving 1,000 students over five years. Each institution signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Degrees of Change (DoC), RTR's parent organization, describing the scope of the partnership and what each partner agrees to contribute (Attachment C). RTR agrees to identify students to participate in the program based on their interests and ability to meet admissions requirements. The partner colleges agree to work with RTR staff to support students' persistence and preparation for post-graduation success, and to provide RTR staff with periodic student academic progress reports. Examples of the support the higher education institutions provide include helping students work through financial aid issues, connect with campus resources, and complete a major related to their career goals.

An advisory council of RTR and college representatives meets quarterly to review the partnership goals and communications regarding the help students need to navigate the transition to and through college successfully. The advisory council has played a key role in identifying ways to better align the support students receive from RTR with college support services. As a result, students have gained more exposure to campus offerings and RTR staff has started collaborating more with campus offices.

RTR's higher education partnerships are based on the relationships its parent organization, Degrees of Change, established with small private colleges starting in 2002 to provide full scholarships and comprehensive support for a small number of first-generation students. Because of the high completion rates of these students, Degrees of Change received a multiyear grant to replicate parts of its partnership model with much larger numbers of students who attend public colleges. Institutions saw several benefits to partnering with RTR. They believed the support RTR provides students would increase their graduation rates. College leaders also valued the assistance Ready to Rise would be providing prospective 12th graders with completing the admissions and financial aid application processes, as well as preparing students during the summer after high school graduation to make the transition to college successful. RTR partner institutions were not asked to commit to providing scholarships because Degrees of Change thought federal and state financial aid would cover students' college costs.

Each institution also signed a data-sharing agreement (Attachment D) that, along with the FERPA waivers students sign, gives RTR access to students' college email addresses, demographic data, enrollment status, and academic transcripts. RTR staff uses these data for two purposes: 1) to support students participating in the program, and 2) to evaluate program effectiveness.

On the ground, the partnerships vary from campus to campus. All of the institutions provide space where Ready to Rise advisers meet with students on a regularly scheduled basis and a campus liaison that connects RTR staff and students with campus resources. Some liaisons extend themselves further. An example is the Tacoma Community College (TCC) liaison who codes all the RTR students in

the TCC student data system as her advisees and checks on each student twice per quarter. She gets an alert when students miss more than three classes, meets with them to see what's going on, and loops in their RTR adviser to help. She also helps students with issues related to covering their college costs.

### **DC Prep, PrepNext – Washington, D.C.**

Neither DC Prep charter schools nor PrepNext has a formal partnership agreement with a college. However, PrepNext's associate director has built strong relationships with financial aid officers (FAO) at several institutions her students attend. She initially called these institutions to advocate for students who were having financial difficulties. She found the FAOs were happy to work with her as long as students had a FERPA waiver on file at the partner institution, Montgomery College (Attachment E.)

At Montgomery College, the FAO helped lift a hold on a student's unpaid balance so he could register for courses and helped another student achieve independent status for financial aid purposes. Over time, this relationship evolved to the point where the Montgomery College FAO now sends PrepNext a list of the students who haven't completed the aid application or verification processes. PrepNext staff then follows up to help students complete these steps. The PrepNext associate director describes this FAO as exemplifying an ideal partner: "He is engaged with students' success. He helps students read and understand emails, meet deadlines, and get across the finish line. He gets that it's hard for students, that they have a lot going on, and where they really are." The FAO values his partnership with PrepNext, saying it does not take too much of his time and that he would rather help students than see them flounder.

### **Capital Partners for Education – Washington, D.C.**

Capital Partners for Education (CPE) has explored working with various colleges but has not yet established any partnerships. Often, conversations with potential partners are initiated by past employees, volunteers serving as mentors, and funders who have an attachment to a particular institution and want to find a way to connect CPE's high school students to their alma mater. A common thread throughout these conversations is that colleges wish they had more resources to support first-generation students with limited financial resources, but seldom feel they can do so adequately. As CPE continues to pursue partnership options, the staff hopes colleges will see that the support students receive from a CPE mentor and a dedicated case manager will make partnering more viable.

CPE and PrepNext would like to have formal partnerships with colleges that five or more of their students attend. They are particularly interested in colleges providing them copies of students' academic transcripts, which would help advisers better guide students with maintaining their financial aid eligibility and meeting degree requirements. Such data also would be useful in determining the effectiveness of the types of assistance the organizations provide and identifying gaps in their efforts to meet student needs.

Both organizations face similar challenges in establishing formal college partnerships. One is the lack of capacity to cultivate relationships with campus leaders. Another is how to approach large institutions that have strong records of graduating first-generation students, such as the University of

Maryland, which enrolls around 40,500 students. Why would senior leaders want to partner with a college success program that sends only a small number of students to its campus? In what ways could the university benefit from doing so? A possible solution to this problem proposed by CPE is a collective effort involving a group of D.C.-based college success programs working together to approach a large institution about partnering. This approach could make it advantageous for the institution to collaborate with the success programs because they would have more students getting help from off-campus sources, and they could execute one partnership agreement covering all the programs.

### **Mutual Benefits**

Effective partnerships involve reciprocity, with each partner contributing and benefiting in substantial ways with the shared goal of supporting student success. The relationships OJS, PGH, and RTR have with their higher education partners illustrate how this reciprocity works. Since the majority of first-generation students leave college before earning a credential, higher education institutions value the personalized support college success programs provide their students. Such support increases colleges' retention and degree completion rates, which in turn adds to their bottom line financially and makes them more attractive to prospective students.

College partners particularly appreciate the help students receive from college success programs with securing funds to pay for college expenses. Examples include programs that offer individualized assistance to students through the financial aid application and verification processes, and connecting students to community resources that college staff may not be familiar with, such as public benefits programs and housing assistance. Another example is the financial support that Operation Jump Start and Project GRAD Houston provide to their students to purchase textbooks and access codes so they can begin the semester ready to undertake their coursework successfully. Institutions also regard as important the social and emotional support OJS, PGH, and RTR provide students through regular one-on-one check-ins, helping students develop self-advocacy skills, and referring them to campus support services, such as writing centers, career counseling, and food pantries.

Likewise, college success programs benefit significantly from college partnerships. College-designated liaisons provide program staff and their students with introductions to key campus offices such as financial aid, academic advising, and career services. They work with program advisers to make sure students secure financial aid and meet deadlines, and they let advisers know when students are missing classes or encountering other challenges. They arrange for space on campus where program staff can meet with students. Data-sharing agreements with college partners give programs valuable information for advising students and assessing the effectiveness of their support services. Relationships with college leaders, such as the one PGH has with Houston Community College, allow program staff to influence college policies to better serve students. College partners also provide programs with students who can serve as peer advisers for their participants. Without the 10-12 social work interns secured through their partnership with CSULB's School of Social Work, OJS would not have the capacity to support their high school graduates in college.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

College completion is the ultimate goal of both community-based college success programs and higher education institutions. Partnering benefits both entities and, most importantly, enhances the likelihood

of students earning a degree or other postsecondary credential.<sup>1</sup> Success programs offer college partners a deeper understanding of the needs of first-generation students, the capacity to help students overcome challenges that often prevent them from persisting, and knowledge of community resources from which students can receive assistance. In turn, higher education partners offer success programs essential academic support, career services, and financial aid for their students. They also can provide programs access to student academic records for advising purposes and give preference to students for special programs such as TRIO, leadership training, and mentoring.

### *Recommendations*

Whether formal or informal, comprehensive or limited in scope, effective community-based organization/higher education partnerships have the following attributes:

- **Student-centered:** They are based on a common understanding of students' needs and a belief in the potential of students to achieve their goals. Partnership activities incorporate multicultural perspectives and support the success of all students, regardless of their backgrounds, academic readiness for college, or financial resources.
- **Trusting relationships:** They are built on trusting relationships. The partners are committed to listening to, learning from, and supporting one another. They recognize and respect the differences in the cultures of their organizations.
- **Flexibility and adaptability:** They are responsive to student and organizational needs as they change over time. Their partnership is not overly codified.
- **Mutual benefit/mutual responsibility:** Each partner benefits in explicitly understood ways. Partners understand the expectations of the other and willingly assume responsibility for meeting them.

The following recommendations apply to the development of both informal partnerships with one or two college staff members who function as “campus angels” for success program students and formal partnerships with written agreements outlining in detail the roles and responsibilities of each partner.

1. **Identify potential college partners.** Potential partners likely to be most valuable are those institutions attended by five or more of a program's students and where students receive adequate financial aid packages, report having positive experiences, and complete degrees in a timely manner. Other criteria to consider are colleges with strong support services for first-generation students, especially during their first year, and institutions where the persistence and degree completion rates for Black, Latinx, Asian American and Pacific Islander, and American Indian students are the same as those of white students.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fishman, Tiffany, Ludgate, Allan, & Jen Tatak. Success by Design: Improving Outcomes in American Higher Education,” Deloitte Insights, March 16, 2017; Nickel, Rich. “Collaborative Higher Ed Partnerships Are the Key to Student Success,” EdSurge Newsletter, May 20, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> A good source of information about an institution's financial aid packages and the persistence and completion of Black and Brown students is [nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/](https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/).

2. **Find someone to approach about partnering.** The easiest people to approach are college staff with whom program staff, students, and/or board members have existing relationships. If they would not be appropriate individuals for initiating a partnership, they can identify others at the college who would be. Campus departments that provide support for first-generation students are places to find people interested in working with success program students. Examples include TRIO Student Support Services, state-funded educational opportunity programs, and multicultural support centers. Admissions officers responsible for recruiting students from specific populations are also good sources for identifying potential “campus angels” to approach.
3. **Initiate a conversation about a partnership.** Initial contact should be made in writing (preferably by email) introducing your program, its mission, the students you serve, and your interest in partnering. This communication should indicate that you will follow up to arrange an in-person meeting or video call to explore the possibility of a partnership. Be persistent in following up on your correspondence. Your students need support on campus, and as their advocate, you have a right to meet with someone.
4. **Explore the feasibility of partnering.** In your conversations about partnering, describe how your program serves students in college and the kinds of help they need from campus faculty and staff. Ask your contact to familiarize you with how their institution supports first-generation students and students of color. Discuss what you would like from a partnership and the ways in which partnering with your program can benefit the college. In addition to increasing their retention and graduation rates, majority-white institutions often are interested in increasing racial/ethnic and socioeconomic diversity on campus and so may see a partnership with you as a way to help them achieve that goal.
5. **Develop a partnership proposal.** Assuming your conversations go well, you should send the potential partner a short written proposal or memorandum summarizing your understanding of what you discussed, how you envision the partnership working, and the ways in which the partnerships will benefit both your organization and the college. The proposal should include your sense of the next steps involved in establishing the partnership and a timeline for doing so. You should ask the college representative to review the proposal and invite them to suggest changes and additions they think are needed. You may also want to schedule a follow-up meeting to discuss and refine the proposal.
6. **Nurture the partnership.** Caring for the partnership once established is critical to its success. Most important is maintaining ongoing communication with key staff and departments that support your students. Make sure your students have FERPA waivers on file so that college staff members are comfortable sharing information with you. Check in regularly about how students are doing and if they are having problems with which you can help. Arrange a time to visit key staff on campus if you have not met them in person. Show appreciation frequently for everything they are doing for your students.

Organizations interested in establishing formal partnerships similar to those of PGH and RTR may find a rubric developed by the Rhode Island Campus Compact helpful (Attachment F). The rubric describes what formal partnerships look like as they evolve from their beginning stages to fully developed “transformative” partnerships. It also discusses effective partnership practices in five areas –

collaborative relationships, mutually beneficial outcomes, communication and learning, responsiveness to community needs, and improvement of partnership practice – and so is a useful tool for those interested in developing college partnerships.



## List of Attachments

Attachment A: [California State University, Long Beach - School of Social Work SW 596 A/B Learning Agreement](#)

Attachment B: [Project GRAD Houston Partnership Agreement for Support Services](#)

Attachment C: [Ready to Rise Sample MOU - Memorandum of Understanding Between Partner College, and Community Affiliate and Degrees of Change](#)

Attachment D: [Ready to Rise – Data-Sharing Agreement between Partner College and Degrees of Change](#)

Attachment E: Sample FERPA Agreements - [Montgomery College](#) and [Ready to Rise Release of Information Form](#)

Attachment F: [Rhode Island Partnerships for Success Partnership Rubric](#)