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## **Tools & Strategies for Equitable College Attainment: Using Contextual Knowledge & Collective Inquiry to Ignite Change**

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California is on a path toward significant labor market shortages for positions that require a bachelor's degree (Public Policy Institute of California, 2019). Beyond the importance of increasing the pool of college graduates to support economic development, postsecondary education has been linked to an array of individual benefits, including improved health and life expectancy, lowered rates of incarceration, and increased volunteerism and civic engagement (Trostel, 2015). About a third of undergraduates in the U.S. are the first in their family to attend college (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018). As such, many efforts to support this population of students to successfully complete college have garnered interest. Many of these students face unique and significant obstacles as they pursue postsecondary degrees, including the navigation of two complex systems: higher education and financial aid.

Given the importance and complexity of the issues, multiple stakeholders, including philanthropists and researchers, have dedicated resources to understanding and improving college attainment for first generation, low-income students.

### **Convening Key Stakeholders**

College Futures Foundation's Community Philanthropy for Student Success Initiative brings key stakeholders together. Through the Initiative, the Gardner Center couples research and capacity building. We work in partnership with multiple community foundations who are engaged in improving college attainment. This brief describes lessons learned from the Initiative, with an emphasis on understanding capacity building through contextual knowledge and collective inquiry.

**john w. gardner**  
**center** for youth and their communities

## Background

In 2015, College Futures Foundation (College Futures) launched a five-year initiative to leverage the ability of community foundations to improve college attainment rates in California. College Futures recognized that community foundations play a unique role, positioned at the intersection of practice, funding, policy, and advocacy. Further, community foundations have relationships with donors, regional leaders, the education community, and local organizations. As such, they have the potential to create and operationalize a cross cutting agenda that could connect educational equity, college attainment, and community vitality.

College Futures brought together seven community foundations with the goal of transitioning from traditional, merit-based scholarship programs to a more strategic, need-based approach. They envisioned this transition as a vehicle to improve college completion rates for low-income, first generation students, and to enhance the community foundations' capacity to improve rates of college attainment. By providing funds for scholarships paired with relevant technical assistance, College Futures anticipated positive impacts throughout the Initiative. They also saw an opportunity to prepare for program sustainability that would have positive results beyond the life of the Initiative.

The Gardner Center approached this effort as a research-practice partnership. The purpose: to build the community foundations' capacity to develop strategies rooted in relevant data and research. We endeavored to support the foundations to use data, indicators, and cycles of inquiry as they designed and implemented new scholarship programs. As part of this process, they engaged partners and stakeholders to build understanding and buy-in for a strategic, need-based approach. The foundations' programs varied, as did the roles they played with community partners. These differences were reflected in the ways they designed their scholarship programs and tackled their college attainment goals.

With our assistance, the foundations positioned themselves as leaders who sought to embed the use of data, research, and collective inquiry in their multi-faceted efforts. In turn, the foundations and their partners taught the Gardner Center about the unique characteristics, challenges, and opportunities in their communities and educational institutions. This enabled us to more effectively build capacity to use data to inform action and ignite change.

The following section describes the processes and tools that enabled the foundations to use contextual knowledge and collective inquiry to design, implement, and improve their college attainment programs, and to support their partners to do the same. In addition, these strategies supported the foundations to more broadly engage community stakeholders to address issues of regional educational attainment.

## Building Capacity to Advance Equitable College Attainment

The Gardner Center worked with the foundation teams to enhance their ability to develop regional college attainment strategies that reflected, and responded to, relevant data. Our aim: to ensure that more youth from underrepresented groups would attend and graduate from college.

Our approach required us to build trust and rapport to support the foundation teams to develop their knowledge and skills. We did so over time and in relation to each foundation's interests, priorities, and developmental readiness for different aspects of data use. To this end, we played many roles: trusted coach, critical friend, thought partner, and, as one partner described, "a resource for all things data." Establishing trust and rapport allowed us to build each foundation's capacity to employ tools and processes that use quantitative and qualitative data to illuminate issues related to program implementation and outcomes.

These internal efforts laid the groundwork for foundations to embed processes of inquiry and data-informed decision making into their operations, as well as to:

- design and implement outcomes-focused meetings with community partners;
- engage partners and stakeholders to understand and improve programs and scholarship processes; and
- build understanding and buy-in among internal and external stakeholders through articulating goals, strategies, and outcomes.

We created the tools and strategies described below as part of our capacity building effort to support foundations to (1) use data for strategy and improvement, and (2) include stakeholders in broader processes to set agendas, establish goals, and engage in inquiry to inform decisions and actions in their regions. The strategies can be adapted for use in other organizations, such as youth development nonprofits, foundations, education institutions, or intersegmental collaboratives.

## Contextual Knowledge

In order to develop the foundations' capacity to use data to define their goals, we created Contextual Education Landscapes.

The Gardner Center developed these documents with multiple objectives:

- Provide regional education data and information to expand and/or deepen the knowledge of the community foundation teams, including an enhanced understanding of what kinds of data are collected and available.
- Model appropriate data display, use, and sourcing and illuminate various types of data.
- Introduce multi-faceted individual-, setting-, and system-level indicators predictive of college readiness and completion.
- Allow for discussions of college readiness and attainment grounded in data and practitioner expertise, and free from placing blame on individuals or institutions.

## CONTEXTUAL EDUCATION LANDSCAPES

*To set the stage for meaningful conversations and lay the groundwork for an iterative learning and design process, we tailored the landscapes to provide value for each foundation. We combined data from several sources and framed those data in relation to meaningful indicators of college readiness and completion.*

### TYPE OF INFORMATION

### BY ...

### EXAMPLE DATA

#### Basic Community Demographics

- County
- State

Population by age, language spoken at home, race/ethnicity, poverty level, educational attainment

#### Public School Demographics & High School Graduation Rates

- School District
- County
- State

Public school population by race/ethnicity, gender, English learner status, Free & Reduced Price Meal eligibility, HS graduation

#### College Readiness Indicators

- High School
- School District

AP & ACT/SAT testing, college counselor availability, course taking related to college eligibility, financial aid application completion

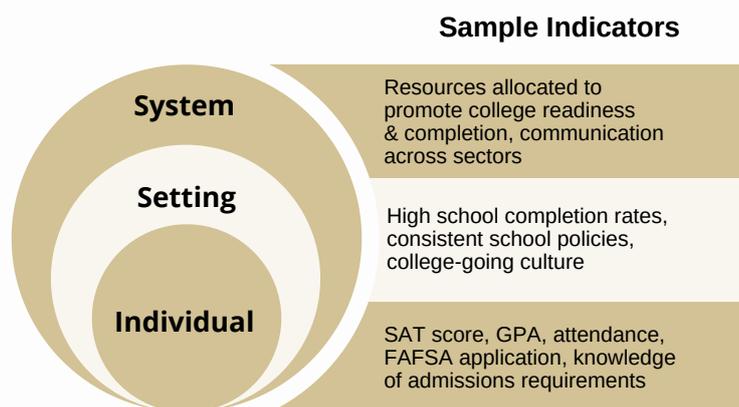
#### College Completion Indicators

- Local Community College
- Local 4-Year Public University
- Region

Direct college-going, persistence, retention, completion

The landscapes promoted critical and ongoing discussion, emphasizing the relationships between student achievement, factors at school settings, and policies at the district level. The foundations embraced the Gardner Center's emphasis of the tri-level nature of indicators, which "...assumes that changes in the system level will stimulate and support (or frustrate) changes in settings, which in turn will (or will not) lead to positive changes in youth outcomes" (Dukakis et al., 2009, p. 2).

## TRI-LEVEL RESEARCH FRAMEWORK



This framework allows the foundations to focus attention toward those outcomes over which they have some control. At the same time, it demands that they pay attention to the interconnectedness of student, setting, and system level strategies and outcomes, and that they not place blame on a single entity or individual. It offers both a functional and optimistic approach for the foundations, allowing them to address complex issues while focusing on the strategies and outcomes that they are best positioned to affect.

### USING CONTEXTUAL KNOWLEDGE TO SHAPE A VISION

After five years of focusing on college attainment, one foundation had achieved strong rates of student persistence and completion. Yet program data also revealed a gender gap, with 64% of the students served being female and 36% male.

To deepen their understanding of this gender gap, they conducted a tri-level analysis of their contextual education landscape data and a national literature review. This led the foundation to understand that male students, particularly young men of color, were falling behind their female counterparts at key points on the pathway to and through college. They also identified a lack of alignment between the needs of male students of color and available supports and funding. Informed by this period of multi-tiered data gathering, the foundation articulated a new vision for expanded efforts to reach young men of color with programs designed to be more responsive to their needs.

At the individual and setting levels, strategies to achieve the vision included identifying and addressing barriers to participation such that young men of color access programs and scholarship awards at parity with young women. One critical strategy centered on engaging twenty emerging leaders from local organizations to focus on the needs of young men of color. Responding to the challenges and promising practices identified in research, these leaders shared practices within their organizations that aligned with literature and reflected their own contexts. Examples of practices taking place at these organizations included, among others: culturally relevant mentorship; drop-in college readiness programming that allows students to design their program content and delivery; mentoring provided through athletics programs in partnership with guidance counselors; and building connections between young men in high school and near peers at local colleges.

At the system level, longer term strategies include engaging community and youth voices in inquiry-informed advocacy efforts targeted to young men of color.

The inquiry process supported the foundation to invest resources at all three levels including efforts to:

- Fund direct service projects tied to research-based indicators of college readiness and completion
- Engage in learning for improvement among grantee partners
- Promote systems change and expand messaging to new audiences for broader impact

## Collective Inquiry

The regional Contextual Education Landscapes provided a gateway to the next level of inquiry. Armed with landscape data and a basic understanding of issues and indicators related to college attainment, the foundations forged ahead to develop their strategies.

To support these efforts, we introduced tools rooted in a cycle of inquiry (see College Readiness Indicator Systems Resources, Annenberg Institute for School Reform et. al., 2014). The cycle starts with identifying a goal or a question, followed by selecting one or more indicators of progress toward the goal, data collection, analysis, and learning. The resulting learning may inform policies or practices, and it may also lend itself to a new goal or a new question, which marks the beginning of a new cycle.

Specifically, this collective inquiry demonstrated how some data are more useful than other data; why focusing on individual level data is not enough; and how data for continuous learning and improvement can advance regional goals. The Cycle of Inquiry, using research-based indicators of college readiness and completion, proved useful to the foundations by allowing them to:

- design and improve their programs in ways that focused on identified gaps;
- establish meaningful dialogue with grantees seeking to enhance their programs to advance equitable educational attainment; and
- provide leadership and partnership for data-informed approaches to education issues among broader coalitions of community stakeholders, thereby building understanding and buy-in.

### CYCLE OF INQUIRY

A transparent Cycle of Inquiry provided a way to engage grantee and community partners in program improvement linked to college attainment.

**Articulate  
Goal or  
Question**



**Select  
Indicator(s)**



## Process Mapping of Scholarship Programs

Building on the knowledge gained through discussing the Contextual Education Landscapes and embracing the Cycle of Inquiry, the Gardner Center engaged foundations in facilitated process mapping exercises. Together, we examined quantitative and qualitative data to better understand and improve scholarship and student support programs. Working with the foundations to unpack the processes driving their programs enabled the teams to gain insights about the alignment of their program tactics with their goals. Although each foundation had a unique program and each team exhibited a range of capacity for data compilation and analysis, the exercise proved valuable across organizations.

In most cases, the process mapping started with a foundation compiling data about their scholarship applicant and awardee pools. Data were disaggregated by race/ethnicity, first generation status, gender, grade point average, family income (i.e., expected financial contribution to college), and others. Foundations also collected information about awardees' intended postsecondary education institution, as well as rates of college persistence and completion.

With these data, foundations and their partners engaged in Gardner Center-facilitated discussions of the supports that enable targeted student groups to access and navigate higher education systems, including specific supports for scholarship application completion. They also considered scholarship eligibility and selection criteria, as well as the application requirements, evaluation rubrics, and training for reviewers. In addition, the inquiry process prompted foundations and partners to consider opportunities to support scholarship recipients throughout their college years, as well as opportunities to support students who applied for, but did not receive, scholarships.

Inquiry allowed foundations to develop baselines to describe the previous year's scholarship process and outcomes, and to identify areas for improvement and possible strategies to employ during the next scholarship cycle.

Process mapping built the foundations' internal capacity to collect and analyze data. The technical assistance partners supported the process by assisting with analysis and interpretation. The resulting insights enabled more informed and effective decision making. Foundations also used their learning to design stakeholder meetings that offered space to focus on data for improvement, enabling movement toward shared, meaningful, and clearly articulated goals and outcomes.

### DATA COLLECTED FOR PROCESS MAPPING



## "WE DON'T HAVE DATA YET." (IN FACT, YOU DO.)

Employing data for improvement requires many new skills and habits, including how to recognize and use data that exist. One foundation was uncertain about engaging in a cycle of inquiry for their scholarship program, believing they didn't yet have the data necessary to assess their progress.

The Gardner Center assisted the foundation to adopt a data-for-strategy perspective. In fact, the foundation did have a great deal of relevant data that they could use to engage their partners in inquiry and inform program improvement. These data included, for example, information about the recruitment and application processes which could be disaggregated to illuminate similarities and differences by high school, gender, first generation status, race/ethnicity, and intended postsecondary institution type.

The foundation's initial hesitation was not unique. Over many years, we have observed a continuum (Gerstein, 2015) which youth-serving organizations traverse while developing the skills to more confidently use data to support strategic decision-making and, ultimately, action:

Phase I: Data are used for accountability but not for improvement. No specific research questions are guiding the data collection or use.

Phase II: Collected data are not yet tied systematically to goals and strategies, but organizations are maturing in their understanding of the need for data to support learning and growth.

Phase III: Data are clearly connected to articulated goals and strategies. Organizations have embraced the notion that they can use data to inform and improve their work, and look to data to help address more sophisticated, nuanced questions.

With a data-for-strategy perspective, the foundation invited their partners to participate in sessions during which they interrogated the scholarship recruitment and application processes, as well as the profile of the award recipients, and continuing communication practices once students are in college.

The foundation's ongoing engagement of its partners in annual inquiry to learn from the data has resulted in trusting partnerships, shared goals, and program improvements designed to better support students.

## Conclusion

While each foundation used the processes and tools in ways that reflected their own priorities and needs, they all employed the tools of contextual knowledge and collective inquiry for learning and improvement related to the design and development of their strategic, need-based scholarship programs. Beyond these efforts, some used the same processes and concepts to engage partners to participate in regional collaborative efforts to advance educational equity and college attainment.

The challenges facing students who are the first in their families to attend college, and especially those who are from low-income backgrounds, are daunting. Many organizations and institutions are working to understand and address the systemic and setting level barriers. The community foundations who participated in College Futures' Community Philanthropy Initiative have joined this effort. They have embraced tools and processes of contextual knowledge and collective inquiry, opening themselves to learning and sharing their newfound capacity to strengthen their communities. Each community foundation, in its own way, is thoughtfully addressing the obstacles faced by low-income, first generation students on their postsecondary journeys, ultimately impacting individual lives and the broader community good.

## FRAMEWORK FOR USING CONTEXTUAL DATA & COLLECTIVE INQUIRY



Reflect on local education data, framed in relation to indicators of college readiness and success.

Consider these data in relation to experiences with students.

Explore outcomes for all students and examine differences by school or program.

Build understanding of setting- and system-level conditions within which student supports exist, allowing for examining, sharing, and addressing current practices.



Collect and analyze data that measure progress towards indicators and outcomes.

Ensure that relevant data about processes and outcomes are used for improvement.

Engage partners to share learnings, including those that illuminate disparities.

Frame conversations through cycles of inquiry and data use to drive action, shifting the focus from *data for accountability* to *data for strategy and improvement*.



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