Raising the Bar from Ready by 21 to Credentialed by 26
Highlights from Community and State Efforts

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

In this issue

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Over the past 50 years, the transition to adulthood has become longer, more complex and less orderly, increasing the need for well-designed, intentional support for young people in their efforts to learn, grow and become economically independent. Despite the changing reality of the transition to adulthood, conversations about student success still tend to focus largely on reducing the dropout crisis.

To ensure successful transitions, support cannot end when students leave high school, either as graduates or dropouts. Ensuring adult success requires broadening our thinking – beyond the classroom, beyond the school day, beyond academics and beyond age 18. Given dramatic changes in the labor market, it also requires thinking beyond high school graduation and shifting our end goal from postsecondary readiness or access to postsecondary completion.

We need to tighten the link between the secondary and postsecondary systems in the education pipeline. However, if we are to take postsecondary success seriously as a goal, and if we want to ensure a successful transition to adulthood for all, we must do more than fix the leaks and increase the flow. We must insulate the pipeline.[i]

The outer layer of insulation (see Figure 1) should ensure that young people have access to high-quality basic services that allow them to successfully make their way through the pipeline: things like health care, transportation, housing and financial supports. The inner layer of insulation includes family and peers, along with organizations that connect youth and their families to critical resources and that broker between systems, and employers who provide opportunities for young people to apply their learning, pursue their interests and build social capital. Gaps in basic services create obvious barriers to postsecondary completion. Gaps in other supports can be less visible but equally debilitating, especially for young people who lack a support system or need extra help.

If we want to ensure a successful transition to adulthood for all … we must insulate the pipeline.

Education, community, business and policy leaders often lack a shared understanding or shared norms about what needs to be in place to support young adult transitions. With no public system focused on monitoring or supporting young adults, it is difficult to track their whereabouts, not to mention their well-being. Organizations and public systems that do work with this age group often operate within distinct silos (such as higher education, employment training, social services, health and prevention, and college access) and rarely find themselves in the same room.

The Ready by 21 Insulated Education Pipeline   Figure 1
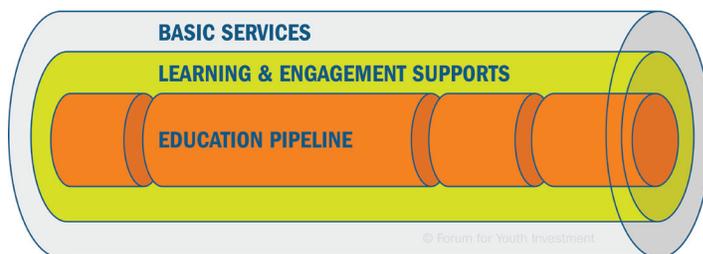
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CREDENTIALED BY 26

As is the case with any complex social problem, there is no silver bullet for increasing postsecondary completion rates, especially for low-income, first-generation students. Both common sense and research suggest the need for a collective approach that aligns the work of numerous stakeholders and helps different sectors work together.[iii] If implemented in isolation, strategies to increase student success might be ineffective in the long term and could exacerbate rather than reduce fragmentation.

With these challenges and opportunities as the backdrop, in 2011 the Forum for Youth Investment embarked on two related projects aimed at increasing postsecondary success: one at the local level and one focused on state policy. In doing so we pushed our own vision from ensuring all young people are "Ready by 21" to ensuring they are in fact "Credentialed by 26."

This brief highlights lessons learned from these two efforts. One was the six-month Credentialed by 26 Community Challenge, which helped diverse groups of community leaders jump-start local conversations and identify strategies for improving postsecondary success. The other was a series of policy scans and roundtables designed to help states identify low-cost policy solutions for increasing supports for low-income college students.

CREDENTIALED BY 26 COMMUNITY CHALLENGE

To focus attention on postsecondary access and success and to help communities pursue important collaborative work on these issues, the Ready by 21® National Partnership selected four communities (see box, this page) to participate in a six-month project called the Credentialed by 26 Community Challenge. This short-term effort was designed to jump-start conversations, build momentum and identify opportunities for progress. In each community, the lead agency committed to 1) engage new stakeholders in community dialogue about postsecondary access and success, 2) collect and/or compile and use data to inform community conversations and planning, and 3) articulate specific short and long-term opportunities for progress. In return, each site received training, coaching, tools, facilitation support, networking opportunities and a $5,000 grant.[1]

CREDENTIALED BY 26 COMMUNITY CHALLENGE SITES

Broward County, Fla.
Lead Agency: Broward County Public Schools

El Dorado County, Calif.
Lead Agencies: Folsom Lake College, El Dorado County Office of Education and Boys & Girls Club

Montgomery County, Md.
Lead Agency: Montgomery County Collaboration Council for Children, Youth and Families

Sonoma County, Calif.
Lead Agency: Sonoma County Office of Education

The Credentialed by 26 Challenge was based on Ready by 21, a set of innovative strategies developed by the Forum for Youth Investment that helps communities and states improve the odds that all children and youth will be ready for college, work and life. Those strategies were informed by over a decade of efforts to understand what makes collaborative efforts around the country succeed. Ready by 21 is organized around four building blocks that help leaders pursue collective action: building broader partnerships, setting bigger goals, using better data and implementing bolder actions. Given the limited scope of the Challenge, the full Ready by 21 framework was introduced to participating communities, but activities and technical assistance focused largely on helping sites make progress on two building blocks: developing partnerships, and collecting and using data.

With a modest grant, targeted infusion of information and coaching, and a small network of interested peers, these four communities rose to the occasion. Despite the fact that the technical assistance focused on building partnerships and using data, at the end of the six months all four sites reported progress in these and several additional areas, such as building demand for change and engaging youth and families.

Most importantly, the project helped sites reach many of the goals they set for themselves at the outset of the effort. It created an opportunity and a reason for the lead agencies to assess the local landscape and to convene

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key partners – some who were already involved in these issues, but also many new voices. In addition to building relationships with new and different stakeholders, those leading the work reported thinking differently about their community's goals related to young people and what it will take to support postsecondary success. With bigger goals in mind, they and their peers found themselves rethinking the kinds of actions necessary to support sustained change.

The project also helped motivated local leaders form relationships with peers across the country who are grappling with similar challenges. Echoing our experiences with other multi-site projects where networks have helped support and sustain change, participants underscored the value of being part of a small learning community with whom they could share ideas, struggles, resources and successes.

CROSS-SITE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The higher education landscape as well as the demographics of the four participating communities varied significantly. Leadership came from different sectors and, not surprisingly, sites approached the work differently and experienced different successes and challenges. That said, sites shared many common goals and made progress in several common areas.

Participating communities attribute the following four positive outcomes to their involvement in the Credentialed by 26 Community Challenge:

- More and new partners are committed to increasing postsecondary completion rates.
- Connections between K-12 and postsecondary systems are getting stronger.
- Local leaders are using data – about student progress and necessary supports – to inform their planning efforts.
- Communities are extending their goals, from ensuring high school graduation and college access to supporting college completion.

MORE AND NEW PARTNERS ARE COMMITTED TO INCREASING POSTSECONDARY COMPLETION RATES.

Stakeholder engagement was a major focus in all four communities. All the sites made notable progress toward increasing community awareness about the importance of postsecondary completion and of engaging key individuals and agencies in focused discussion and planning around this issue.

The Montgomery County Collaboration Council for Children, Youth and Families (the public-private partnership leading the Credentialed by 26 work in that county) reports that as a result of its efforts, community-based organizations (CBOs) and local businesses are more deeply engaged as partners in supporting young adult transitions. This deepening commitment from partners corresponds with the council's effort to expand its focus to more explicitly address older youth and postsecondary success and to strengthen its relationship with Montgomery College and the local Workforce Investment Board. The council convened a CBO roundtable in September 2011 to discuss the postsecondary completion agenda, engage CBOs explicitly in this goal, and solicit their input about key barriers and supports.

In other sites, strategies for engaging stakeholders included individualized outreach, targeted convenings and large-scale community forums. In Broward County, leaders from different sectors – including a retired university president and the current school board vice-chair – were recruited to serve as local champions for postsecondary completion, and as a result now play a more visible role in terms of raising awareness promoting collaborative work. The Sonoma County Office of Education's (SCOE) effort to engage partners in this work dovetailed with a major "cradle-to-career" initiative to coordinate and align efforts and resources across the county. Dan Blake, career development specialist at SCOE, noted that the Insulated Education Pipeline idea and graphic were particularly useful in deepening stakeholder engagement. "That idea has really helped CBOs, local policymakers and the business community better understand their roles in partnering with schools," Blake said. "Before, I think some people just felt they had to show up at meetings."

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN K-12 AND POSTSECONDARY SYSTEMS ARE GETTING STRONGER.

El Dorado is a geographically diverse and largely rural county that straddles the Sierra Mountains; it is really two sites in one. Over the course of the Credentialed by 26 Community Challenge, the core team in El Dorado County fielded community surveys and hosted two local convenings. One of the key findings from the data collected from the survey and convenings was that the secondary and postsecondary systems do not communicate adequately, especially at the level of classroom teachers and faculty. This leads to frequent misunderstandings and unclear expectations.

Misalignment of curricula across the K-12 education system, community colleges, universities and employers is a significant barrier to student transitions and success. Collaborative discussions about curriculum alignment across these systems are relatively rare; when they do occur they tend to be voluntary and sporadic rather than institutionalized.[iv]

Strategies for engaging stakeholders included individualized outreach, targeted convenings and large-scale community forums.

As a result of the activities that took place during the project, Folsom Lake College has plans to convened a series of meetings between high school and college faculty to develop a shared understanding of college expectations for entering students and to increase alignment between the two systems. This marks a significant step forward. "To date there are very limited linkages across these systems," said Dale Van Dam, dean of instruction at Folsom Lake College's El Dorado Center. The initial meetings will focus on math and English curricula and standards.

In Sonoma County, the focus on postsecondary success led to the development of a new initiative, "Your Future Starts Now." SCOE is collecting baseline data and working with its partners to identify age-appropriate program elements/activities (such as career awareness, goal-setting, college visits, workplace learning opportunities and college fairs) to take place at each grade level (from grades 7 – 12) that support postsecondary completion. The plan is to begin targeting seventh-graders in 2012-13, with a series of opportunities that build on one another in a coherent way. This includes the development of some new programs but primarily involves identifying and integrating many existing efforts into a more logical pathway.

LOCAL LEADERS ARE USING DATA – ABOUT STUDENT PROGRESS AND NECESSARY SUPPORTS – TO INFORM THEIR PLANNING EFFORTS.

The Sonoma County Office of Education, working closely Santa Rosa Junior College and other partners, also decided to take a close look at available data – at the individual student, organizational and community levels – and take steps to fill strategic data gaps. After compiling and reviewing existing data at the outset of the initiative, SCOE documented programs, organizations and initiatives providing relevant services and supports to youth in Sonoma County. Given the emerging county-wide cradle-to-career initiative, the core team also decided to document key "moving trains" – current initiatives, networks and collaborations related to educational success that had momentum or resources. A matrix illustrating the focus and the goals of each effort helped ground the discussion at a fall stakeholder convening and informed the work of an ad-hoc steering committee formed at that meeting.

To get a better handle on individual student progress, SCOE wanted better information from students about their plans and available supports at the outset of high school and following graduation. The office developed and piloted a College and Career Preparation Student Questionnaire in local high schools, and created a database of 2011 graduates in order to collect data about follow through on educational attainment plans, postsecondary progress, barriers, and career selection and satisfaction.

Other sites also made progress collecting and using information to drive planning. The Broward County team collected information about more than 35 local organizations providing services related to postsecondary access and success, then shared the results with stakeholders and the public during two community forums designed to raise awareness, generate momentum and spur collaboration. The Montgomery County team mined an existing social services database to identify CBOs offering young adult services. Through that inventory the team identified organizations to engage in a CBO roundtable on improving postsecondary success. At the student level, the Montgomery County team is exploring adding questions about perceived support for career pathway planning to the current School Environment Survey. The team is also considering implementing a new survey about the extent and source of guidance related to careers and postsecondary pathways.

In Sonoma County, the focus on postsecondary success led to the development of a new initiative, "Your Future Starts Now."

In El Dorado County, holding data-driven discussions about postsecondary success was an important milestone. Dale Van Dam, the higher education partner on the core team, said, "Folsom Lake College does an annual data sharing exercise, but it is generally a one-way process, with minimal input from the K-12 system about what they would like to see. The discussion of data related to young adult success that took place at the two convenings we held was probably the most that has happened in the community ever. In that sense it constitutes a breakthrough."

COMMUNITIES ARE EXTENDING THEIR GOALS, FROM ENSURING HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION AND COLLEGE ACCESS TO SUPPORTING COLLEGE COMPLETION.

In today's economy, graduating from high school does not ensure a successful transition to adulthood. Yet reducing the high school dropout rate remains the driving goal of many education-focused initiatives at the local, state and national levels. To address this disconnect in Broward County, representatives from the school district partnered with administrators and faculty from Broward College and Nova Southeastern University to lead the Credentialed by 26 work. They positioned that work as a logical extension of a dropout prevention effort underway within the district.

One important and unanticipated outcome of the Broward team's work was linking the Credentialed by 26 initiative to the Broward Children's Services Council. The goals and actions developed through Broward's Credentialed by 26 effort now align with and have been integrated into Broward's Children's Services strategic plan, marking a notable addition to their older youth work that had been largely focused on employment and prevention.

In Montgomery County, the Collaboration Council's Children's Agenda and corresponding data reports focus on eight major result areas related to child and youth well-being. Until now, high school graduation has been the sole indicator for measuring progress on the result area "Young People Prepared for the Workplace." Having successfully increased awareness about the importance of postsecondary completion, the council is raising the bar by adding new indicators for this area: completion of a postsecondary credential and young adult employment rates.

Similarly, thanks to the dovetailing of Sonoma County's Credentialed by 26 work with an emerging collective impact effort initiated by the County Department of Health Services, stakeholders there are converging around a draft vision that includes several new indicators, such as postsecondary enrollment, postsecondary completion, remediation needs and participation in internships or apprenticeships.

CONCLUSION

This brief synopsis barely scratches the surface of the important work these communities have taken on. Given the modest supports associated with this initiative and the complexity of the postsecondary success challenge, we are impressed by their focus and commitment. In our experience with these sites and others around the country, when leaders believe large-scale change is possible, they begin to ask different questions. These questions often lead to a demand for better data and for bolder actions that have the potential to result in sustained change. And when leaders agree they can be more effective working in partnership, they are motivated to build the kinds of structures that will ensure their efforts add up to a coherent whole.

**CREDENTIALED BY 26 COMMUNITY CHALLENGE
Selected Project Outcomes**

- In Montgomery County, CBOs and businesses are more deeply engaged as partners in supporting young adult transitions.

- In El Dorado County, meetings are planned between high school staff and faculty at Folsom Lake College to advance a shared understanding of expectations for entering students.

- The Sonoma County Office of Education is developing "Your Future Starts Now," an initiative to ensure postsecondary and career awareness activities begin in 7th grade.

- Broward County's Children Services strategic plan now includes goals and actions focused on postsecondary access and success.

CREDENTIALED BY 26 STATE POLICY ROUNDTABLES

Policies developed and implemented at the state level have a significant influence on young people's success in college, work and life. State policymakers across the country believe that in order to maintain economic vitality, their states' policies need to support higher education access and success. Unfortunately, in an age of unprecedented budget cuts, direct funding for state higher education systems has been severely reduced.

While direct funding for higher education has considerable influence on college access and success, it is not the only way that states can support college students. Postsecondary attainment is also heavily influenced by programs, services and supports made available to students by state agencies outside of the higher education system. (See Figure 2.) In addition to the K-12 system, these agencies and systems include health and human services, child welfare, transportation and labor.

States should examine the programs, services and regulations of these other systems to ensure that they support postsecondary success and insulate the education pipeline. The most pro-active states will institute "college-friendly" policies and procedures in each of these systems. At the very least, states should look to remove barriers to success and college-adverse policies from these systems.

To help a handful of states identify such opportunities, the Forum's policy team collected information from college access and success practitioners and specialists in Maryland, Florida and Tennessee to identify policy changes that could support postsecondary attainment. This information was distilled into a short set of policy recommendations for each state focused on both regulatory and legislative opportunities, with a heavy emphasis on no-cost/low-cost solutions. (See the Maryland recommendations on page 7.) The goal was to identify policy solutions that would be good for students, good for taxpayers and good for states. Recommendations were shared with stakeholders during a "policy roundtable" in each state that engaged students, agency leaders and elected officials in discussing opportunities for improvement.

By bringing together a diverse set of actors and putting concrete and sometimes simple strategies on the table, the roundtables generated productive dialogue. "This roundtable provided a great opportunity for people who don't often get together to come up with solutions for some of the persistent problems that young people face as they enter and try to succeed in college or other post-high school training," said David Wilkins, secretary of Florida's Department of Children and Families and chairman of the Florida Children and Youth Cabinet. During the Florida event (which was co-sponsored by the Forum, the Florida Children and Youth Cabinet and Florida's Foundation), several participants committed to team with others to work on specific recommendations. For example, the Florida College Access Network will work to expand a partnership with Single Stop USA to make needed public benefits available for low-income students on more Florida campuses.

When state leaders and students came together in Maryland to discuss policy options, they immediately focused on a food assistance priority and vowed to act quickly. States can expand eligibility for the federal food stamps program to students who don't meet minimum work requirements but are enrolled in certain certificate or degree programs. (This is at no cost to the state, thanks to flexibility granted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.) "It's doable, and it doesn't cost the state any money," said Rosemary King Johnston, executive director of the Governor's Office for Children.

In Tennessee, leaders used the roundtable to start discussing new strategies. Bob Obrohta, executive director of the Tennessee College Access and Success Network, noted that "by bringing together diverse stakeholders to discuss college access and success, we were able to develop policy recommendations that show how we all play a part in determining whether or not Tennessee will reach its educational attainment goals."

Figure 2

Supporting Student Success[ii]	
Academic Supports	• Proactive academic advising • Learning communities and other cohort models • Accelerated/contextualized remediation
Social and Civic Supports	• High expectations • Positive relationships • College know-how • Service-learning/leadership development
Basic Supports	• Financial aid • Emergency funds • Health care • College-friendly employment • Access to housing, food, transportation, child care

CONCLUSION

Improving postsecondary completion rates is a complex challenge. Sufficient funding for higher education is a critical part of the equation, but student success depends on ensuring a range of services and supports are available from multiple state agencies. At the local level, colleges and universities need the support and engagement of the K-12 system, community-based organizations and other public and private partners in order to increase completion rates.

Our experiences at the state and local levels over the past year have reinforced the belief that a collective approach – one that aligns the work of numerous stakeholders and helps different sectors work together – is critical.

INSULATING THE HIGHER EDUCATION PIPELINE
MARYLAND STATE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

ACADEMIC SUPPORTS

1. *Create STEM-specific need-based financial aid for STEM majors at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. (MEDIUM TERM; MEDIUM COST)*
2. *Offer more evening, weekend and summer classes, and give working students and students with children enrollment priority. (MEDIUM TERM; MEDIUM COST)*
3. *Fix administrative delays with the processing of the Guaranteed Access Grant and the Education Assistance Grant. (SHORT TERM; LOW COST)*

SOCIAL AND CIVIC SUPPORTS

4. *Engage students in meaningful conversations about policy change at every level. (SHORT TERM; LOW COST)*
5. *Print and distribute a limited number of hard copies of the "College 411" book. (SHORT TERM; LOW COST)*
6. *Pursue partnership with Single Stop USA. (MEDIUM TERM; LOW COST)*
7. *Support K-12 school counselors as advisors for college access. Hire more, provide more and better training, and set and track performance metrics. (LONG TERM; HIGH COST)*

BASIC SUPPORTS

8. *Facilitate the expansion of the nonprofit Dreamkeepers scholarship program or other "last dollar" funds or emergency grant programs. (MEDIUM TERM; LOW COST)*
9. *Support affordable child care solutions for students with children. (MEDIUM TERM; LOW COST)*
10. *Augment tax-preparation services with the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion services. (MEDIUM TERM; MEDIUM COST)*
11. *Reconfigure the funding formula for state student aid so that it doesn't penalize low-income students for working. (MEDIUM TERM; MEDIUM COST)*
12. *Broaden the eligibility of the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) to include more college students and allow SNAP (via EBT) to be used on campus for on-campus meals/meal plans. (MEDIUM TERM; MEDIUM COST)*
13. *Address transportation struggles for students. (LONG TERM; MEDIUM COST)*
14. *Prioritize affordable, subsidized and otherwise accessible housing near community colleges and consider policies that support access to housing for students and their families. (LONG TERM; HIGH COST)*

DATA

15. *Use the data collected by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) to increase student engagement. (SHORT TERM; LOW COST)*
16. *Increase the range of institutional data available to students and their families and make it easy to use. (MEDIUM TERM; LOW COST)*

COORDINATION AND ALIGNMENT

17. *Formalize the connection between, and alignment of, the Children's Cabinet and the Maryland Higher Education Commission. (SHORT TERM; LOW COST)*

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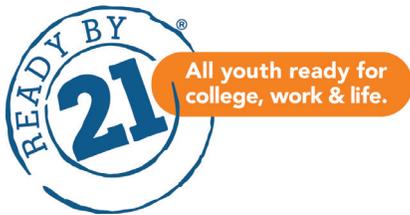
All youth ready for college, work & life.

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