



THE COLLEGE COMPLETION GAP:

AN ACTION GUIDE FOR PHILANTHROPY

HOW TO INCREASE GRADUATION RATES, SUPPORT STUDENT SUCCESS,

AND BRIDGE THE COLLEGE COMPLETION GAP

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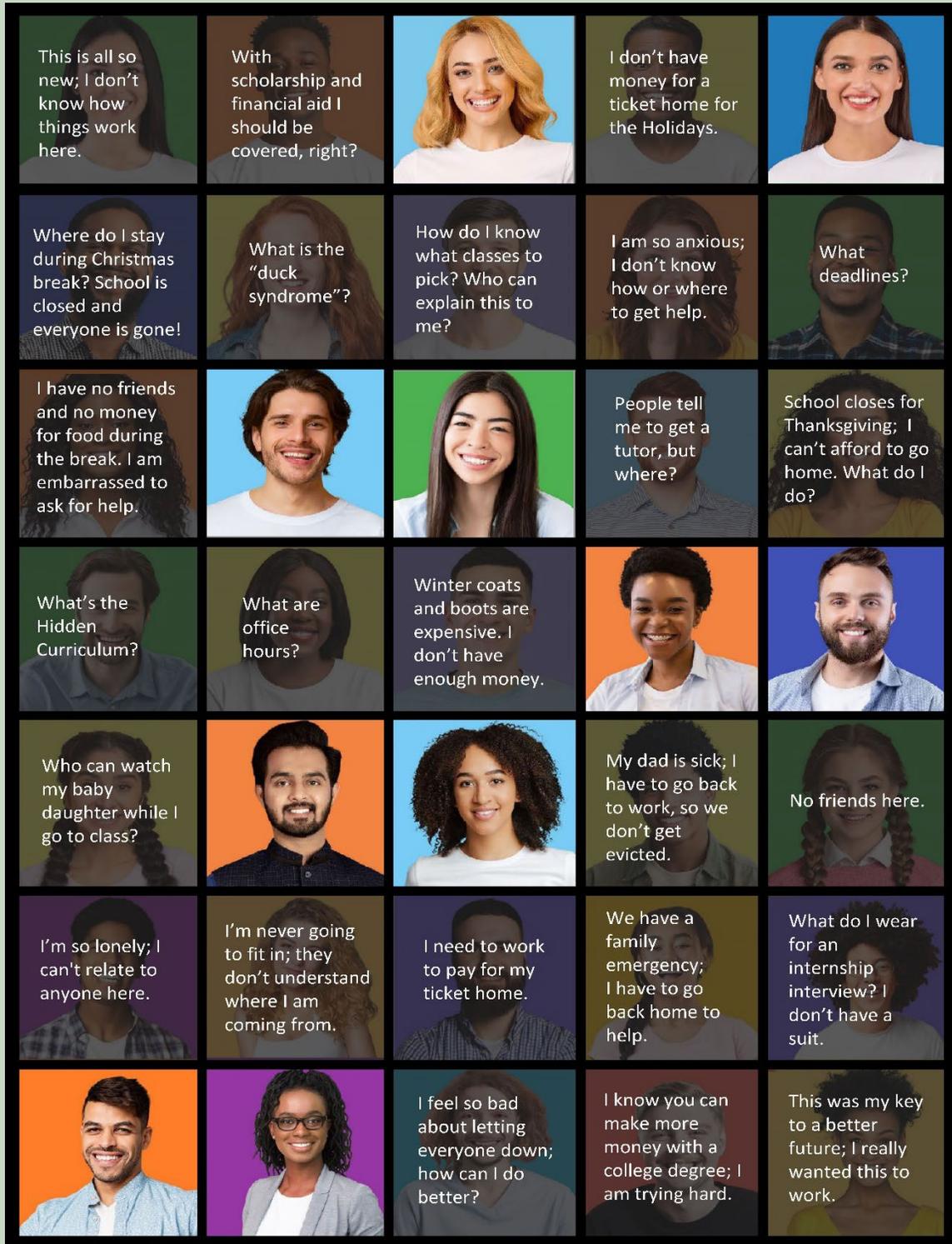
CRIMSONBRIDGE
FOUNDATION



Gifts for scholarships and financial aid to attend college are deeply rooted in American philanthropy. They represent our being able to “give back” and “pay it forward,” helping the next generation achieve their college and professional dreams, opening the door to higher earnings and progress. Giving designated to support first-generation students and students coming from under-resourced backgrounds is important, key for them to build a better future, and in itself a source of joy.



But did you know that out of all the first-generation students enrolled in college, many supported by scholarship funding, only 42% will graduate? Many of the reasons that lead to a nearly 60% drop out rate are beyond the students' control. But these obstacles to their success – and the success of the scholarship – can be addressed. This is a solvable problem if we work together. Please join us!



About The Crimsonbridge Foundation



The Crimsonbridge Foundation is an entrepreneurial philanthropic organization that builds bridges of collaboration to create transformative solutions that improve the lives of our nation's youth and families. We innovate and strategically invest in education, leadership, and capacity building programs to help America's youth and nonprofit organizations succeed.

College Success

The Crimsonbridge Foundation's team has decades of combined experience working for college success and meaningful career pathways. We have partnered as a grantmaker, program designer, and trusted advisor with nonprofits, universities, high schools, community colleges, and research organizations. We also advise and collaborate with foundations, financial advisors, individual donors, and donor-advised funds. Crimsonbridge connects philanthropists, at different points in their philanthropic journey, to giving opportunities and solutions to bridge the college graduation gap. We call these entry points: finding or creating the most effective way to support college success, that (A) meets the expectations, experience and capacity of the philanthropist, and (B) is the most appropriate, research-based, results-oriented, student-centered intervention, that also supports colleges' efforts to remove the obstacles to college completion.

Our Priorities

- Improve college completion and success for all students, especially first-generation students and students underrepresented in higher education.
- Build physical, digital, and technology infrastructure that serves all students.
- Identify and elevate research that increases awareness, collaboration, and momentum towards college success.

Join us! Learn more about opportunities to fund, collaborate, and partner on philanthropic programming with Crimsonbridge at www.crimsonbridge.org or contact us at collegesuccess@crimsonbridge.org.

Crimsonbridge Partners in College Success (as of 2022)

Capital Partners for Education (now Spark the Journey)
cpfe.org

Catholic University Take Flight cultural.catholic.edu/take-flight

Center for First-generation Student Success
firstgen.naspa.org

College Success Foundation—DC
collegesuccessfoundation.org/regions/district-of-Columbia

CollegeTracks collegetracksusa.org

Collegiate Directions, Inc. collegiatedirections.org

Cristo Rey Network cristoreynetwork.org

Excelencia in Education edexcelencia.org

Generation Hope generationhope.org

Georgetown Scholars Program gsp.georgetown.edu

The Hope Center hope4college.com

KIPP kipp.org

MDRC mdrc.org

New Futures newfuturesdc.org

Introduction: A Letter From The Crimsonbridge Foundation

Dear Reader,

You've likely opened this guide because you believe in the value of earning a college degree. You know that college graduates have access to more jobs, greater earning potential, higher homeownership rates, better health outcomes, and a host of growth opportunities – all steps to achieving the American Dream. While students will choose different career pathways, such as professions and occupations that require academic or technical certifications, the key is that they successfully graduate, achieving their educational goals and opening doors to progress and a steady income. Research and data assert that college graduation and meaningful career pathways for students are vital for equity and the economic prosperity of the United States.

Scholarship giving has been a mainstay in philanthropy and a heartfelt practice of alumni, donors, and foundations. These gifts have increased access to higher education and helped millions of students get to college. **But even after they receive scholarships, only 42% first-generation and low-income college students earn a bachelor's degree within six years. This difference between college access and graduation is known as the College Completion Gap. Scholarships play a key role in helping students get to college and cover tuition costs, but scholarships alone are not enough to provide the tools and footing necessary for all students to go through college and have a fair chance at graduation.**

As we illustrate in this guide, many reasons beyond a student's control force them to leave college. Fortunately, there are promising practices and innovative solutions helping students across the country make their way to and through college. Informed by our philanthropic practice and work with research, higher education, and nonprofit partners, this guide offers strategic advice and points to high potential areas for philanthropy to make a difference. We hope you'll agree this is an historic opportunity for philanthropy to help bridge the college completion gap, and the time to act is now. Crimsonbridge is on a mission to make college completion a reality for students, families, and our country. Join us!



Gabriela Smith
Founder and Executive Chair



CRIMSONBRIDGE
FOUNDATION



Danielle M. Reyes
President and Chief Executive Officer



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GUIDE AT A GLANCE



A college degree is still the single most influential determinant of multigenerational progress and ending the cycle of poverty. Across the United States, the contributions of philanthropists, foundations, and donor-advised funds are having a transformational impact on education. Gifts dedicated to helping first-generation students and students from under-resourced communities are a traditional way to give the next generation the key to a better future.

However, while colleges continue to admit a record number of students from economically and culturally diverse backgrounds, the ability to pay college tuition is only part of the challenge that holds many students back from graduating. Even if they receive scholarships, only 42% of first-generation college students earn a bachelor's degree within six years. In other words, a roughly 60% dropout rate is the shocking outcome of philanthropy that is well intended, welcome, and needed, but that is missing crucial pieces which deeply undermine its effectiveness. But it doesn't have to be this way.

There is an increasing understanding of the challenges facing these students, and as we'll see in this guide, a growing consensus and movement to improve college graduation rates by creating a comprehensive approach that extends beyond funding for access, college preparation and scholarships. Successful strategies include integrated services for students, resources, meaningful peer relationships, and mentoring that set the stage for earning a degree. Philanthropy needs to work alongside students, families, nonprofit programs, and higher education institutions.

Crimsonbridge developed this guide based on years of research and practice by each of these stakeholders. In this guide we offer context on the current state of college success and present the most compelling opportunities to direct dollars towards student-centered solutions. These are philanthropic investments that can change the lives of millions of students and address the urgent need to increase college completion rates across the country.

This guide will leave philanthropists with:

- 1) increased awareness of commonly faced barriers for college students;
- 2) ideas for successful interventions and innovative solutions addressing these challenges; and
- 3) recommendations for those who want to make a difference, regardless of how much time and engagement they are able to give to this cause, with multiple points of entry for individual donors, financial and philanthropic advisors, foundation staff, donor-advised fund contributors, and others considering philanthropic investments to raise graduation rates. This is a call to action to take part in a rising college success movement, and gifts at any level have the power to transform the lives of students, families, and our nation.



BUILDING BRIDGES TO COLLEGE SUCCESS AND CAREER PATHWAYS ON 3 PILLARS

Out of every 10 first-generation college students and students on scholarships already accepted and enrolled in a higher ed institution...

6 students will stop or drop out from school within six years of starting their degree, lacking the tools to successfully complete college.

Only 4 of the 10 students that started college will graduate with a bachelor's degree within six years. **Why are we losing 60% of those who initially enrolled?**



Scholarships cover tuition, basic university food, housing and books. Scholarships are not designed to cover other factors needed to successfully go through college.

- 1- Meeting Basic Needs
- 2- Building Belonging and Connection
- 3- Resources and Academic Support
- 4- Navigating College and Career Pathways

Philanthropy needs to do everything possible to continue covering access and supporting colleges providing the persistence tools students need to graduate.





THE CHALLENGES TO COLLEGE SUCCESS

1. Meeting Basic Needs

- Disengaged from campus advocates
- Food and housing insecurity (not having enough to eat or a place to stay)
- Job insecurity (unemployment or underemployment)
- Lack of access to emergency aid
- Physical, emotional, mental health needs
- Caregiving needs or family obligations

2. Building Belonging and Connection

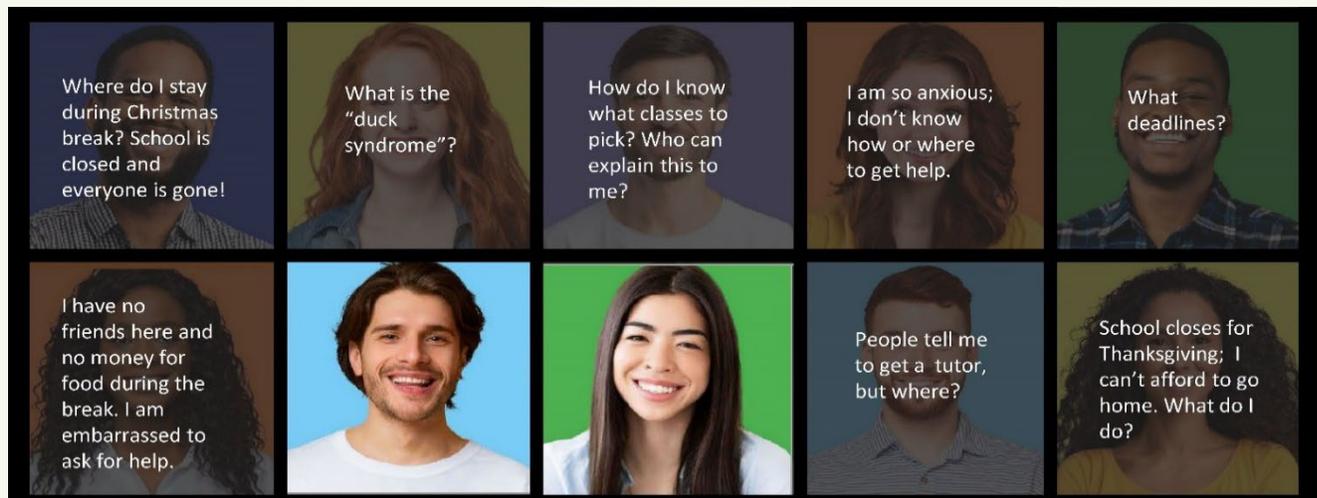
- Feel alone or don't feel they belong to a community
- Limited or no social and academic support
- Far from their families, schools, or friends
- Families may find it challenging to relate to their new experiences

3. Accessing Resources and Academic Support

- Challenging to make connections to advisors, faculty, mentors, coaches, peers, and campus organizations
- Unable to access key campus influencers and deciders connected to a degree program
- Inaccessible campus resource offices (i.e., financial aid, career services, disability services, etc.)
- Feel intimidated or unwelcome

4. Navigating College and Career Pathways

- Degree pathways may not be aligned with students' educational goals
- Gaps between degree plan and desired career field requirements
- Milestones are unclear or not communicated with students
- Transfer pathways are hard to navigate
- No credit for prior learning and experience





SOLUTIONS ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES TO COLLEGE SUCCESS

1. Meeting Basic Needs

- Emergency aid programs that respond quickly and connect students to resources
- Mental health services, 1:1 and group counseling, wellness programming provided at scale
- Understanding of stress determinants in a college experience
- Dedicated resources and staff for basic needs support
- Communications campaigns that share information about services, especially at key times and milestones
- Student voices represented in the decision-making around addressing basic needs

2. Building Belonging and Connection

- Programs that position students as welcome, capable, and valued
- Options and guidance on how to engage with campus communities and support networks is clear and available to all students
- Understanding of a hidden curriculum or college knowledge to succeed in degree program
- Physical and psychological safety
- Interventions that support academic and social integration and long-term well-being
- Advising approaches that are inclusive and culturally sensitive
- Intentional, ongoing, and embedded diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts

3. Accessing Resources and Academic Support

- Access to advisors, mentors, programs, and networks
- Guidance and resources that support today's college students' experiences and goals
- Trusted network of support to check in with students regularly
- Prioritized support for individual students with emergent needs
- Scaled services and interventions for all students and groups

4. Navigating College and Career Pathways

- Timely advising that aligns with students' educational goals
- Clear entrance requirements and degree milestones
- Connections between major, desired career, and a meaningful family-sustaining wage
- Pathway options with entry and exit points informed by student experiences
- Coordination for extracurricular requirements
- Paid internships and faculty-led research projects available
- Participation in career services
- Career exposure opportunities, programming, and guidance



PHILANTHROPY IN ACTION – RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DONORS

WHERE TO BEGIN – IT BEGINS WITH YOU:

Whether you are a first- or second-generation philanthropist, seasoned donor, new funder, donor-advised fund contributor, traditional philanthropist, philanthropic advisor, foundation professional, a long-term supporter of education, or graduate seeking to help their alma mater, you should:

YOUR APPROACH AND STRATEGY

Think about your giving as a philanthropic investment, which measures success in terms of social benefit achieved as a direct or leveraged result of your philanthropic funding. Your scholarship funding is helping students **access** college, but are those students successfully **graduating**? Find out if your philanthropy is succeeding or if there are interventions needed to make sure it does.



WORK FROM YOUR BASELINE

As a donor, you have your profile and different levels of expertise in a variety of fields. You might be an expert in certain areas and need advice on others. Also, you might be very involved or have minimal engagement in your philanthropy. Either way you can make sure there is due diligence and measurement of meaningful outcomes. Simply establish your baseline for your scholarship/college completion giving and work from there.



ACCESS ADVISORY RESOURCES AND WORK WITH YOUR PREFERRED PHILANTHROPIC VEHICLE

You don't need to be an expert to be impactful or make it your life mission. You can find the right advisors to help you make a difference. The vehicle you use for your giving will determine the process of how you do it and will also shape how much advice and assistance you can get in the giving process.







BLUEPRINT FOR ACTION AND POINTS OF ENTRY

BLUEPRINT FOR ACTION AND POINTS OF ENTRY

1. ASSESS

Based on your donor profile and baseline, tap into your philanthropy advisory resources to help you assess how to support college completion efforts.

2. INQUIRE

Respectfully inquire about graduation rates and college success programs, and find out about efforts by the university and other organizations to increase graduation rates. What are the chances that students receiving your scholarship funding will graduate? How can your philanthropy help increase graduation rates? The questions on [page 38](#) will illuminate opportunities and demonstrate that you want your philanthropy to leverage ongoing efforts improving the path to graduation and the success of students.

3. GO BEYOND SCHOLARSHIPS

Prioritize and specify your funds towards efforts that help college students thrive and complete degrees. Be clear about your focus. Specify a percentage of your scholarship funding to be applied to programs supporting first-generation and low-income students; in other words, funds that would not go to tuition but to programs to support completion. That might just be key to ensure those students have what's needed for graduation.

4. DIVERSIFY YOUR PHILANTHROPIC PORTFOLIO

Consider diversifying your philanthropy portfolio to support different types of nonprofit organizations addressing the graduation gap from different angles. Beyond the colleges you support, you can help innovative local and national nonprofits.

5. WHERE TO GIVE: EVERY QUALIFIED OPPORTUNITY CONSTITUTES AN ENTRY POINT FOR YOUR PHILANTHROPY

You can focus on the colleges you already support by asking about graduation rates and helping develop or fund programs to support college success. You can also help nonprofit organizations addressing the challenges faced by first-generation college students, support high school-based online alumni resources dedicated to college completion, especially when the colleges they attend don't have resources in place. There are many opportunities to support college completion. You can learn about innovative initiatives, partnerships, and collaborations in the field on page 26.



PHILANTHROPY IN ACTION

OPPORTUNITIES TO SUPPORT COLLEGE STUDENT SUCCESS EXIST BEYOND HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS:

- Nonprofits (local, regional, and national) with “to and through” college success programs
- Colleges and Universities with student success services and programs
- Professional Associations and Research Organizations focused on college success
- Community and Operating Foundations with college success initiatives
- High schools supporting the success of their graduates in college. National networks such as the Cristo Rey Network and KIPP are developing throughout high school-based online alumni resources dedicated to college completion to follow, mentor and guide their alumni especially when the colleges they attend don’t have resources in place.
- Fund local and national organizations advocating for and providing needed services. Learn about some of our college success partners on [page 4](#).

ALL GIFTS MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Whether a small donation, a grant recommendation to a donor-advised fund, a large foundation gift, or a multimillion-dollar investment, support at all levels can make a meaningful difference.

[For examples of excellent organizations working to address the challenges to college completion, please go to page 22.](#)

Do not be overwhelmed by the choices; start with your baseline and philanthropic advisory group. Assess and inquire so you can make sure your funds support student success. Go beyond scholarships for the colleges you support. Expand and diversify your philanthropic portfolio, so you can address the problem from different angles and support key stakeholders. Reach out and partner with experts in the field. You can make it very simple and very impactful at the same time.

For additional information, guidance, and throughout advice you can contact the Crimsonbridge Foundation at collegesuccess@crimsonbridge.org.



THE 4 MAIN CHALLENGES TO COLLEGE SUCCESS



Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, only 12% of students from low-income families [earned a bachelor's degree](#) by age 25, compared to 70% of students from high-income families. In addition, only 14% of [community college students](#) transferred to a university and completed a bachelor's degree within six years. Half of all students in higher education choose a [community college](#)—whether an associate or bachelor's degree—but fewer than half those students finish what they start. Many students from under-resourced households excel in high school only to falter in college and struggle to land good jobs. Why is this happening? These are the 4 main obstacles to college success:

1. Meeting Basic Needs

College students leave college for many reasons, often a combination of factors come into play in the decision to stop going to school. Chief among the impediments to success that students face: unmet basic needs. Food and housing insecurity—not having enough to eat or a place to stay—top that list, but it also includes transportation insecurity (no car or access to affordable transit), job insecurity (unemployment or underemployment), and a lack of access to emergency aid that can make the difference between staying or going.

While financial aid packages might include university food and housing, dorms and student cafeterias might be closed during holiday breaks. If students could not afford a ticket home, they might find themselves away from family with no access to housing or food. Sometimes they cannot afford the ticket back to school, a winter coat, or they might feel guilty that they are going to school instead of working to help their family. These are non-issues for students coming from medium-high income families. But for students from low-income backgrounds, these are real obstacles to their ability to attend college.

Unmet basic needs can also relate to physical, emotional, mental, social, and caregiving needs not being addressed. For example, a lack of access to affordable childcare for a young student parent. Or inadequate mental health and wellness services for students who need such resources. A student or family crisis or emergency can force an enrollee off campus, away from classes, and eventually lead to leaving altogether. Any family or caregiving responsibility that conflicts with college expectations can derail a student. College students whose needs aren't met impacts college completion rates, academic achievement, and physical and mental health. A lack of access to safe, nutritious food obtained in a socially acceptable manner causes students to reduce or restrict intake and endure physical hunger.



Almost forty percent of students at two-year colleges reported skipping meals due to lack of access for at least an entire day in the previous month, according to the 2021 #RealCollege survey, the nation's by [The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice](#) at Temple University in Philadelphia.

“There were so many times that I was on the edge of not being able to pay rent, not being able to afford childcare. It would've been very easy for me to drop out of college. For the vast majority of students, those sinkholes are everywhere.”

– [Nicole Lynn Lewis, CEO & Founder, Generation Hope](#), and author of *Pregnant Girl: A Story of Teen Motherhood, College, and Creating a Better Future for Young Families*

2. Building Belonging and Connection

College students need to feel welcome and that they belong and fit in their new environment. Many students have left high school and friends they made at home behind. They may be on their own for the first time. They may struggle to negotiate a new, unfamiliar environment, unsure about what the future may bring or how long they can afford to attend. Just because a student got into college, doesn't mean they feel like they fit in. When barriers to success raise their head—a tough class, a bureaucratic hurdle, a financial hiccup—students can turn to friends, teachers, or advisors for assistance. It becomes harder to slip through the cracks when a student belongs to a supportive community. Students who feel they belong tend to seek out campus resources, which furthers their success.

Studies show that connected college students do better on important measures such as physical and mental health and emotional well-being. Students who feel a strong sense of belonging are also more engaged and more likely to join college organizations, take on research opportunities, and make connections with peers, faculty, and staff. Students who feel like they belong earn higher grades and opt into and succeed in more difficult courses, according to a [July 2020 study in Science Advances](#) on broad-access higher education institutions.



When students don't feel like they belong, they can become disengaged, disconnected, demoralized, disillusioned, and discouraged. Feeling a sense of belonging to a school community is especially important for students from historically excluded groups in college. This includes students whose lived experiences are not shared by students in the majority on their campuses.

“When underrepresented student populations do not feel a strong sense of belonging on their campus, it impacts how they integrate, perform and persist.”

--Maithreyi Gopalan, [“Students’ Sense of Belonging Varies by Institution, Identity”](#) by Elin Johnson, Inside Higher Ed

3. Accessing Resources and Academic Support

To be successful on college campuses, students must make connections to faculty, advisors, mentors, coaches, peers, campus organizations, financial aid staff, special programs coordinators, career service employees, study abroad coordinators, work-study supervisors—it's a long and important list of touchpoints.

But many students find it challenging, disheartening, or intimidating to access or make these connections and require support—especially first-generation students and historically marginalized students—to succeed in this area.

Consider that, according to the [American Association of Community Colleges](#), 29 percent of the nation's community college students are the first in their families to attend college. In addition, 20 percent of community college students have a disability, 15 percent are single parents, 9 percent are non-U.S. citizens, and 5 percent are veterans.

All these students may need extra attention accessing resources and require academic support. So, too, so-called parking lot students—a term some peers use to describe students who go from the car park, to class, and back to their car, which makes it difficult for them to access resources and connect with campus life.

The 4 Main Challenges to College Success



Colleges and nonprofit organizations are working to strengthen bonds to campus life, degree programs, and internal and external resources, both human and services.

For instance, charitable organizations—including Crimsonbridge allies such as Capital Partners for Education, Catholic University Take Flight, Collegiate Directions, CollegeTracks, College Success Foundation—DC, Cristo Rey Network, Generation Hope, and New Futures—work to bridge these gaps for students in need. “I think every kid deserves a positive, guiding influence in their lives—whether that comes in the form of parental support or community-based advocates, or one-on-one mentoring,” says Lester McKee, Program Director at [College Success Foundation--DC](#).

College students agree. “New Futures got me through the impossible, and now I’m growing into the person I’ve dreamed of becoming,” says Rohan, a program participant. “They gave me the tools I needed to complete my associate degree, connected me with the right advisors and resources, introduced me to professionals and companies related to my field, advised me on my business portfolio, and are helping me pay for my bachelor’s degree,” adds Rohan, who earned an associate of science in cybersecurity and is a second-time scholar pursuing a bachelor’s in cybersecurity at the University of Maryland Global Campus (formerly University of Maryland University College).

“College matters so much because it isn’t just about book learning or the development of tangible skills. The students who complete it typically go on to earn more and live healthier and happier lives.”

— David Leonhardt and Sahil Chinoy, [“The College Dropout Crisis,” New York Times](#)





4. Navigating Degree and Career Pathways

Students need to plan for college success. Often there is inaccessible or inadequate advising in this realm. Students tend to do better with structure—following defined academic pathways or degree road maps—versus randomly signing up for classes. Students may stop or stall enrollment because of academic hurdles that seem insurmountable, including STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) or English literacy (reading and writing) requirements. College students need academic preparation and intentional advising to meet their degree goals on a reasonable timeline from the start to finish of their college years.

Guidance includes help navigating through the initial transition to college and college transfers, assistance with developmental education and testing requirements, support through key academic milestones (registration and enrollment, 1st to 2nd year, math and writing course requirements, STEM courses, degree requirements) and more. It means assistance with annual financial aid processes, including [FAFSA](#) (Free Application for Federal Student Aid). And support with negotiating online learning, access to tutors, mentors, and supplemental instruction.

Students need support to identify and achieve their career goals to connect to a meaningful career. They need assistance with career pathways, exposure opportunities, and guidance and connection to relevant jobs, internships, externships, or related certificates or apprenticeships in career and technical education.

Reform is in the works. There is a movement to improve college completion with better career outcomes for students by redesigning students' journeys through college and offering the kind of leadership, mentoring, and support students need along the way.

“College students are more likely to complete a degree in a timely fashion if they choose a program and develop an academic plan early on, have a clear road map of the courses they need to take to complete a credential, and receive guidance and support to help them stay on plan.”

--[Community College Research Center](#)



SOLUTIONS ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES TO
COLLEGE SUCCESS

Is it the best use of philanthropy to focus on college access and financial aid if two-thirds of those students don't graduate? Philanthropy's support is needed from access through completion and to career. The solution is a combination of financial aid and programs that help first-generation and low-income students to be successful.

The good news is that a lot can be done.

There are many interventions, initiatives, and programs successfully addressing the obstacles to college success. Some originate in the schools, others are external nonprofits, and many are supported by philanthropic investments.

While these programs might focus on one specific challenge or another, the reality is that by addressing one type of obstacle, other problems begin to be resolved. In this section, we present programs addressing these challenges from around the country. These are examples of ingenuity, commitment, possibility, and they can serve as inspiration to philanthropists as we can see the impact of philanthropy in action. Each example in this guide represents an entry point for readers who want to help and a solution for addressing the college completion challenge.

1. Meeting Basic Needs

Colleges and universities are bolstering efforts designed to meet students' basic needs. Food pantries and other food access programs, such as [Swipe Out Hunger](#), have sprouted on campuses in every state. Addressing basic insecurity issues for college students is an area that is also garnering attention at the federal level, witness the [September 2021 Congressional hearing on hunger on college campuses](#).

Emergency Aid: Keeping College Students in the Classroom

Emergency aid programs have been developed or expanded and designed to quickly and effectively respond to crises that could hinder a student's ability to complete college. For instance, the [GeorgetownScholars Program](#) at [Georgetown University](#) in Washington, D.C. offers extra financial support via microgrants from its [Necessity Fund Endowment](#), which was launched with a \$1 million gift and is designed to offer financial assistance to first-generation and low-income students. These small grants can help cover unexpected and/or emergency costs that arise throughout a student's time on campus. Common grant requests include medical co-pays, career development expenses (for example, for professional attire or funding for graduate school application fees), and off-campus mental health counseling.

Solutions Addressing Challenges to College Success

The private college also provides modest grants to students encountering other unexpected out-of-pocket expenses such as grocery stipends, winter clothing, [DACA](#) expenses, and emergency travel. Funded by Georgetown’s donor community and administered by the university’s Georgetown Scholars Program—the **fund** now distributes several thousand grants annually. In the fiscal year 2020, the fund provided Georgetown students with nearly \$700,000 in emergency aid, including significant resources to support the transition to a virtual learning environment.

The GSP Necessity Fund is a crucial complement to students’ financial aid packages. The university has seen a significant increase in demand from students for this additional support: the number of necessity fund grant awards distributed annually has grown more than 150% in the past five years.

This kind of giving is considered emergency aid, but it is also funding that supports the true cost of college attendance (not just tuition, housing, food, and fees, but also transportation, technology, mental healthcare, and other expenses that can add up.)

Georgetown is just one example. At Georgia State University [Panther Retention Grants](#) award funds of as little as \$300—the average grant is under \$1,000—to assist students within a few courses of graduation who have unmet financial needs. [A few hundred dollars really can make the difference](#) between completing a degree or not. The program at this public Atlanta-based university has an impressive return rate: 86% of students who receive a Panther Completion Grant graduate.

Beyond the Food Pantry: Nourishing Students on Campus

The University of California system, with nine public undergraduate campuses across the Golden State, is considered a [trailblazer in innovation](#) to address students’ [basic needs](#). Consider [UC Berkeley’s Basic Needs Center](#), a one-stop shop for students with food, housing, and financial insecurity, that opened in 2019.

Many colleges and universities have a basic needs center with a food pantry, nutrition workshops, aid for unhoused students, and referrals to off-campus social services. But Berkeley’s center goes further. It features a space where representatives from local agencies hold “office hours” to assist students with rental housing applications, [CalFresh \(Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program\)](#) applications, and more.

Solutions Addressing Challenges to College Success



The center also offers case management by a licensed clinical social worker for students needing a wide spectrum of specialized support. In the communal kitchen, students can prepare food pantry items or meals brought from home. The center also has room for wellness activities, training events, and community development.

Other institutions are finding unique ways and forging local partnerships to ensure their student body is well fed. For instance, [Compton College](#) in Los Angeles teamed up with the meal delivery service [Everytable](#) to provide free meals to students at this community college. [Ozarks Technical and Community College](#) in Springfield, Missouri, has

expanded its successful free breakfast program to all of its campuses. [White Mountains Community College](#) in New Hampshire provides daily breakfast and lunch and one dinner each week to all enrolled students.

Connecting Students and Services

Of course, it's not enough to offer these services. Colleges and universities need to ensure that students who need these resources know about them, know how to access them, and aren't prevented by embarrassment or shame from utilizing them. One of the many reasons students do not take advantage of available assistance—for instance, going to a food pantry or applying for federal nutrition benefits—is the social stigma that can accompany such aid. Some organizations are using new programs to address this concern.

Take [Benefits Hub](#)—a promising model based on a partnership that embeds trained [AmeriCorps](#) members (dubbed coaches) on college campuses where they connect students to services and resources to help them meet their basic needs. Benefit Hubs, managed by the [United Way of King County](#), operates in seven Seattle area community and technical colleges and one public university. This human-centered approach is based on the premise that coaches serve as trusted and reliable connectors to resources to access groceries, secure housing, pay utility bills, obtain financial and legal advice, locate transit assistance, and find mental health and wellness referrals.

2. Building Belonging and Connection

Many institutions are experimenting with ways to promote a culture of inclusion to help foster a sense of belonging among students.

Putting First-Generation First

First-generation students often face significant financial, cultural, and educational barriers to accessing college. They represent a diverse cross-section of the country. At the [University of Wisconsin at Madison](#), for instance, where around one in five undergraduates is a first-generation student, [most are White and from small towns and farms](#). The assumption that all first-generation students come from underserved communities is not necessarily the case: Some come from well-resourced families who made their living without degrees but who are still newcomers to college culture.

Different strategies to help students adjust and excel include programs such as the [University of Cincinnati's "Gen-1" residential house](#), which is exclusively for first-generation students and designed with services to help students succeed academically and socially. The program, the first live-learn community in the country to focus on first-generation students, launched in 2008. Many more such programs have followed. Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia established its [F1RST Faculty](#) program pairing first-generation students with [faculty and staff mentors](#) who themselves had been first-generation students and know the challenges first-hand.

Changing Mindsets, Improving Grades

Born out of groundbreaking research from Stanford University, which showed low-cost, low-time interventions that targeted students' beliefs could influence their academic trajectory, the nonprofit [PERTS](#) (Project for Education Research That Scales) works with educators to integrate evidence-based practices to help advance social equity. The novel approach is proving powerful in combating self-doubt and imposter syndrome in college students. The interventions deliver persuasive yet stealthy psychological messages to neutralize crippling anxieties and fears. Students who participate in the exercises post better grades, have lower dropout rates, and, in some cases, better health and well-being for up to three years than students who did not.

The [Student Experience Project](#)—operating under the PERTS umbrella—includes six public urban colleges testing these mindset interventions on campuses, beginning with STEM students. Participating universities include Portland State University, Colorado State University, University of Colorado at Denver, University of New Mexico, University of Toledo, and University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

Building Resilience

Stanford University is also a self-acknowledged [epicenter of “Duck Syndrome,”](#) —in which students at the prestigious, private institution appear to each other to be gliding effortlessly but are, in fact, paddling furiously beneath the surface. To counter this syndrome, the university implemented the [Resilience Project](#), which aims to “instill a sense of belonging and bravery” through storytelling about failure and struggle.

[Failing Well](#) at Smith College in Massachusetts has a similar goal and even works with

students to create a “failure resume” describing setbacks they have faced. Penn Faces at the University of Pennsylvania shares stories from students who practiced the art of appearing happy even when struggling. Sharing honest accounts of what social psychologists call belonging uncertainty – even if they make students feel vulnerable or uncomfortable – can help to mitigate feelings of isolation. These sorts of initiatives are [part of a national trend](#) toward programming that helps students forge social connections through sharing uncomfortable experiences rather than students avoiding discomfort through social segregation.



Taking Pride in the LGBTQIA+ Community on Campus

LGBTQIA+ students want the same –and different—opportunities to connect as their peers. New York University’s [LGBTQ+ Center](#) runs innovative programming such as Queering Faith, Lavender Graduation, and Trans Awareness Week.

Programming on campuses goes beyond one-off celebrations such as Pride or National Coming Out Day. UCLA’s [LGBTQ Campus Resource Center](#) offers a range of services, including outreach and education, advocacy, student counseling, and an ally network.

Cornell University offers residential housing for LGBTQIA+ students and their allies and is home to several [LGBTQIA+ organizations](#) for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transitioning, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, nonbinary, and more students.

Student Parents Want to Belong at College

[Generation Hope](#), a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit, recognizes the additional support that students with children need. Its [Scholar Program](#), designed to help young teen parents in the area fulfill their college dreams, offers tuition support, family mentoring, access to mental, emotional, and wellness support and counseling, access to emergency funding during times of crisis, and child care support.

The program gets results. 1 in 5 undergraduate college students is a parent, but they are 10 times less likely to graduate than college students who don't have a child. And fewer than 2% of teen mothers who have a baby before age 18 earn a college degree before age 30. That said, sixty-two percent of Generation Hope's Scholar Program recipients receive a college degree within six years, which exceeds the national average for all college students.

3. Accessing Resources and Academic Support

These nonprofit organizations—and Crimsonbridge partners—based in the greater Washington, D.C. area, serve as examples of how such groups can impact students of limited economic means by connecting them to key resources and people.

Building Relationships, Creating Networks, Opening Doors

Relationships build networks, and networks open doors. That's the guiding philosophy behind [Capital Partners for Education](#), whose goal is to equip first-generation students with the experiences and community of support they need to help them get to and through college and achieve upward economic mobility. The program is designed to help students gain the tools they need to tackle any barriers to obtaining a college degree through a structured continuum of one-on-one mentoring, academic support, scholarship opportunities, and career preparation services.

The program does more than help students attend and graduate from college: It strives to prepare students for the workforce so that they can blossom in sustainable careers and gain economic mobility. Developing and continuing relationships is at the core of its work, and it's what fuels the impact the program has in the lives of its students.

Solutions Addressing Challenges to College Success

Model Corporate Work-Study Program in Catholic Schools Preps for College, Life

The [Cristo Rey Network](#) consists of 38 high schools across 17 states and delivers a [career-focused](#), college preparatory education in the Catholic tradition for students with financial obstacles. The network uniquely integrates rigorous academic curricula with four years of professional work experience and support to and through college. Cristo Rey partners with educators (including 68 universities), businesses, and communities to enable students to fulfill their aspirations for life beyond school. Ninety percent of Cristo Rey graduates—98% of whom are students of color—currently enroll in college, a rate 1.4 times greater than low-income high school graduates (61%) and more than high school graduates from high-income families (86%). Cristo Rey graduates are three times more likely to complete a bachelor's degree by age 24, compared to students who come from economically-vulnerable backgrounds.

Staying on Track with the Help of a College Coach

[CollegeTracks'](#) mission is to empower first-generation college students and students from low-income and immigrant households in Montgomery County, Maryland, by helping them bridge systemic opportunity gaps with enough support to get into and through higher education. The organization's [College Success Program](#) pairs college students with a success coach who helps them develop an academic and career plan, enroll, persist, and complete their degree. These college coaches help students manage the academic, financial, personal, and social challenges all students face, along with helping to secure ongoing financial aid so they can flourish.

Less is More in Non-Traditional Pathways

[New Futures](#) has a novel approach to fighting inequity: it believes in the long-term benefits of short-term credentials – associate degrees or vocational certifications – as a potential launching pad toward rewarding, fulfilling careers. It is one of the few college success organizations supporting underserved young people on this so-called non-traditional path. New Futures invests in community college students through a combination of scholarships, academic and career advising, and access to transformative professional networks, as a conduit to help jumpstart careers in in-demand fields such as healthcare and technology that can lead to financial security and supports youth on a path to well-paying, professionally-satisfying jobs.

Solutions Addressing Challenges to College Success

New Futures offers guidance on teamwork, time management, and communications, networking opportunities to prepare students for industry careers, and advising to help them stay on track through two-year college programs.

Making Student Wellness a Priority

As with other programs, [Collegiate Directions](#) is committed to closing the education, achievement, and opportunity gap for low-income, primarily first-generation-to-college students. The organization provides comprehensive college counseling, targeted tutoring, test preparation, study skills, leadership training, and ongoing support, starting in 10th grade and continuing through successful college graduation. It also offers scholars career coaching and access to workforce opportunities through experiential learning and connects students with accomplished professionals in their chosen fields.

One area where Collegiate Directions serves as a model: how responsive and strategic the nonprofit is in supporting college students' wellness and how it views wellness as a function of students' ability to persist and graduate. All their scholars are required to meet with a trained social worker four times; 80% of their scholars continue to meet with their wellness counselor beyond the mandated sessions.

The group's wellness program includes a partnership with local social work interns as staff support and includes a wellness program strategy that understands the importance of family engagement and works to normalize mental health, wellness support, and access to related resources as a crucial component to students' academic success package in college.



4. Navigating Degree and Career Pathways

A Path to Completion

In many community colleges, students are left on their own to navigate a complex and confusing array of academic programs and support services. Many students can't see a clear path to their goals, become frustrated, and drift away. A growing number of colleges and universities are redesigning academic programs and support services to create more clearly structured and educationally coherent pathways. Colleges give it different names, although it often goes by "guided pathways." The underlying idea is to give students firm guidance in choosing courses, along with clear course sequences that lead to on-track graduation. Colleges also monitor students' progress closely and intervene when they go off track.

The national [guided pathways](#) movement represents a relatively new strategy for transforming the student experience and improving college graduation rates. Guided pathways are a comprehensive and systemic redesign of the student experience -- from the student's initial connection to the college all the way to completion and graduation.

Community colleges in particular have been adopting this program to help students choose a program of study and create a plan to either transfer to a four-year college or find meaningful, sustainable work with a two-year degree. Hundreds of community colleges have committed to using a guided pathways approach, according to the [Community College Research Center at Teachers College](#), Columbia University.

[Research conducted by CCRC shows](#) that the practices used in guided pathways programs can lead to better outcomes for students. Students who enter a specific program earlier on in their time at a community college are more likely to transfer to a four-year college or complete a degree. Case in point: [Florida State University](#) in Tallahassee, which has its own [College Success Program](#) and was recently [honored for its efforts](#). Utilizing academic program maps increased retention and decreased the number of excess credits students took there. [CUNY's ASAP](#) is another model program. City University of New York's Guttman Community College, which opened in 2012, has used guided pathways from the start. Although Guttman draws from among CUNY's less-prepared students, its three-year graduation rate is 44 percent — nearly triple the rate of similar colleges nationwide, according to the New York Times. The guided pathways strategy — including meta majors — has helped other schools, including Georgia State University, the entire Tennessee system, several Ohio community colleges, and the University of Hawaii dramatically increase retention and graduation rates. In states such as California, the guided pathway concept has been enacted into law; with a goal towards improving timely graduation rates, several California community colleges have made substantial progress towards that end.

Demystifying Degree Pathways

[Complete College America](#), a national non-profit organization, provides technical assistance to many colleges to improve completion through pathway-centered initiatives, in many instances redesigning what a college pathway looks like. Another catalyst for this reform is [Curricular Analytics](#), an open-source software tool designed by innovators at the University of New Mexico that helped triple the university's four-year graduation rate. The software allows faculty members to develop maps that visualize the path to a degree within their department and provides a complexity score. The higher the score, the harder it is for students to graduate. Professors can see, for example, how a student's inability to enroll in — or to pass — one required course can block the path to potentially a dozen or more courses. These curricular maps can identify other potential delays to a degree or courses that seem tacked on and lead nowhere. Professors can use the tool to create alternative pathways to see what effect it might have on retention and graduation rates. In 2019, several universities began utilizing Curricular Analytics, including the University of South Florida, Colorado State, Utah State, and New Mexico State universities.

Technology startups also offer services to help colleges design degree pathways. These for-profit guided solutions can be useful tools, though challenges can occur in integrating with existing campus data systems, training, and technical assistance.

Turning Degrees Upside Down: Certificates First, General Education Second

Most degree programs begin with a series of general-education courses. Although they provide a foundation for critical thinking and future learning, these courses—which can range from algebra to English composition—can also tend to feel less relevant to first-generation and under-resourced students, who want an education to equate to increased earnings. The learning gained from general education is not immediately valuable in the labor market and can be lost if a student leaves college early.

Helping students earn certificates upfront may provide a promising path to address the college incompleteness challenge. Postsecondary institutions offer this kind of “flipped” credentials to students in a variety of subjects, from auto mechanics to interior design. Turning degrees upside down has the potential to do two jobs: provide students with marketable skills sooner rather than later (and with a credential that will be relevant to employers) while also ensuring they stay the course and graduate with a degree. [Career Technical Education](#) programs in states such as Texas, Florida, and California offer this inverted model to students who seek relevant technical knowledge and skills needed to prepare for further education and careers in current or emerging professions, including cybersecurity, nursing, and hospitality.



PHILANTHROPY IN ACTION
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DONORS

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DONORS

“Philanthropy that is intentional, strategic, and centered on student success, can and will help close the college graduation gap.”

– Gabriela Smith, Executive Chair and Founder, the Crimsonbridge Foundation

Philanthropists – whether individuals donating to an alma mater, a family foundation giving to a community-based organization, or donors recommending a gift through donor-advised funds – understand the value of investing in the next generation of college students.

This guide has highlighted the immediate need and opportunity for investment in four areas that directly support college students’ success and improve graduation rates. We believe that interventions in any of these areas will support all of these areas and contribute to college completion.



When a strategic philanthropic investment is focused on college success, it makes sure that funds are not simply used to cover college tuition and fees but instead to support students as they navigate milestones in college. Federal government efforts to support college success are happening, but not at a pace that meets the needs of today’s students or at levels that support the true cost of going to college. Absent a national policy to substantially address the real cost of attending college, nonprofits, colleges, and philanthropic entities are stepping up to help fill the void in the college success equation.



BE A PART OF THE SOLUTION HOW CAN YOU START MAKING A DIFFERENCE

There are different ways to give, programs to support, strategies and entry points, all needed and impactful for every kind of donor and at any amount. Today, philanthropy has an historic opportunity to support college success, to help students not only to access but also to complete college, which will directly benefit the social and economic future of our nation.

Whether you are using a donor-advised fund, making a foundation grant, giving a direct personal charitable gift, or advising a client on their philanthropic strategy, all giving is important and how you do it might make the difference between the success or failure of your philanthropic investment—which measures success in terms of social benefit achieved as a direct or leveraged result of your philanthropic funding. In other words, are students accessing college through your scholarship funding graduating? Chances are that if your funding seeks to help low income and first-generation college students achieve their college dreams, 6 out of 10 of those students are not completing college. We understand the reasons and the solutions to help bridge this gap between access and completion. This problem has been identified in part because access has expanded significantly, and it is time for philanthropy to finish this job and help bridge the college access to completion gap once and for all.

College success doesn't have to become your life mission or the focus of your philanthropy. You should be able to spend as much or as little time as you are able, and still make a tremendous difference. We know the extend of your engagement will depend on multiple factors, including your giving vehicles, access to advisory staff, personal preferences, professional experiences, and values you seek to cultivate. We believe that philanthropy that is well informed and strategic is more effective, compassionate, and successful at achieving intended results.

We prepared this guide to share information, best practices, and provide recommendations based on our extensive combined and first-hand experience as foundation leaders and founders, donor-advised fund contributors, business entrepreneurs, university board members, venture philanthropists, recipients and providers of scholarships, nonprofit associates, college administrators, first-generation college graduates, and advisors. Informed by our extensive experience in advancing college success, we offer the following recommendations as strategies to guide your philanthropy and maximize the impact of your support.



WHERE TO BEGIN? IT BEGINS WITH YOU

Whether you are a seasoned philanthropist, a new funder, a traditional philanthropist, a philanthropic advisor, foundation professional, donor, or college graduate seeking to help their alma mater, you should know:

- Your giving is a philanthropic investment, which measures success in terms of social benefit achieved as a direct or leveraged result of your philanthropic funding.
- You don't need to be an expert to be impactful or make it your life mission.
- You can find the right advisors to help you make a difference.
- You can spend as much or as little time as you are able. You can be very involved, work with your family, or have minimal engagement. Either way, you can make sure the right questions are asked, due diligence takes place, and meaningful outcomes are measured.
- You can make a difference regardless of the amount you give.
- Your scholarship funding is helping first-generation and students from low-income households access college, but are those students successfully graduating? You need to find out if your philanthropy is succeeding or if there are interventions needed to make sure it does.

WORK FROM YOUR BASELINE

As a donor, you will have your style, profile, and different levels of expertise in a variety of fields. You might be an expert in certain areas and need advice on others. Simply establish your baseline for your scholarship/college completion giving.





ACCESS ADVISORY RESOURCES AND WORK WITH THE PHILANTHROPIC VEHICLE THAT SUITS YOU

- The vehicle you use for your giving will determine the process of how you do it, such as simply writing a check, preparing a grant agreement, and recommending a grant from a donor-advised fund (remember you can never pledge from a donor-advised fund; you can only recommend for approval).
- The type of vehicle will also shape how much advice and assistance you can get in the giving process, for example, your foundation staff can research for you, or you might need to connect with development offices directly.





RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DONORS - BLUEPRINT FOR ACTION

1. ASSESS:

Based on your donor profile and baseline, tap into your philanthropy advisory resources to help you assess how to support college completion efforts. Whether it's your foundation staff, financial advisor, donor-advised fund donor services, partners, or grantees' development offices, they should be able to advise you or guide you in the right direction. You can keep it simple by connecting directly or partnering with experts in the field.

2. INQUIRE:

Respectfully inquire about graduation rate and college success programs, and find out about efforts by the university and other organizations to increase graduation rates. What are the chances that students receiving your scholarship funding will graduate? How can your philanthropy help increase graduation rates?

Questions to ask before giving

The questions below will illuminate opportunities and demonstrate that you want your philanthropy to leverage ongoing efforts improving the path to graduation and the success of students.

- Are the currently funded scholarships resulting in students earning degrees?
- What are the graduation rates for first-generation students and students with financial need?
- How do enrollment rates for these students compare to their graduation rates?
- Where is the greatest need for funding to support college student success?
- How are they addressing the basic needs of students and where are there gaps?
- Are there programs in place to support first-generation and low-income students?
- What specific programs connect students to a supportive network?
- What resources and academic support are making a difference to college graduation?
- What does success look like for this college, university, or nonprofit program?
- What is their strategy, plan, and timeframe to increase graduation rates?
- Are there efforts underway to create or expand support services for scholarship students?
- Who are their college/community-based nonprofit partners? How are they partnering?



3. GO BEYOND SCHOLARSHIPS:

Provide additional funding to go beyond tuition assistance to support basic needs and emergency aid funds.

- Donors already engaged in higher education understand that scholarships can be a necessary starting point to help more students get to college. To achieve greater returns from philanthropic interventions and make inroads towards needed systemic change, align scholarship giving with complementary efforts.
- Designate a percentage of your scholarship funding for basic needs or emergency aid.

Prioritize and specify your funds towards efforts that help college students thrive and complete degrees.

- Donor-advised recommendation forms, charitable appeals, and online giving platforms offer donors ways to specify how their funds will be used. Be sure to designate your support towards first-generation college student success programs. Specify in writing the grant is “dedicated to programs supporting first-generation and scholarship students to complete college.” (On donor-advised fund recommendation forms, this can be done under “other” programs.)

Fund Infrastructure.

- Be part of increasing the investment and creation of new services, facilities, technology, and programs helping campuses meet basic needs, support, and celebrate first-generation student success. Help fund or collaborate on efforts to finance a student basic needs center.
- Support the expansion and accessibility of technology that helps students thrive.
- Contribute to or create a first-generation initiative at a college campus. Explore funding to help mentoring and special programs designed to create community and foster a sense of belonging.





4. DIVERSIFY YOUR PHILANTHROPY PORTFOLIO:

Consider diversifying your philanthropy portfolio to support different types of nonprofit organizations addressing the graduation gap from different angles, to include key players in helping more students earn a degree.

- Community colleges present true value and forty-one percent of U.S. undergraduates attend a community college but only 1.5 percent of dollars raised in higher education go to two-year institutions.
- Nonprofits present donors with opportunities to invest and engage. Consider investing in the innovative program of a local or national college success nonprofit.
- New research and data is vital to inform promising practices and positive change. Invest in a project at an institution you already support, a national nonprofit, or think tank.

Support innovative local and national nonprofits.

Consider programming on and off campus. A growing number of highly effective nonprofit organizations are working with students beginning in high school and supporting them through college and beyond.

- Support local nonprofit organizations helping students in your community realize their dreams of a college degree.
- Support national nonprofits that are leading initiatives for specific demographics of students (i.e. parenting students, first-generation college students, and other students underrepresented in college graduation rates) to address college student success in your community.
- Seek the advice of community foundations, philanthropic advisors, and informed donor-advised fund managers to identify nonprofits engaged in college success work.

5. WHERE TO GIVE - EVERY QUALIFIED OPPORTUNITY CONSTITUTES AN ENTRY POINT FOR YOUR PHILANTHROPY:

You can focus on the colleges you already support by asking about graduation rates and helping develop or fund programs to support college success. Help nonprofit organizations addressing the challenges faced by first-generation college students. You can help high school-based efforts, local and national efforts, innovative online initiatives, and a whole range of programs seeking to address the 4 main obstacles to college success.



Opportunities to support college student success exist beyond higher education institutions:

- Nonprofits (local, regional, and national) with “to and through” college success programs.
- Colleges and Universities with student success services and programs.
- Professional Associations and Research Organizations focused on college success.
- Community and Operating Foundations with college success initiatives.
- High schools supporting the success of their graduates in college. National networks such as the Cristo Rey Network and KIPP are developing thorough high school-based online alumni resources dedicated to college completion to follow, mentor, and guide their alumni especially when the colleges they attend don’t have resources in place.
- Fund local and national organizations advocating for and providing needed services.

All gifts make a difference.

Whether a small donation, a grant recommendation to a donor-advised fund, a large foundation gift, or a multimillion-dollar investment, support at all levels can make a meaningful difference.

For examples of excellent organizations working to address the challenges to college completion, please go to page 22.

Do not be overwhelmed by the choices; start with your baseline and philanthropic advisory group. Assess and inquire so you can make sure your funds support student success. Go beyond scholarships in the colleges you support. Expand and diversify your philanthropic portfolio, so you can address the problem from different angles and support key stakeholders. Reach out and partner with experts in the field. You can make it very simple and very impactful at the same time.

For additional information, guidance, and thorough advice, you can contact the Crimsonbridge Foundation at collegesuccess@crimsonbridge.org.



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