

Building Cities by Degrees

Lessons on
Increasing
College
Completion
from Six Talent
Dividend Cities

*Executive
Summary*

mdrc
BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

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December 2017

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Overview

While completion of a college credential is a critical step toward increasing one's viability in today's labor market, only about 40 percent of Americans earn an associate's or bachelor's degree by age 27. Many policymakers, education leaders, and philanthropic organizations have focused on improving graduation rates. In 2011, the Kresge Foundation sought to build on this work by launching the National Talent Dividend \$1 Million Prize Competition. Leaders of the initiative posited that a city's per capita income would rise as the number of degree holders rose, and the contest promised to award \$1 million to the city with the greatest proportional increase in its college degree completion over a four-year period. Fifty-seven of the nation's most populous cities participated in the competition; the winner was Akron, Ohio, which increased its degree attainment by 20 percent.

Given the strong performance of many cities in the competition, the Kresge Foundation was interested in learning which particular strategies may have been influential in their postsecondary gains and in sharing potential lessons from the Talent Dividend work with the larger field. This case study examines the efforts of six of the top cities in the competition (Akron; Columbia, South Carolina; Omaha, Nebraska; Orlando, Florida; Portland, Oregon; and Richmond, Virginia) in an effort to build a set of hypotheses around the activities that may have helped these cities increase degree attainment. In examining the efforts of multiple institutions to raise graduation rates within their city, this study departs from higher education research that tends to focus on individual colleges. And because three colleges in the case study cities have been among the nation's most successful in decreasing achievement gaps between low-income and traditionally underrepresented minority students and their more wealthy, white peers, the research also focuses on identifying which approaches might be particularly important in closing such gaps.

Overall, this study found several key factors that might help improve postsecondary completion. First, nearly all the case study cities had established partnerships across education sectors and between colleges and employers that helped bring hundreds to thousands more students into postsecondary institutions. Specific interventions aimed at easing students' transitions between high school and college, and between two-year and four-year college environments, seemed to be particularly instrumental in helping them earn college credits and credentials. In supporting underrepresented minority and low-income students, strong transfer agreements between two-year and four-year colleges, widespread financial aid, and intensive student services seem to play a key role. Finally, contextual factors, such as the economic downturn, often influenced cities' efforts and outcomes. Successful cities found ways to highlight their postsecondary opportunities and promote student achievement within their changing environments.

Preface

Enrolling in college and completing a degree is an important way for Americans to train for and enter the workforce — yet too many fail to do so. The need for a credential is particularly acute as the labor market becomes more technologically advanced and skill oriented. Employers have increasingly called for — but have not always found — workers with the higher-order critical thinking and problem-solving skills necessary to perform well in this environment. As a result, postsecondary leaders have been seeking more innovative ways to reach and educate lower-skilled individuals. For example, colleges have created “bridges” between high schools and career and technical programs and developed “career pathway” programs, with a focus on the accumulation of credentials on multiple levels.

But while most higher education research has focused on the efforts of colleges to improve student outcomes, work outside these institutions can also be critical to achieving this goal. The communities surrounding postsecondary institutions — including local businesses, philanthropic organizations, and nonprofits — play an important role in employing and serving many of the colleges’ students. Learning how colleges work within and among their local communities to improve student achievement can provide insights into how college access and success can be promoted.

The Kresge Foundation’s Talent Dividend competition aimed to give cities an incentive to work collaboratively to improve degree completion. Studying how cities successfully pursued this project offers a window into how these types of cross-sector partnerships might work — and how they may dramatically affect the number of students enrolling and earning credits at these institutions. The hypotheses generated from this study may help bring about new thinking on how cities and local communities can increase their college-going and college-graduating populations — and help researchers, practitioners, and policymakers continue to move this work forward.

Gordon L. Berlin
President, MDRC

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We are also thankful to the many individuals who read and reviewed this brief. In particular, we are grateful to those who gave us excellent written and oral feedback, including Alexander Mayer, Robert Ivry, and Victoria Quiroz-Becerra. Finally, we would like to thank the publications staff from MDRC, including Jennie Kaufman and Christopher Boland.

The Authors

Executive Summary

Completion of a college degree is a critical step toward improving one's earnings and viability in today's labor market. It is estimated that 60 percent of all U.S. jobs will require some form of postsecondary education by 2018; a trend toward greater educational requirements has been developing for at least the last decade, as technological change and globalization have created a labor market that rewards those with higher-level skills while eliminating many of the traditional "blue collar" manufacturing jobs that provided living wages to middle-class families.¹ Yet only about 40 percent of Americans earn an associate's or bachelor's degree by age 27.² This situation has led many policymakers, education leaders, and philanthropic organizations to focus on improving postsecondary credentialing, with large foundations, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation, seeking to dramatically increase the nation's current college graduation rates over the next decade.³ The federal government has kept pace through efforts such as the American Graduation Initiative, which called for five million additional college graduates by 2020, and increases in federal financial aid through the 2007 College Cost Reduction and Access Act and reauthorization of the Higher Education Act in 2008.⁴

Recognizing the challenges, in 2011, CEOs for Cities and the Kresge Foundation launched the National Talent Dividend \$1 Million Prize Competition, which would award \$1 million to the city that had the greatest proportional increase in college degree completion over a four-year period. Talent Dividend leaders posited that a city's per capita income would rise as the number of degree holders rose and developed the competition to help focus cities on the potential benefits of increasing the college graduation rate. Fifty-seven of the nation's most populous cities participated in the competition, and the winner — Akron, Ohio — was announced in 2014, having increased its college credentialing by 20.2 percent.

Given the strong performance of many cities in the competition, the Kresge Foundation was interested in learning which particular strategies may have been influential in their postsecondary gains and in sharing those lessons with the larger field. This case study examines the efforts of 6 of the top 10 performing cities in the Talent Dividend competition (Akron; Columbia, South Carolina; Omaha, Nebraska; Orlando, Florida; Portland, Oregon; and Richmond, Virginia) in an effort to build a set of hypotheses about what activities may have helped these cities increase their college completion rates. The research team began by identifying leaders

¹Carnevale, Jayasundera, and Gulish (2016).

²Living Cities (2014).

³Achieving the Dream Network (2017); Lumina Foundation (2017).

⁴SoFi (2016); Institute for College Access and Success (n.d.).

from a broad set of organizations, including colleges, businesses, foundations, nonprofits, and government agencies, within each of the six case study cities. In examining the efforts of multiple institutions to raise college completion within their city, the study departs from higher education research that tends to focus on individual colleges. The research also seeks to highlight the types of approaches that may be helpful in decreasing achievement gaps for low-income and traditionally underrepresented minority students.

Key findings from the study include the following:

- Partnerships across education sectors and between colleges and employers — promoting credit transfers, simultaneous enrollment, or internships — appeared to be influential in helping many students earn college credits and degrees.
- Interventions such as financial support and intensive student services, which ease the transitions along the education and employment pipeline, may lead to higher college enrollment and degree completion.
- Strong transfer, financial aid, and student support systems may help in closing achievement gaps.
- Contextual factors, such as the economy, can have an important influence on postsecondary education and may present opportunities for cities to increase college completion.

What Did the Top Cities Do to Improve Degree Completion Rates?

Representatives within the six Talent Dividend case study cities posited a number of factors that they saw as influential on the growth of college credentialing, as highlighted below.

- **Partnerships across education sectors — K-12 systems, two-year colleges, and four-year colleges and universities — may hold particular promise for increasing college completion.**

Cross-sector partnerships, a key tenet in the Talent Dividend theory of change, played an important role in many of the case study cities' efforts to increase degree attainment. Five of the six cities had partnerships in place that generally involved government leaders, kindergarten through 12th-grade school districts, and colleges; in some cases, nonprofit networks helped bring together multiple actors within their cities. While colleges have most often taken the initiative, mayors in two of the cities, Portland and Orlando, had been working to foster these relationships.

Most notable were alliances between education sectors. Relationships that helped ease students' transitions along the education pipeline, including those that allowed secondary students to enroll in college courses and earn college credits as well as those that eased the burden of transfer between two-year and four-year colleges, appeared to be particularly beneficial. The partnerships that allowed for the greatest amount of access to the next educational level — involving guaranteed admission for two-year college graduates to four-year colleges, or large-scale dual enrollment programs in which high school students can earn college credits — appeared to play an important role in helping hundreds to thousands of students reach the next level of education.

Though these findings align with rigorous studies on the positive effects dual enrollment programs can have on students' accumulation of college credits and degrees,⁵ much less is known about how partnerships between two-year and four-year colleges may improve students' credentialing. Numerous studies have confirmed a lack of alignment across colleges' course requirements and students' loss of course credits in the transfer process,⁶ even in states that had articulation agreements to align courses and course numbering.⁷ More specificity around course transfer may be needed for students to successfully matriculate and complete bachelor's degrees. Having strong support systems for transfer students also appears to be key, given the documented challenges these students face in moving across institutions. Finally, students' success in earning an associate's degree may also be important, as research has shown that earning an associate's degree before transfer is positively associated with earning a bachelor's degree.⁸

The benefits that four-year institutions in the case study cities gained from their transfer partnerships suggests that more effort is warranted. Of particular note, the experiences in some Talent Dividend cities indicate that transfer agreements may hold promise for increasing four-year colleges' diversity and reducing achievement gaps. But while quantitative studies have demonstrated that this can happen, less is known about the types of programs that may facilitate this work. Some agreements allow two-year graduates more open access to four-year colleges, while others restrict entry based on such factors as grade point average or specific course requirements. Policymakers, practitioners, and researchers should put a high priority on further investigations of how the transfer process might further promote such outcomes.

⁵What Works Clearinghouse (2017).

⁶Jenkins and Fink (2015); Booth et al. (2013); Jaggars and Fletcher (2014).

⁷Handel and Williams (2012); Bailey et al. (2017).

⁸Crosta and Kopko (2014); Arrington (2016).

- **Building networks with employers and working with them to create degrees that meet local labor force needs may help colleges further increase their enrollments and credentialing.**

Representatives in all the case study cities attributed their increases in degree completion to the strong alliances that had been built between their postsecondary institutions and local employers. While four-year colleges and universities tended to connect with employers through internship programs, two-year colleges tended to partner more closely with local businesses to create new degree or credential programs that would meet employers' workforce needs. In addition to developing a strong job pipeline for new graduates, partnerships with large companies, such as Toyota or Boeing, often brought new resources to two-year colleges, as the companies donated equipment or their expertise to help create programs and train students.

These types of employer-college partnerships represent a potentially valuable, but understudied, resource in helping more individuals achieve college credentials. Some organizations, such as the Center for American Progress and the Aspen Institute, have begun studying the proliferation of these partnerships and noted the potential they have for increasing graduates' income.⁹

Given these findings, two-year colleges may wish to cultivate new relationships with local employers to see whether and what types of training programs might further facilitate individuals' certification and employment within local cities. In particular, degree programs in health-related, business, engineering, and computing seem to hold the most promise for increasing the wages of students receiving certificates or associate's degrees.¹⁰ These programs could benefit from a deeper understanding of which types of employer-college partnerships are most fruitful, how new programs can be more easily created and maintained, and whether additional credential and workforce opportunities can be built on these new degree programs to further advance individuals' skills and earnings.

- **Large-scale financial and student support programs, such as statewide scholarship programs or institution-wide intensive advising models, may be particularly helpful in increasing degree attainment.**

MDRC's research team found that the interventions that seemed to influence student persistence and completion tended to be larger-scale programs that improved students' financial or social support as they enrolled in college. Many of the colleges in this case study had implemented or felt the effects of statewide scholarships or other financial aid programs that support-

⁹Soares (2010); Heidkamp and Hilliard (2014); Association of American Colleges and Universities (2013).

¹⁰Belfield and Bailey (2017).

ed hundreds and sometimes thousands of their students. In addition, many colleges had developed institution-wide processes to support different types of students as they entered college, whether they were first-time entering freshmen, transfer students, first-generation-in-college students, or students specializing in particular fields (such as STEM majors). Leaders at these institutions argued that such programs helped students develop clearer plans for their college and career trajectories and fostered a sense of community among students that they believed was an important contributor to their persistence and graduation.

This hypothesis aligns well with recent research on intensive student support services and supplementary financial aid programs, which have been shown to have strong effects on students' persistence and completion. For instance, research on the Performance Based Scholarship programs, which provided supplementary grants to students as they met certain academic milestones, improved students' academic progress, while an evaluation of Kingsborough Community College's learning communities program, in which students took three classes together as a cohort and received case management advising and vouchers for textbooks, revealed that students took and passed more courses and were more likely to have graduated six years later than students in the control group.¹¹ Additionally, strong graduation impacts have been found from financial and student support programs more intensive than those in the Talent Dividend case study cities, such as those provided by the City University of New York's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), which nearly doubled graduation rates in three years.¹²

Given these findings, colleges in other states might consider implementing more intensive advising and greater financial support to help guide students throughout their college careers. Currently, MDRC is studying whether models like ASAP can be replicated in other states, with varying levels of financial aid and student support; early findings suggest that the strong impacts on student achievement can be achieved at other colleges.¹³ Further research will demonstrate whether these findings hold over time and how different levels of support may affect students' outcomes.

- **Strong transfer partnerships, financial aid programs, and student support systems may be particularly important in reducing achievement gaps and helping low-income students and students of color attain degrees.**

¹¹Mayer, Patel, Rudd, and Ratledge (2015); Weiss et al. (2014).

¹²Scrivener et al. (2015).

¹³Sommo and Ratledge (2016).

Three universities in this study — Virginia Commonwealth University, the University of Central Florida, and the University of South Carolina at Columbia — have been recognized nationally for their success in decreasing achievement gaps between traditionally underrepresented minority (URM) students and white students. Leaders in these institutions as well as in other case study cities highlighted three factors that they felt had made a particularly strong contribution to increasing their diversity and supporting the success of URM students. First, college and university leaders noted that strong transfer relationships with two-year colleges had helped increase the percentage of URM students in their schools, thereby diversifying their graduating classes. Second, financial aid, including both federal and state grants as well as privately funded scholarships, was seen as particularly influential in helping low-income students enroll in college and persist. Third, leaders highlighted the important role that student support services played in helping URM and low-income students make the transition to college and succeed there. Even when services were directed to the larger student body, the leaders argued that they had a particularly positive effect on URM and low-income students, who tended to be less familiar with college expectations or have fewer financial means to support their enrollment.

Recent studies have found that certain states and certain postsecondary institutions have produced better outcomes for URM students. For instance, in a correlational analysis of 700,000 degree-seeking students using data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, low-income transfer students attained degrees at a rate similar to their high-income peers in the states of North Carolina, Florida, Tennessee, and Iowa, suggesting that particular policies or practices may help promote low-income students' success.¹⁴ And as was the case with the University of Central Florida and Virginia Commonwealth University, researchers have found that certain four-year colleges (such as the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, the University of Washington, and Colorado State University) saw notable increases in their enrollments and diversity based on the strong partnerships and articulation agreements they had developed with their local community colleges.¹⁵

Given these findings, postsecondary institutions might look to bolster their ties with other colleges and universities as well as shore up their financial and student support in an effort to further reduce the achievement gaps between URM and white students. Additionally, qualitative researchers should study the colleges that have had more success at reducing such gaps to better understand what patterns may exist in their programs or services. If patterns do appear, more rigorous research should be devoted to learning whether their approaches can be

¹⁴Jenkins and Fink (2016).

¹⁵Wyner, Deane, Jenkins, and Fink (2017).

integrated into other college environments and measuring what effect they may have on students' achievement of credentials.

- **Future college initiatives aimed at improving completion rates should consider the role that certificates and other workforce degrees can play in bringing individuals into the postsecondary arena.**

The theory underlying the Talent Dividend initiative was that an increase in four-year bachelor's degrees was correlated with an increase in per capita income. Thus, the initiative was heavily weighted toward bachelor's degrees, discounting associate's degrees and excluding short-term certificates. However, leaders in many of the case study cities noted that two-year colleges and short-term certificate programs provided important avenues into postsecondary training and credential attainment, particularly among low-income students. Additionally, many of the employer-college partnerships highlighted in the case study cities began with certificate-level programs for students, which could then lead to further degrees as students advanced their skills.

In national research, associate's degrees and certificates have been shown to play an important role in increasing individuals' participation in the labor market and earnings. For instance, in a study recently released by Community College Research Center, associate's degree holders saw an average earnings increase of \$4,600 (among men) to \$7,200 (among women) over individuals who started college but did not earn a degree. Similarly, certificate holders saw an average gain of \$2,110 (among men) to \$2,940 (among women) in their earnings.¹⁶ Other studies have also shown that certificate holders have higher employment and income than those without certificates.¹⁷ Given this research, many institutions have begun to implement credential pathways, often beginning with short-term certificate programs and building toward associate's or bachelor's degrees, as a means for bringing lower-skilled adults into the postsecondary education pipeline and educating them in careers that have the potential for upward mobility.¹⁸

Considering these benefits of certificate and associate's degree programs, initiative leaders should consider including these degrees in their measures of postsecondary completion. An analysis of these degrees would be likely to provide an important window into postsecondary access and completion among lower-income or first-generation college students.

¹⁶Belfield and Bailey (2017).

¹⁷Xu and Trimble (2014).

¹⁸Bergson-Shilcock (2017); Zachry Rutschow and Crary-Ross (2014); Prins, Elder, Needle, and Raymond (2017).

- **While contextual factors, such as an economic recession, can have an important influence on college enrollments and financing, institutions within many of the case study cities implemented tactics that took advantage of opportunities and lessened negative effects on students.**

Both the economic recession of 2008-2009 and the opening of new postsecondary institutions increased college enrollments in the case study cities and probably influenced college completion during the Talent Dividend period. For instance, college enrollment increases surpassed the national average in at least half of the case study cities in the years just before the competition. Coincidentally, five of the six case study cities saw at least two and as many as five new institutions open during the competition period, which in some cities accounted for nearly 20 percent of the increase in associate's degrees or bachelor's degrees awarded at the end of the Talent Dividend period. At the same time, many institutions saw cuts to their financing, as tax revenues were dampened and state budgets waned. A number of colleges developed creative ways to overcome these challenges, whether by raising enrollments and funds through new degree programs or by diverting funding away from less essential projects, such as new buildings, in order to maintain the programming and support services that directly affected students.

The changes brought about by the recession carry two implications for cities' and institutions' efforts to improve college completion. First, while generally outside colleges' control, a city's economic situation can dramatically affect the flow of students and capital into postsecondary institutions. Second, factors such as the downturn in the economy may have the inadvertent effect of raising colleges' importance. Cities and colleges might benefit from anticipating an increased interest in college during these periods and developing strategies to accommodate higher enrollment. Colleges might try to capitalize on this outcome by directing investment toward programs that promote students' success, such as financial support or other student services.

- **Future initiative leaders who seek to support efforts to increase a city's number of degree holders might be well served by considering a longer timeline for the work and accounting for the ways that cities' previously established partnerships and efforts may have contributed to short-term successes.**

The Talent Dividend competition covered a four-year period, comparing outcomes from 2012-2013 with those from 2009-2010. Among the cities in this case study analysis, most, if not all, had been implementing strategies to boost college completion rates for many years before the competition. Therefore, stakeholders in most case study cities noted that their Talent Dividend work built on ongoing initiatives, rather than the competition instigating wholly new

efforts. In addition, some leaders provided an important critique of the initiative's short timeline for measuring changes in college completion, noting that such changes are generally seen as a result of many years of painstaking work and relationship building.

Improving postsecondary credentialing, particularly in relatively short periods of time, has proved daunting for many initiatives in the past.¹⁹ Interventions that have shown more dramatic effects on graduation rates tend to be longer-term and more intensive, both in the services they provide and the monetary assistance they offer to financially strapped students.²⁰ While this does not mean that short-term interventions cannot have effects on college completion, learning from longer-term efforts and considering whether and how these can be initiated in other cities might provide a fruitful way forward.

Conclusion

The Talent Dividend \$1 Million Prize Competition was developed as an incentive for cities to increase their numbers of college graduates. In exploring the approaches taken by six of the top-performing cities, this case study sought to generate hypotheses about what types of efforts might increase postsecondary completion and decrease achievement gaps.

Factors that appeared influential in increasing enrollment included partnerships across education sectors and between colleges and employers, and interventions to ease students' transitions through college and into the workplace. In addition, strong transfer, financial aid, and student support systems showed promise in closing achievement gaps for low-income students and those from traditionally underrepresented groups. Overall, most of the cities were able to capitalize on the recession's apparent effect on enrollments, providing opportunities for more residents even while dealing with reduced funding from some sources.

While higher education research tends to focus on individual colleges, the Talent Dividend competition offered an opportunity to take a city-level perspective, examining the efforts of multiple institutions to boost degree attainment. While colleges have taken the initiative, mayors have also worked to foster such relationships. Researchers, policymakers, and practitioners may find the hypotheses presented here to be of value in future investigations into ways to encourage college achievement.

¹⁹Zachry Rutschow et al. (2011).

²⁰Scrivener et al. (2015).

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About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York; Oakland, California; Washington, DC; and Los Angeles, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff members bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-prisoners, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Children's Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.