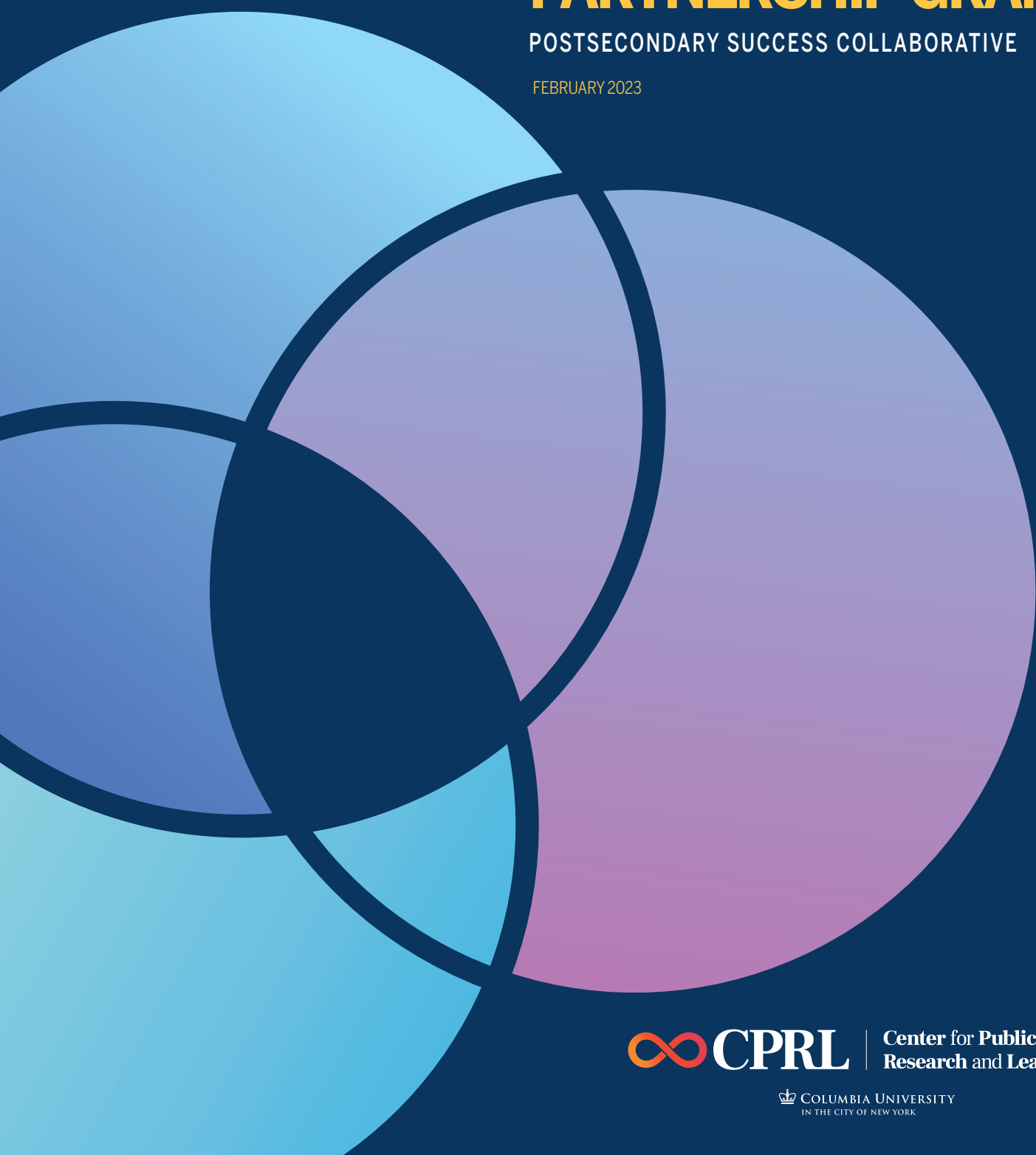




THE CENTERBRIDGE-BAIN PARTNERSHIP GRANT

POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS COLLABORATIVE

FEBRUARY 2023

 **CPRL** | Center for Public
Research and Leadership

 COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK

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“Across our partnership, for all our students, we hold one aspiration: that they have fulfilling lives. This project drives to the heart of that goal, making it a top priority for each of us.”

- Postsecondary Success Collaborative

Introduction

For more than 10 years, the Centerbridge Foundation (“Centerbridge”) and Bain & Company (“Bain”) have teamed up to use financial resources and strategic consulting to encourage innovative and accomplished organizations to fine-tune and scale their services and positively influence young people.

A highlight of their collaboration is the Partnership Grant, which Centerbridge has awarded to one organization each year since 2012. This award includes up to \$500,000 over 4 years, as well as consulting support from Bain. Grant portfolio support has also included leadership advisory support from ghSMART, research guidance from a team led by Ben Castleman and Jim Wyckoff at the University of Virginia, ongoing involvement and access to volunteer support from Centerbridge professionals, and sponsorship of team members who attend nonprofit-management courses at Columbia Business School. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Centerbridge also invited grant partners to apply for up to \$100,000 in supplemental relief funding.¹

In 2019, Centerbridge and Bain awarded the Partnership Grant to the Postsecondary Success Collaborative (“the Collaborative”), comprising three New York City-based charter management organizations (CMOs): KIPP, Achievement First, and Uncommon

Schools. The vast majority of their students qualify for free or reduced lunch and identify as people of color, a demographic that historically has not been served well by postsecondary institutions, such as college. The most recently reported national 6-year college completion rate (AA+BA) among graduates of “high-poverty high schools” was only 21%, compared with 53% from “low-poverty schools.”² Together, these CMOs aimed to increase the quality, effect, and cost-effectiveness of their postsecondary alumni support, thereby increasing college completion and persistence rates and strengthening transitions to strong first jobs for all students, regardless of postsecondary pathway.

This case study documents the Postsecondary Success Collaborative’s work that was made possible by the Partnership Grant, identifies program successes and areas for improvement, and provides guidance on how Centerbridge and Bain can deepen their impact with existing and future partners.

Background

In 2018, KIPP,³ Achievement First,⁴ and Uncommon Schools⁵ joined together to discuss how to create a more cost-effective and united system of postsecondary support for their alumni that could be used by CMOs throughout the nation.

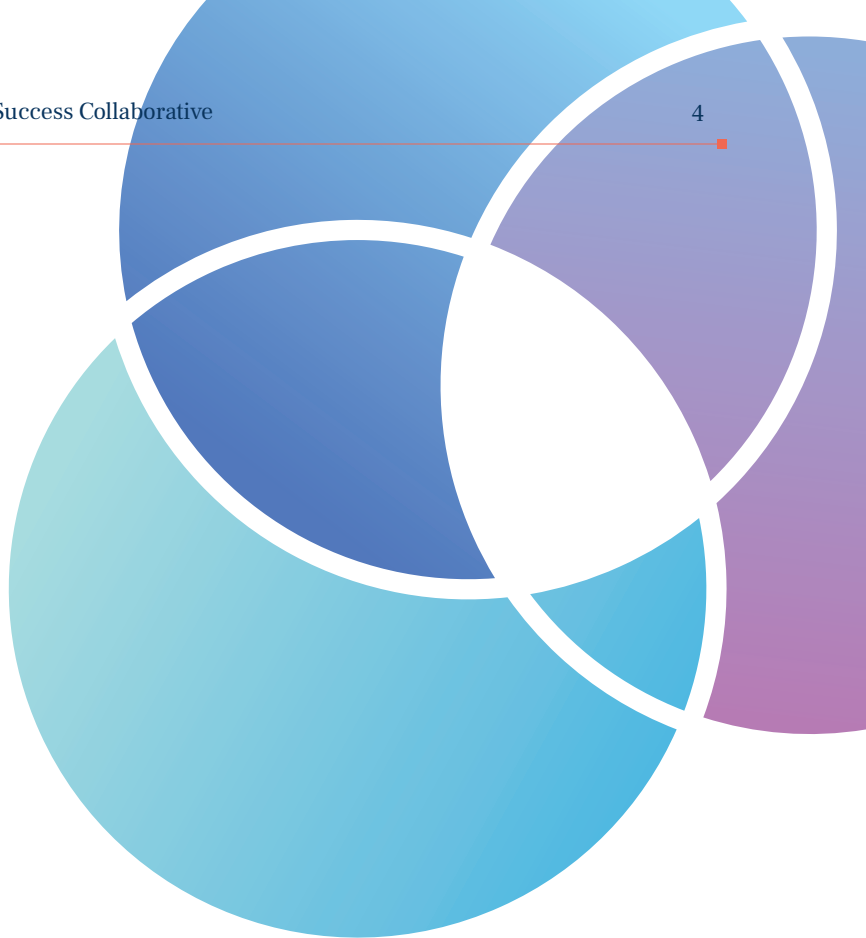
At the time, all three CMOs had made a long-term commitment to “college, career, and life beyond,” and worked to secure postsecondary pathways to success for their students and alumni. For KIPP, this took the form of KIPP Forward, a branch of KIPP NYC that developed and implemented a near-peer college advising model and workforce development program. Achievement First participated in higher education advocacy work and used Alumni Success Counselors to support students in the first 6 years after graduating from high school, and Uncommon Schools was in the process of developing a career support team and alumni advising strategy.

Across these efforts, all three CMOs wrestled with an important question: Without public dollars, in KIPP cofounder Dave Levin’s words, “How do you do this at scale in a way that is affordable?”⁶ The three organizations recognized that support, advocacy, and partnership building could be more efficient if done as a collective.⁷ They began conversations about their need to strengthen alumni support, and in 2018, they seized the opportunity to apply for the Centerbridge-Bain Partnership Grant. In the words of KIPP’s chief

research, data, and innovation officer, Jonathan Cowan, this would be a “catalytic investment,” forcing them to “either go after it or just keep talking about it.”⁸

Recognizing that their three CMOs were positioned to use their K–12 educational programming as a springboard to drive college and career success, KIPP, Achievement First, and Uncommon Schools set a goal of attaining 75% college completion for their alumni, a notable aspiration given that the national college completion rate is 21%.

Collectively, these CMOs have 120,000 students and more than 25,000 college-age alumni,⁹ so the potential reach of this effort was staggering, especially as the CMOs aspire to reach low-income college students throughout the country. As former CEO of the KIPP Foundation Richard Barth described, “many of our alumni land in the same place. . . . All three of us together can give a more focused scope. The big idea is more about creating ecosystems at scale for young people and not about any one K–12 institution.”¹⁰



Centerbridge and Bain Involvement

Centerbridge and Bain were eager to partner with KIPP, Achievement First, and Uncommon Schools on this important work. They were impressed by the impact of the CMOs: their track record of success and commitment to producing a solution to their shared challenge. Johanna Meadows, who leads the Centerbridge Foundation, cited “the flexibility, openness and drive of the leadership teams to do this together” as a main inspiration and driving force behind the Partnership Grant,¹¹ and Bain was eager to support the CMOs in determining how to “come together and use our scale to [work] more efficiently and effectively in service of our students.”¹² Both organizations were excited by the opportunity to work with the alumni from the three CMOs and saw a tremendous potential for impact across the sector.¹³

Centerbridge’s investment in and Bain’s collaboration with the CMOs began in May 2019. It focused on three overarching goals: (a) reach a shared understanding of each CMO’s processes and practices; (b) align on a collective vision, strategy, and 3-year model; and (c) determine the governance structure in each step of the student and alumni journey to a successful first job and a fulfilling life. Bain organized weekly working sessions and three steering committee meetings to reach alignment on each goal. A critical component of the work was a design workshop that highlighted alumni voices. The CMOs continued to pilot, iterate, and plan to scale where appropriate, with the long-term goal of including other CMOs and traditional districts and improving outcomes for traditionally underserved students and alumni.

Reaching a common understanding of the starting point

Before pursuing their goals as a collaborative, the CMOs needed to agree on the problem facing their alumni. Each CMO came to the table with different measures for understanding postsecondary readiness and success, as well as “different histories, cultures, and processes.”¹⁴ They also came with different levels of established alumni programming. To help navigate these differences, Bain encouraged the hiring of an internal manager to facilitate communication and collaboration among the CMOs. This manager aided with meeting facilitation, presentation preparation, conflict resolution, and data strategy and analysis.

To reach a common starting point, the CMOs explored the broader ecosystem of college and career pathways and each CMO’s postsecondary values and beliefs. Like Centerbridge and Bain, each CMO wanted to reframe “college or bust” ideals and shift toward an approach inclusive of multiple pathways leading to the goal of a ful-

filling, successful career. With Bain, they focused on “landing a strong first job, not just college being the top of the mountain.”¹⁵ This was a necessary change given that “even kids that are going to elite colleges are struggling” to graduate and secure rewarding employment.¹⁶

Bain also helped the CMOs understand how their strategic priorities aligned. Through the facilitated process, KIPP and Achievement First recognized they had “a high enough overlap in their interests and needs” to continue formal partnership as a Collaborative.¹⁷ Uncommon Schools was more focused on engaging in postsecondary advocacy with the Collaborative, so it decided to continue sharing ideas with the Collaborative as a “learning partner” but decided against participating in joint programming.¹⁸

Developing a 3-year vision and strategy

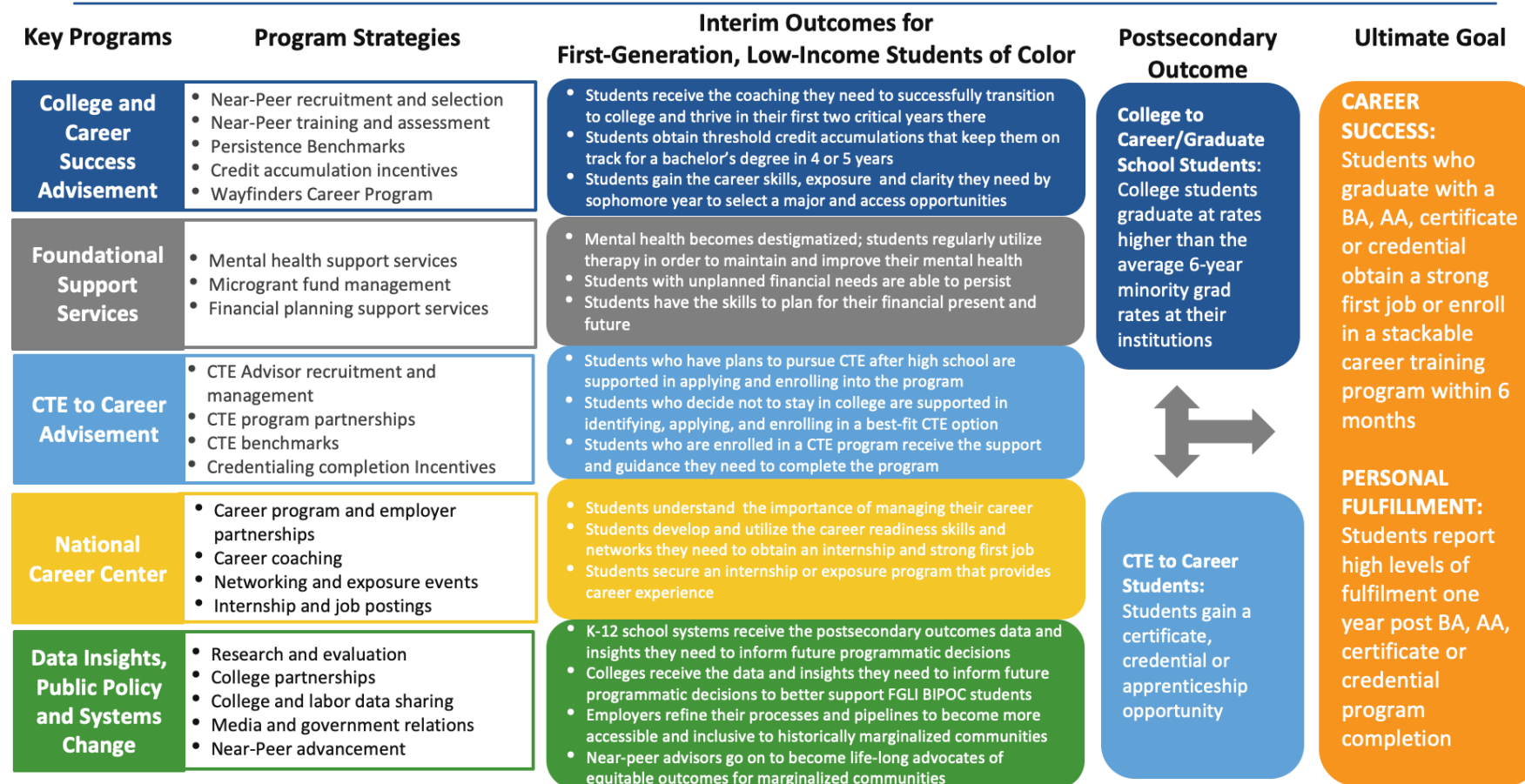
From this common understanding, the Collaborative generated a shared vision and strategy. Bain conducted primary and secondary research to determine what supports have the greatest impact on students and alumni and facilitated workshops to identify and coalesce around key programs and activities.

Particularly influential was the full-day design-thinking workshop Bain conducted to map the postgraduation experience of alumni and highlight challenging points where CMO support could be increased. Bain convened alumni from the CMOs to share their stories and gather their perspectives on improved alumni support. Together, alumni and CMO leadership identified pivotal moments in the alumni journey and prioritized solutions.

Taking a “future-back” approach, Collaborative leaders determined their road map for the next year, outlining where they wanted to be in the future and what new models could ensure the partnership was “scalable over time, replicable, and [had] the greatest impact.” (see Figure 1)¹⁹

Figure 1: Postsecondary Success Collaborative Theory of Impact 2022²⁰

College and Career Success Theory of Impact (2022)



Using this theory, Bain helped the Collaborative develop a dashboard to track metrics and target near- and long-term goals, including key metrics related to “strong first jobs that lead to career pathways for both college goers and non-college goers” and what it means to “have a living wage in different communities.”²¹

Building and resourcing the collaborative

The final piece of the Bain engagement involved deciding on a governance and funding structure that could support the Collaborative through its future expansion and the role each CMO would take to support and operationalize the Collaborative’s 3-year model. Bain researched and presented potential governance structures and a cost model, considering key questions such as who would be making “short-term decisions and long-term decisions, how the Collaborative should be housed and resourced, and what are the different supports provided.”²²

The Collaborative determined that it would be governed within KIPP Foundation, a national organization, and expand naturally as

the Collaborative expanded to new regions. Bain also provided the cost model that the Collaborative uses to map out how to provide more services at a lower cost per student at scale,²³ with a cost-per-student goal of under \$1,000 per year, a “feasible” plan “given the range of funding available.”²⁴

Lastly, with the help of Bain, Collaborative leaders detailed a model to reach their large strategic goals. They planned two college-success and two career-success pilots to test and learn how best to implement their partnership-driven strategy and approach. Because KIPP NYC, via its KIPP Forward team, had already implemented a strong near-peer advising model and partnered with key providers and support organizations (e.g., Project Basta, YouScience, KIPP College Partnerships), they decided KIPP Forward would lead and deliver programming, serving alumni from its CMO and Achievement First. This agreement required clear communication and coordination because “culturally it’s hard—it’s scary to hand over your students to a different entity.”²⁵

Implementation and Growth

With a shared understanding of the short- and long-term goals, a strategy to achieve its vision, and clarity on how to resource the continued work, the Collaborative implemented its model with great success. Over the grant period, the Collaborative launched its short-term testing pilots, learning, in real time, which programs worked best for its alumni and pivoting when its approaches were ineffective. At the same time, the CMOs started to lay the groundwork necessary to sustain and eventually scale the Collaborative's reach over time, including developing collaboration structures and securing funding from additional sources.

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– Postsecondary Success Collaborative

Both CMOs showed impressive commitment, including through the COVID-19 pandemic, by delivering strong programming for alumni. They recognized that “this was not an ideal situation to be starting a major growth of a program, but we did it,” motivated by the idea that “someone needs to help these students now more than ever.”²⁶ Where they could, the CMOs transitioned their programming to online and even leveraged the learnings of the remote context to innovate new avenues of communication with their alumni moving forward.

Scaling KIPP Forward practices and piloting new ideas

Expanding the reach of the advising model

Even before the Collaborative was formalized, KIPP and Achievement First were aligned on the new idea that college matriculation was neither the end nor the only approved option for their graduates, and that many postsecondary options could lead to financial freedom and a fulfilling life. For KIPP, this idea evolved over a decade into KIPP Forward, through which KIPP graduates receive continued, holistic support that increases their likelihood of securing strong first jobs, regardless of postsecondary pathway.²⁷

Key to KIPP Forward's success is the College Success Program, a near-peer advising approach in which KIPP alumni who have

recently graduated from college, known as College Success Fellows, are employed by the CMO to mentor high school graduates and, in partnership with KIPP staff, connect students to comprehensive on-campus support. College Success Fellows work with recent high school graduates during the first 2 years of college, a critical point for the graduates who face obstacles in navigating unfamiliar educational settings and processes, especially graduates of color and from low-income households.

The Collaborative designed two college success pilots based on the promising outcomes and effectiveness of KIPP Forward's advising model. The first pilot was a test of outsourcing advisement from an external organization, Bottom Line, to provide one-on-one support to 66 KIPP, AF, and Uncommon alumni.²⁸ The Collaborative paused the partnership because of three key factors. First, outsourcing advisement meant that the Collaborative did not receive the level of data and insights that could be generated in-house. Second, the Collaborative was unable to control for adviser quality and programming needs, such as mental health, in the way they would like. Most notably, given the breadth of campuses (over 100) that KIPP and Achievement First alumni attended, Bottom Line could not be a partner at scale because it serves a much smaller set of colleges.

The second pilot set out to test scaling KIPP's advising supports to serve alumni from not only KIPP but also Achievement First and the College Bound Initiative (CBI). In 2019, 10 Achievement First and 14 CBI alumni were served by the KIPP Forward team across 12 City University of New York (CUNY) and State University of New York (SUNY) campuses.²⁹ To support this initiative, the Collaborative partnered with InsideTrack, a third-party organization with a successful record of college-advisement methodologies, to help train its College Success Fellows and managers.

In year 2 (2020–21), the Collaborative continued to scale within KIPP Forward, now serving 241 Achievement First alumni.³⁰ As

part of that growth, KIPP Forward actively sought to hire Achievement First alumni as College Success Fellows; half of the fellows hired that year were Achievement First alumni. Amy Christie, the senior director of college and career at Achievement First, said the inclusion of Achievement First alumni as College Success Fellows is “profound on so many levels . . . Seeing alumni in spaces where they really thrived and were attracted to career opportunities was really helpful for us and for our alumni.”³¹ Also in year 2, to solve for the need for more effective career readiness programming for alumni, the Collaborative partnered with Project Basta. Together, they created and delivered the Wayfinder program for sophomores in college, utilizing Basta’s signature diagnostic tool and career readiness webinar series to integrate career advisement directly into their college advising model.

Expanding the reach of the annual summit

The Collaborative also extended KIPP Forward’s strategies supporting alumni in preparing for and securing internships and jobs, including its annual alumni summit. Before the Partnership Grant, KIPP hosted an annual alumni summit, consisting of alumni panels, recruitment events, and meet-and-greets with employers and workforce development and training programs. In 2020, the Collaborative scaled the KIPP Alumni Summit to include alumni from Achievement First and Uncommon Schools, calling the event the Next Up Alumni Career Summit. Over 200 alumni from the three CMOs attended the first summit, which opened with a career expo consisting of over 60 employers representing 10 industries from the New York metropolitan area.³² The following year, because of COVID restrictions, the alumni summit was held virtually. But participation still grew, with over 300 alumni attending the 2021 event.³³ The joint summit has been successful, largely because of the “strong alumni [each CMO] . . . [expanding] the pool” of speakers and attendees and providing “more diversity for alumni to see and experience.”³⁴

Building capacity for sustainability

In addition to scaling practices, the Collaborative also spent the implementation phase building infrastructure that would put it in a strong position to continue its work in supporting alumni to succeed in college, career, and beyond. Collaborative leadership hired staff members, built their data infrastructure, secured multiyear funding, and developed new partnerships with a variety of external organizations.

Laying the structural groundwork

The Collaborative made early and continuing investments in building out its data systems and increasing its operational capacity, in particular, to provide career services for alumni who chose to pursue the CTE pathway. In the first year, KIPP hired an associate director of career strategy to oversee the career-support pilots, bring together the different CMOs’ career-support practices, identify cost-saving efficiencies, and develop new structures of collaboration. The Collaborative also hired a workforce adviser to increase the staffing capacity of the CTE advising model.

To develop the shared data architecture and systems needed to track the Collaborative’s progress toward its goals and alumni outcomes, KIPP Forward hired an associate director of data and a data associate in the first 2 years. The increased staff made it possible to organize and communicate data collected and used by all Collaborative partners. In particular, the data team created a dashboard for Achievement First to track its graduates as they navigated the KIPP-operated College Success Program. Through the dashboard, which is updated every day, its partners “can really see and filter information in so many ways: which students are interacting with their fellows, how deeply they’re interacting, how often they’re getting outreach, how often they’re responding, whether it’s a meaningful response, and more.”³⁵ As the Collaborative expands service to more CMOs, this dashboard ensures partners have transparency into their students’ engagement at every step. Additionally, having a strong data infrastructure enabled the Collaborative to accurately measure the results of its collaboration during the grant period. “To be able to see so much growth in just 2 years’ time and share it with our partners, our team, and beyond” has transformed their hopes of scaling to new areas and new students, says Tessa Kratz, senior managing director at KIPP Forward.³⁶

Securing dedicated funding

Throughout the grant period, the Collaborative also identified and secured funding from additional sources to ensure longer-term sustainability, one of the Centerbridge Foundation’s major goals for its grant partners. Starting early in the 1st year, the partnership leveraged Centerbridge’s support to attract an additional \$700,000 in multiyear funding from the Peter and Carmen Lucia Buck Foundation,³⁷ Carnegie Corporation of New York,³⁸ and Herbert & Nell Singer Foundation.³⁹ The following year, the Collaborative secured an additional \$600,000 in multiyear funding from Charter School Growth Fund and the Peter and Carmen Lucia Buck Foundation. The Collaborative secured an additional \$450,000 from the Peter and Carmen Lucia Buck Foundation and the Heckscher Foundation for Children in 2022.

Partnering with external organizations

To carry out its ambitious plans, the Collaborative worked with a variety of external organizations, each an expert in its field. New partnerships with a variety of CTE programs and job placement providers such as Opportunity College, the Door, and Year Up Professional Resources focused on expanding support to alumni pursuing the CTE and Career pathway, which historically had not received the same attention as college success programming. To scale and strengthen support for college-enrolled alumni, the Collaborative worked with InsideTrack and Project Basta. Table 1 summarizes the main organizations brought in and their involvement throughout the partnership grant period.

Table 1. External Partners of the Postsecondary Success Collaborative

Organization	Focus and Goal
Ayana Therapy	Recognizing that robust mental health support was necessary to ensure college and career success, the Collaborative engaged Ayana Therapy to provide alumni with free, virtual, flexible, and culturally competent mental health support from trained mental health professionals who are people of color. During the pandemic, mental health support was cited as a top need from alumni, and data showed that the number of active users significantly increased.
Bottom Line	As one of the College Success Pilots, the engagement with Bottom Line was pursued to build understanding, alongside another organization that provided college advising, about the most effective approaches to personalized college counseling. During the pilot, Bottom Line provided 66 alumni from KIPP, Achievement First, and Uncommon Schools attending SUNY and CUNY schools with one-on-one guidance and mentoring. Because of the learnings from the pilot collaboration, the partnership was not renewed for subsequent classes.
InsideTrack	InsideTrack was involved in one of the College Success Pilots aimed at strengthening KIPP NYC's near-peer advising model. It provided intensive training on its proven coaching methodology to College Success Fellows so they could effectively help students accomplish their educational and career goals. They also provided management training to help managers improve fellows' advisement quality.
Project Basta	The engagement with Project Basta began in 2020 to help integrate career support directly into the 2nd year of the college-advising model. Specifically, using its tools and resources, including diagnostic and career readiness webinars and a proprietary job board, Project Basta worked with College Success Fellows to deliver "career learning to their students earlier and more often" than had previously been offered.⁴⁰ Throughout the Partnership Grant, the Collaborative continued to invest in Project Basta, gaining a deeper understanding of student needs, then taking those learnings to adopt programming and strategies to build higher engagement and provide more curated support.
YUPRO	As one of the Career Success Pilots, the Collaborative brought in YUPRO to provide differentiated career, internship, job coaching, and placement services to a small group of KIPP and Achievement First alumni. YUPRO specifically focused on alumni who never enrolled in college, dropped out of college, have a certificate or an associate's degree, or are underemployed.

Resilience and advancement in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic

Throughout the pandemic, the Collaborative remained agile, adjusting to the needs of students and alumni while innovating to address problems in real time. Where possible, the Collaborative moved operations online—holding remote advising appointments, increasing its partnership with online mental health provider Ayana Therapy, and hosting its Next Up Alumni Career Summit remotely. The summit was successful, with increased participation from the previous year, and College Success Fellows continued to deliver guidance and mentorship to their college-going mentees. Preliminary data show that the College Success Program positively affects alumni because “many organizations have seen a decline in student matriculation, and [the Collaborative is] in the same place as in the past.”⁴¹

The Collaborative not only transitioned critical activities remotely but also launched a new set of programs in response to the COVID

crisis. One such innovation was the microgrants program, which awarded money to alumni to cover tuition, re-enrollment costs, and emergency costs. In the 1st year microgrants were dispersed at KIPP, over 90% of grant recipients persisted in its postsecondary programs, which led KIPP to create the national microgrant fund and continue awarding grants through the following year. Achievement First built a similar microgrant fund. In the 2020–21 school year, the Collaborative awarded its alumni “nearly \$300,000 in microgrants.”⁴²

Another COVID-19 innovation was Nudge-Enabled Remote Advising (NERA), in which an adviser has a larger caseload using nudge technology and its accompanying management platform to identify and prioritize alumni who are most in need of support. In 2022, the Collaborative launched NERA for alumni 3 to 6 years after high school, with academic, financial, socio-emotional, and career resources and reminders being sent via text along with any necessary direct advisement.

Implications and Lessons for the Field

As the first of its kind, the Postsecondary Success Collaborative is a powerful model of what nonprofit organizations can accomplish effectively and efficiently while scaling to serve larger numbers of students and alumni.

Working with alumni and partners throughout the postsecondary ecosystem, the Collaborative reframed college as one of multiple pathways to reach the goal of a fulfilling life and generated a postsecondary model that has the potential to support young people across the nation. Already, in spite of the COVID-19 pandemic, the model has demonstrated promising results (see Table 2). The accomplishments lay the groundwork for future growth and reveal a set of lessons for those pursuing and supporting similarly bold change.

Indicators of success

In just 3 years, the Postsecondary Success Collaborative has made significant progress. It has successfully scaled effective programming and continued to test new ideas to identify approaches that serve more high school graduates over time. Table 2 displays available results.

Table 2. Postsecondary Success Collaborative Indicators of Success

Success Indicator	Collaborative Outcome (for most recent class with data available)	Closest National Benchmark
College melt (% that intended to enroll but did not)	6%	10-40% ⁴³
Fall year 1 to fall year 2 college persistence (% pursuing bachelor's degrees for the first time who returned to college for their second year)	83% BA / 45% AA (Class of 2021)	76% BA / 54% AA ⁴⁴
Engagement and satisfaction with college success adviser or workforce adviser	88% engagement rate (Class of 2022); 82% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I am satisfied with the level of support I have received from my adviser." (Class of 2020 and 2021)	N/A
College academic performance	82% of BA enrollees earned satisfactory academic progress (Class of 2021)	N/A
CTE completion within 2 years after high school for those assigned a workforce adviser	Outcomes expected 2023	N/A
6-year college graduation rate	Outcomes expected 2026	21% ⁴⁵
Attainment of a strong job within 6 months of college or CTE completion	Outcomes expected 2025	45% ⁴⁶

Next steps and beyond

A priority moving forward is making the Collaborative's work more efficient on a cost-per-student basis. With the help of the Bain cost model, according to Dave Levin, the Collaborative "has visibility and a way to do this work at \$1,000 per student."⁴⁷ Until it reaches scale, the Collaborative will focus on securing sustainable sources of funding to cover any gaps in the cost that it is pitching to partner organizations. The Collaborative is also pursuing other resources in the postsecondary space to support its work, asking "not just what can the organizations do but how can we engage the whole system—who can [the Collaborative] partner with, what can they do?"⁴⁸ Higher education institutions could play a large role in resourcing and the Collaborative is considering how, over the years, "universities can pitch in to this model" through cost-sharing or hosting outside programs on their campuses.⁴⁹

To reach scale, the Collaborative will continue to expand to new regions and test its model in new environments. In 2022–23, this means extending to Achievement First Connecticut and KIPP New Jersey students and alumni. In the next 5 years, with the number of alumni served expected to grow from 25,000 to over 80,000, the Collaborative work will move from KIPP NYC to KIPP Foundation, which is already equipped to support national programming. Further expansion will include "other charter organizations that are reaching out" and even collaborations with the New York City Department of Education and other public districts.

Additionally, the Collaborative will invest in even more extensive research and measurement, building a "more robust data architecture around clear and objective outcomes"⁵⁰ that will allow it to "continue getting better even as [it] grows bigger." As services evolve, the Collaborative will continue to act upon its understanding that "postsecondary success hinges not only on academic advising but on a comprehensive set of supports, ranging from financial to mental health services."

Key takeaways

Supporting all students requires multiple pathways to postsecondary success

Forming the Collaborative and implementing and improving a comprehensive set of supports elevated alumni voices and needs and changed the national conversation about college and career success.

"Centering . . . alumni voice" gave Bain and the Collaborative the unique opportunity to "listen to the young adults themselves who are experiencing this," Bain partner Abby Smith said, and helped the Collaborative act on the conclusion that "going to college wasn't enough."⁵¹

Individual students and alumni held very different postsecondary goals, many of which did not include attending college. Students who did attend college demonstrated they could benefit greatly from mentorship and sponsorship during their 1st year, which would help them throughout their college careers. To truly drive student outcomes, the Collaborative needed to "understand more holistically the individual's goals along with what's going on overall."⁵² KIPP's leadership echoed this, saying, "We as a society and we as educators have to understand: What is the long-term goal of our work with young people? Every single kid has to count. . . . The denominator should be all kids that enter your system. What are they doing when they're 25, 35? That, to me, is really the question that we face."⁵³ By redefining postsecondary success for alumni, the Collaborative provides a greater number of opportunities and pathways for all alumni to achieve their goals and lead successful lives.

Structured collaboration facilitates joint work and good governance

Formally partnering to tackle shared challenges wasn't easy. Although the CMOs were substantially aligned on problems and goals and were highly successful organizations, "bringing together different entities and cultures who have a lot of pride in being their own entity . . . required a lot of mindset shifting and trust building."⁵⁴ Collaborative members appreciated the spirit of the Partnership Grant and Centerbridge's willingness to be a thought partner rather than to prescribe solutions. Starting with the grant application and selection process, the Collaborative leaders were "forced to get the clarity on what it was [they] were going after and how [they're] going after it together."⁵⁵

Even with this preparation, the practice of building the Collaborative itself took more time than originally anticipated. Abby Smith, a Bain partner, emphasized that it's difficult to get "three organizations 100% on board until you do the work to get them

on board. Building Collaboratives is messy, and so you've just got to jump in and work collaboratively to get it done."⁵⁶ Collaborative leaders agree, noting their appreciation for Centerbridge's willingness to "invest in something at a pretty early stage and come with [the Collaborative] through the messiness."⁵⁷ They appreciated the thoughtful questions asked by Bain and Centerbridge to help guide the process, and how the shared funding necessitated commitment to the project and to each other.

This process required "a really good model of getting everyone's voice heard, making sure everyone gets to provide input."⁵⁸ Bain facilitated this participation and decision-making by "effectively using time" during the working groups, steering committee meetings, and alumni workshop, "asking the right questions, putting together materials, visuals, and analysis, and eventually really making the case for how [the Collaborative] can come together."⁵⁹ The KIPP team took advantage of Bain's partnership as much as possible, knowing that the "heavy lifting" during consulting would pay off in the long term.⁶⁰

Centerbridge was also patient through the process, noting that "progress takes time, especially when it's between big organizations," and that the foundation needed to be "flexible around what needs to be piloted first to meet some of the longer-term larger goals and scale that we want."⁶¹ KIPP leadership agreed that "we need to not be chasing perfection . . . It's about chipping away . . . testing ideas, learning from things that work, and growing from things that don't."⁶²

This structured process, along with the internal Collaborative manager who supported communication and conflict resolution, generated the structure and trust between the organizations required to collaborate on such an important set of work. Through the process, Achievement First recognized that it made sense for the Collaborative to be governed by KIPP NYC, but entrusting their students to another organization for student and alumni programming was a decision that required adaptation by both teams and transparency at every step.

Unprecedented work requires sustainable and flexible support

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Centerbridge offered additional grants and emergency funding to the organizations receiving its Partnership Grant, including the Postsecondary Success Collaborative. Centerbridge recognized the importance of supporting the students and families of the organizations they were partnering with in unprecedented circumstances. Kim David, the director of college success at KIPP, alluded to how low the financial benchmark can be for the Collaborative's students and families, and how "especially during the pandemic, less than \$1,000 meant a student could stay in college."

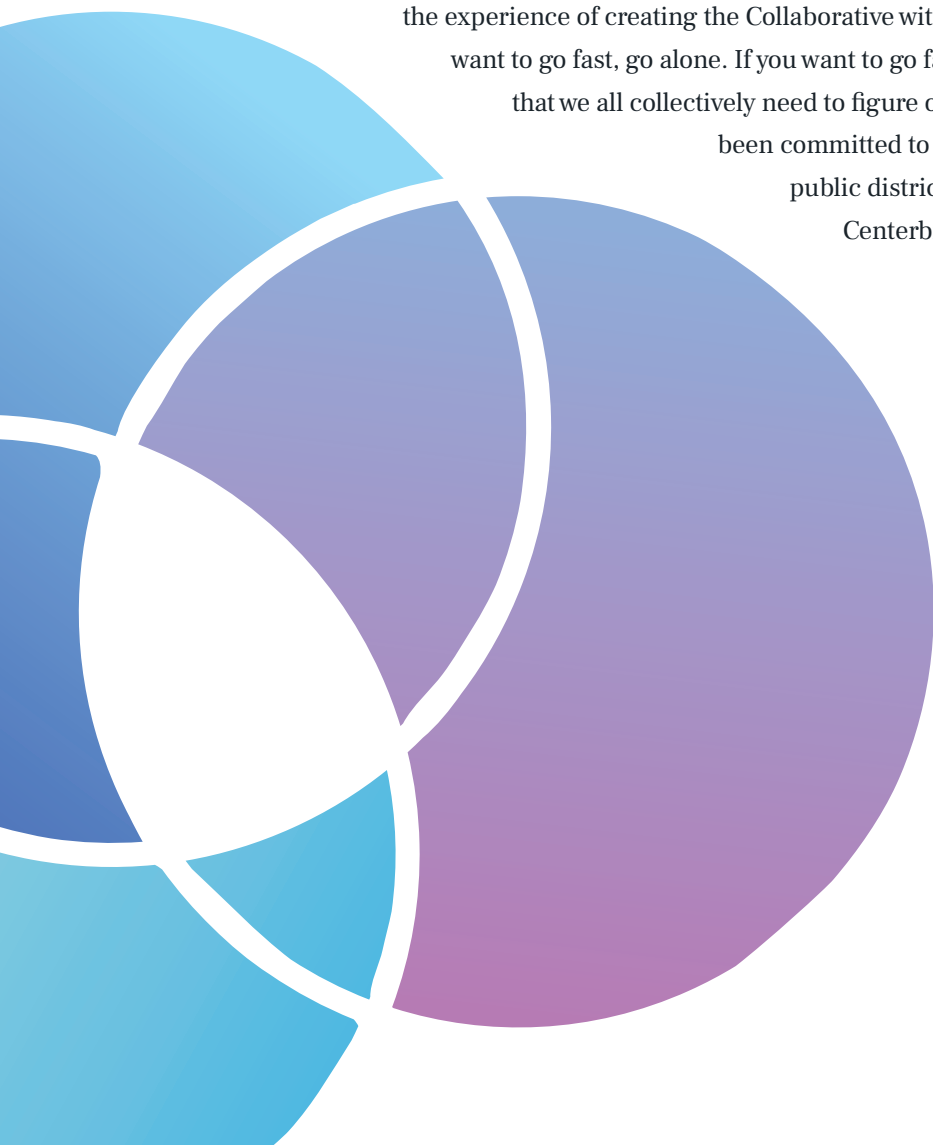
The additional funds provided by Centerbridge during the pandemic went directly to serving students. In a pandemic and other emergency situations, these funds are critical for students and families.

Beyond a global crisis, the Collaborative has highlighted a need for holistic and strategic support from partners and funders. Securing sustainable funding sources after the Partnership Grant period is a high priority for the Postsecondary Success Collaborative. The KIPP team explained that the Collaborative has a "line of sight to a multiyear financial model that we think is sustainable, that still requires philanthropic support." Centerbridge has offered to help facilitate connections between the Collaborative and potential funders following the grant period, which is an exciting "forward-looking opportunity" for the Collaborative. The Collaborative also expressed interest in Centerbridge, proactively showing the results of their partnership and presenting the Collaborative as a vetted partner for any Centerbridge donors looking for opportunities to directly donate to Centerbridge's grant partners.

Conclusion

The Partnership Grant transformed the idea of the Postsecondary Success Collaborative into the reality of the pilots and expansion. The grant made possible the unprecedented joining of resources and talent within three CMOs, creating an entirely new and collaborative system of serving their alumni. Despite the challenges posed to CMO alumni by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Collaborative proceeded with its planned programs and provided emergency funding to allow students to persist in their postsecondary education and pathways to a strong first job.

The creation and design of the Collaborative itself highlights the importance of the role of shared funders and strategic support in engaging in a process that is entirely new. Dave Levin, a cofounder of KIPP and an early champion of the creation of the Postsecondary Success Collaborative, uses an old adage to describe the experience of creating the Collaborative with the support of Centerbridge and Bain: “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together. Increasingly, there’s this sense that we all collectively need to figure out the challenges that face the kids we’ve all been committed to over the years together. A lot of people in the public district world are asking: How do we do this together? Centerbridge and Bain bring that spirit.”⁶³



References

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- 2 According to National Student Clearinghouse, high-poverty schools are those where at least 75% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and low-poverty schools are those where less than 25% of students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch. Using this definition, KIPP, Achievement First and Uncommon Schools are high-poverty schools.
- 3 KIPP is a network of 281 charter schools (elementary, middle, high) organized in 28 regions and supported by the nonprofit KIPP Foundation. KIPP NYC is one of the founding networks, with 15 schools. KIPP NYC plays an integral role in piloting a variety of programs and leveling up their effective practices to the KIPP Foundation to enable spread across the entire network.
- 4 Achievement First was founded in 1999 in New Haven, Connecticut. Today its network has expanded to include 41 schools in 5 communities in Connecticut, New York, and Rhode Island, with 15,000 students total. Each school in the AF network in the Northeast benefits from its centralized functions, staff training, and other services.
- 5 Uncommon Schools is a network of 53 elementary, middle, and high schools in Boston, Newark, Camden, New York City, and Rochester, serving 20,000 students. Uncommon Schools disseminates resources to its network throughout the Northeast, including curriculum development, assessment design, professional development, and teacher recruitment.
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- 9 Collaborative Theory of Action Meeting 2018.
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- 25 KIPP team, personal communication, July 27, 2022.
- 26 KIPP team, personal communication, July 27, 2022.
- 27 KIPP established KIPP to College in 1998, later reframing its mission to include career pathways and shift to KIPP Through College and Career and then becoming KIPP Forward in 2021.
- 28 Collaborative Progress Report, June 2020.
- 29 CBI is an organization that works in select public schools to maximize students' college awareness and access to financial aid.

- 30 Collaborative Progress Report, April 2021.
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- 33 Collaborative Progress Report, April 2021.
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- 43 Benjamin L. Castleman and Lindsay C. Page, *Summer Melt Supporting Low-Income Students Through the Transition to College* (Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2014), <https://www.hepg.org/hep-home/books/summer-melt>.
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