



Education

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Closing Opportunity Gaps in High School, College, and the Workforce

How Corporation grantees are working to support students from school to the
job market

Kathleen Carroll, August 23, 2021

Leyla Reyes is ready for what's next. In fact, she's already gotten started.

The 17-year-old Bronx student is wrapping up her studies at Dreamyard Preparatory High School, which this year has included a paid internship with a local nonprofit called **Here to Here**. As a student ambassador, she promotes and signs up her fellow students for the college and career planning support that Here to Here provides and advises the agency on what jobs and employers interest students most.

The experience has “prepared me for the real world,” said Leyla, who is headed to the College of Mount Saint Vincent after graduation. She plans to earn a degree in child psychology and open a counseling practice. “I found out I want to work with children and help the next generation become much more involved in school and change in their community.”

“A lot of students, including myself at one time, feel like school isn’t that educational. Work-based learning helps us see school and the real world together, and it helps us find ourselves.”

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FARHAD ASGHAR, EDUCATION PROGRAM OFFICER, CARNEGIE CORPORATION OF NEW YORK

This vision of education — blending school with the “real world” to chart a purposeful path to the future — is a key priority of the Education program at Carnegie Corporation of New York. And bridging the divide between secondary and postsecondary learning is a shared goal across the Corporation’s two grantmaking portfolios focused on high school and higher education. “The fragmented and isolated nature of our education and employment systems is an enormous barrier for students,” said Farhad Asghar, a program officer with the Corporation’s Education program, where he manages the Pathways to Postsecondary Success portfolio.

Students, and particularly low-income students of color, often lack opportunities for rigorous academics in high school, access to information about college success, and the social capital and network connections that ease entry into the workforce. Meanwhile, high school coursework too rarely includes hands-on, work-based learning experiences that can both inspire and equip students to immediately seek sustainable jobs after graduation, through work experience, a pay-boosting professional certificate, or both.

“Our education system does not deliver a thriving postsecondary future for every young person, particularly those who are furthest away from opportunity at the starting line,” said Saskia Levy Thompson, a program director at the Corporation’s Education program, where she manages the New Designs to Advance Learning portfolio.

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“Educators and practitioners know what rigorous, real-world learning looks like, but it’s still happening one piece at a time: the high school system, the local community college, a community nonprofit partner,” Levy Thompson added. “Until we solve for the stitching of all these pieces together, we won’t have a system that rises to these big challenges.”

Here to Here is among a group of changemaking Corporation grantees that are supporting young adults to and through critical points of transition between high school, college, and the workforce. Taken together, these efforts can build a coherent system that promotes opportunity from cradle to career.

Expanding Options for High School Students

For high school students who have recently immigrated to the United States, mastering English in a new culture can crowd out critical learning opportunities and longer-term planning for college and career. Corporation grantee **Internationals Network** supports 28 public schools across the United States to integrate English study with rigorous academics and experiential learning outside of school, including internships.

“The goal of our schools is to help prepare students for what comes after high school,” said Joseph Luft, executive director of Internationals Network. “For many students, we hope and we know that that’s college. For others, it might not be college right away. We support students to have options to pursue something that will help them lead a meaningful, fulfilling life.”

Postsecondary planning starts in 9th grade, and students and their families are guided through choosing and applying to school. Internationals Network also arranges campus visits — critical experiences for students whose families lack formal connections to higher education in the United States.

The network's 9,500 students to date, who speak 100 native languages and are predominately from low-income households, have a four-year graduation rate of 79 percent. Seventy percent enroll in college within three years.

Network schools often pair academics with student internships in government, corporate offices, and community agencies. In high schools in the Bronx, for example, students can earn professional credentials in video and audio editing or construction trades while completing a college-preparatory course of study in high school, through a partnership with Here to Here.

This broad base of opportunity gives students a variety of footholds as they move into adulthood and can “spark a student's imagination,” said Luft.

Igniting a sense of possibility — and then supporting students to bring that vision to life — is also part of the mission of Corporation grantee **OneGoal**, which supports low-income students to and through college.

“I want to achieve higher education and teach, influence, and inspire younger children as a teacher,” a 16-year-old student from Crown Heights, Brooklyn, wrote in a recent “Vision for Success” project for OneGoal. “Success overall to me is to be strong in faith, healthy, happy, educated, comfortable, and to have healthy relationships and stability.”

Some 12,500 students at 127 schools nationwide have participated in the three-year program, which begins in 11th grade and concludes after the first year of college. Eighty-six percent of OneGoal students enroll in a postsecondary institution, and 76 percent of those students persist through their first year.

In 11th and 12th grades, students take a for-credit class that combines college planning logistics like choosing schools, completing applications, and filling out financial aid forms with social-emotional learning that supports a smooth transition from high school. Students both “dream and prepare” for college through structured conversations and assignments on how college completion will support their identities and future plans, said Rochelle Sinclair, executive director of OneGoal – New York, which operates in 23 city high schools.

“Students spend a lot of time exploring themselves and defining their strengths,” she said. “What are they good at? What do they get joy from? They think about their values, what is important and meaningful for them.”

Once in college, their teacher shifts into a mentor role, with regular check-ins and resources to ease students over common speed bumps. Students have access to up to \$500 in emergency funds for costs like unplanned travel home and lab fees. Mentors share time management techniques, encourage campus involvement, and serve as a familiar source of confidence-boosting support.

“Students struggle with, ‘Do I belong here? Am I smart enough? Capable enough?’” said Sinclair. “It’s important that they understand who they are, that they do belong, and that they can achieve what they want for themselves.”

Career Connections That Start in College

College, like high school, should serve as preparation for a student’s next stage. But successfully shifting gears from school to the job market does not come easily for many students, especially first-generation and immigrant students from lower-income households.

That’s where **Braven** comes in. Rishan Campbell, 26, graduated last spring with a degree in health services administration from Lehman College, part of the City University of New York. As a Braven fellow, she had taken a three-credit class designed to prepare students for what the organization terms “a strong first job”—one that requires a bachelor’s degree, is full-time, has pathways to promotion, and a competitive, household-sustaining salary. After completing the Accelerator class, she participated in a 3 month “Professional Mentorship” program, which offered individual mentoring and specific, just-in-time help with interview and resume preparation.

Campbell, who grew up in Jamaica, was surprised by the social conventions familiar to seasoned job seekers, like thank-you notes and networking through LinkedIn. With her mentor's support, she navigated seven successful rounds of interviews at Aetna, where she landed a full-time job helping members access their Medicaid benefits. Now she's expanding her network in person and online, looking to move up in the company, and eventually land her dream job of leading a hospital in the Bronx.

"I was worried I would be one of those students who graduates and can't find a job," she said. "But I had Braven to offset my stress and anxiety, help me prep for interviews, and connect me with people in the departments and jobs I'm trying to get into. That got me off to a great start."

Campbell didn't need help acclimating to work — after all, she had worked full-time as a pharmacy technician while completing her studies at Lehman. What she needed was specific, how-to guidance.

The organization serves as "connective tissue between resource-constrained colleges and employers," said Kilsys Payamps-Roure, founding executive director for Braven in New York City. Braven partners with universities to complement their career services and help students develop deeper networks, communication skills, and problem-solving skills.

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SHEILA SAREM, FOUNDER, BASTA

Braven also connects its fellows with major employers, who provide volunteer mentors and industry contacts for fellows. In New York, that includes Credit Suisse, Montefiore Medical Center, Salesforce, and WW.

“Companies often look at Columbia and NYU to recruit, but they don’t look at CUNY,” said Payamps-Roure. “In an industry like finance, only 6 or 7 percent of management positions are held by Black and Latinx people. You have all of this talent in your backyard that you’re not tapping into.”

That untapped talent pool is the focus of another grantee, **Basta**, which supports first-generation college seniors as they enter their first job after graduation. Basta fellows are students who may not necessarily catch the eye of a recruiter — they attend the City University of New York and other public institutions, and typically have earned less than a 3.5 grade-point average — but are ready to succeed on the job.

The program was inspired by founder Sheila Sarem’s experience as a recruiter for the KIPP charter-school network. “I didn’t see a lot of people that looked like me that were making it through the hiring process,” she said. “Clearly something was broken. There is no dearth of talent.”



Basta has served 650 fellows so far and has formal partnerships with 12 local employers, who discuss upcoming entry-level needs and share job openings. It also runs monthly meetups with employers in the financial-services industry at the City University of New York.

Fellows complete a 10-week program that provides detailed guidance on professional networking and a productive job search. They have access to a Basta jobs board and work with “career success managers” who review resumes and correspondence with hiring managers, designed to mimic the sort of “white-glove” recruitment support typically focused on students at elite institutions. Today, former fellows work at 75 different organizations across the city.

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Grantee **Kura Labs** has taken on the college-to-pipeline challenge in another way: by creating its own technology training curriculum that leads to a certificate in DevOps engineering, an emerging IT role in high demand. This spring, 11 out of 16 Kura Labs students landed jobs within six weeks of completing the program. Their average starting salary: \$87,000.

“We’ve created a curriculum that is based on employer feedback, invited employers to get to know our students, and ensured that the training and preparation is meeting the need,” said co-founding board member Richard Rivera.

Kura Labs was launched over dinner in 2018, when Rivera met with longtime friend Sheldon Gilbert, a technology entrepreneur. In discussing Rivera’s efforts in workforce development and college-access programs and Gilbert’s experiences running Proclivity Systems, they found a fit for both of their needs. A broad shift to cloud computing was creating enormous demand for DevOps engineers, but there were more jobs than qualified candidates.

They founded Kura Labs as an “upskill” nonprofit to train young adults with backgrounds in computer science or math for the roles. Rivera brought education expertise and connections, and Gilbert had the tech expertise and virtual rolodex to bring major employers on board. With seed

funding from the Corporation, Kura Labs launched its 6-month training program in 2021 with a handful of employer partners, including Proclivity, Google, and NASDAQ.

Students create online GitHub portfolios and earn associate-level certifications designed to prepare them to compete in the engineer job market and lend credibility to the program. Employer partners commit to interview candidates; if they choose to hire them, they pay Kura Labs \$10,000. Rivera expects the nonprofit to be financially self-sustaining within 5 to 6 years.

The organization plans to track graduates for two years and invite them to earn expert-level certifications, which will improve their marketability. Already, program graduates are on tap to earn nearly \$1 million in their first year in their new jobs, bringing new resources into economically disadvantaged communities. They also bring much-needed diversity to the tech sector, where Black and Latinx employees make up approximately 15 percent of the workforce.

“As much as technology destroys jobs, it creates them — but they can be either low-income jobs, or high-income jobs. The upskill is really important,” said Rivera. “If it were not for Carnegie’s willingness to take a chance, for Sheldon to build those bridges with employers, we would not be where we are today.”

TOP: (Credit: Braven)