

# A Story of Leadership: The Boston Foundation



## *Learnings in Making Higher Education a Community Priority*

This story is part of a larger series by Informing Change for the College Futures Foundation to support community foundations that are working to reduce gaps in college success. As an outgrowth of Informing Change's evaluation and learning partnership with the College Futures' Community Philanthropy Initiative (CPI), these stories explore and share lessons learned from community foundations that are leaders in promoting and supporting higher education.

To learn more about CPI, please visit [collegefutures.org](http://collegefutures.org).

### DATA IGNITED A CITY TRANSFORMATION

When the Boston Private Industry Council (PIC) and Northeastern University asked the Boston Foundation in 2007 for funding to conduct a longitudinal study on student outcomes, the foundation was eager to partner. "The foundation likes to fund research because we believe that contributes important evidence and fuels conversations in our city and the region. It's part of our civic leadership role," says Elizabeth Pauley, Senior Director, Education to Career at the Boston Foundation. The partners were interested in the postsecondary trajectories of students who graduate from Boston Public Schools. Until then, no studies had explored whether Boston students completed postsecondary degrees or certificates, despite steadily rising rates of high school graduation and enrollment in college.

To prepare for the study's findings—which would reveal the magnitude of the gap between college access and completion for local students—staff at the Boston Foundation immediately began outreach to nonprofits that had proven strategies for supporting students to complete their postsecondary degrees. By the time the results of the full study were released in 2008 confirming that far too few Boston students were completing postsecondary degrees, the foundation had already been convening for months with a number of community stakeholders to consider effective strategies for turning the dismal statistics around.

This study sent shockwaves through a community that prides itself on—and deeply values—its higher education institutions. Rather than point fingers, the city's mayor at that time, Thomas Menino, embraced the findings and tasked the entire community with the shared responsibility of responding to them. A city-wide multi-stakeholder coalition, including the Boston Public Schools, the

### LEADING THROUGH LEARNING

The foundation-funded study found that only 35.5% of students who enrolled in college completed a secondary degree or credential within seven years—a statistic that shocked education stakeholders across the city and planted the seed for Success Boston. Funding research allowed the foundation to position itself as a leader in the field by presenting pivotal data points, using the research as a platform to raise visibility, and convening partners in the community to strategize a response. "Putting the data out there about what was happening [with educational outcomes] has been transformative in this city," says Pauley.

***"We don't talk about college access in Boston anymore. We talk about postsecondary completion."***

– Elizabeth Pauley, Senior Director,  
Education to Career at the Boston Foundation

workforce investment board, University of Massachusetts Boston, and the foundation, began working together to outline options for addressing the huge postsecondary completion gaps. From this coalition, Success Boston emerged.

## SUCCESS BOSTON: SERVICES & INFRASTRUCTURE FOR AN EMERGING FIELD

Following the release of the report, the community conversation shifted from college access to college completion, and the Boston Foundation was a leading participant in the conversation, listening for new ideas and pulling in stakeholders who could add value and possibly spur an innovative solution. The stakeholders eventually settled on a new approach, titled Success Boston, that uses a model of coaching and academic and financial advising to prepare high school students to transition into, pursue, and complete postsecondary degrees. With activities on high school campuses, Success Boston prioritizes wrap-around student supports to ensure that the transition from high school to postsecondary education paves the way for students to complete their degrees.

***“Today every student needs something beyond high school, and they need to start and finish it. It’s everyone’s responsibility to make sure there are clear and transparent opportunities for this to happen.”***

– Elizabeth Pauley, Senior Director,  
Education to Career at the Boston Foundation

While Success Boston’s direct service recipients are students, the foundation has helped to build out infrastructure to support the organizations and individuals delivering these services. The coaches who work with students to diagnose and troubleshoot emerging challenges gather monthly at the foundation offices for training and support; the mutual support extends beyond the monthly meeting and the group is essentially a professional learning community. Program managers of the nonprofit organizations involved in Success Boston also meet monthly, and foundation staff use these gatherings to elicit feedback on how the initiative is playing out in real-time. Through Success Boston’s annual survey of partners, the foundation has a mechanism for hearing directly from the student community. A Student Leadership Council made up of students receiving coaching services has been a particularly effective strategy for eliciting and incorporating students’ perspectives into the initiative.

## WHY SERVE AS A BACKBONE ORGANIZATION?

The Boston Foundation believes Success Boston’s direct service for students and professional development for providers alone will not effect the systems-level change necessary to prepare a generation of young people for successful careers. In order to shift the way schools, higher education, and community institutions provide support for students to complete their postsecondary degrees, Success Boston needed an ongoing facilitator, and the foundation found a natural fit as the initiative’s backbone organization, a role seemingly no other community institution could occupy.

By virtue of its position as a community foundation, the foundation could flex a kind of convening power that has potential to bring about systems-wide change. It had the ability to bring together student-serving nonprofits, Boston Public Schools, higher education institutions, additional philanthropies, and even city hall to provide and fund direct services to students, as well as stimulate and sustain productive discussions of systemic issues. Over the years, mayors, superintendents, and higher education leaders have come and gone, but the foundation has remained the through-line in ensuring that each one of those leaders understands the stakes and necessary supports to ensure postsecondary degree completion remains a community priority. Further, with one third of foundation

***“Success Boston has been successful at creating focus on the issue, sustaining that, and creating a table that others can come to as they’re thinking about it.”***

– Elizabeth Pauley, Senior Director,  
Education to Career at the Boston Foundation

discretionary grant funds directed to the initiative, the foundation wanted to closely monitor the initiative's progress toward its goals and intended outcomes.

However, this cross-sector, multi-stakeholder coalition is not without challenges. Success Boston is made up of 37 different institutions, creating a mammoth amount of work to coordinate and a wide range of organizational needs and perspectives to understand and consider. The foundation has been deeply involved in securing outside funding for Success Boston's operations and expansion, including a large federal grant. Furthermore, the foundation must navigate its own dual role of both convener and funder, a power dynamic that can compromise the degree to which other organizations feel comfortable in expressing opinions. Nevertheless, the foundation has not shied away from having and expressing its own point of view. Foundation staff helped develop governance structures and clarify decision-making lines, which are crucial to implementing strategy in collective action.

The relationship-building among different community institutions in Boston, and continued focus on postsecondary completion, has made possible some cross-institution policy alignments. For example, the state of Massachusetts dovetailed its Commonwealth Commitment, which provides financial support to students who transfer from a community college to a university to earn a Bachelor's degree, with Boston's community college program that provides students with free tuition and built-in individual coaching.

Success Boston's combination of providing direct services to students while also working at the institutional level has landed well with donors who want to have a personal connection to their communities, while also affecting systems-level change. Many of the foundation's most generous donors, in fact, have been at the Success Boston table from very early on, when the foundation was mapping out solutions to the postsecondary completion gap.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Elizabeth Pauley has the following advice for community foundations leading coalitions in supporting postsecondary completion:

- Start with data. Partner with school districts to find out what happens to high school students when they graduate.
- Use your convening power as a community foundation, which can serve as a neutral space where other people at the table can share what they think.
- Don't let limited discretionary funds slow your community foundation's interest in developing a collaborative project. Projects grow out of ideas, relationships, and hard work, not just money. There are advantages to being one of several small or moderate funders of an initiative, including a greater sense of shared responsibility for sustainability.
- Even if you are focusing on partnerships with high schools and programs serving high school students, involve higher education as early as possible in a college completion initiative. Gaining buy-in from higher education early on distributes the responsibility for ensuring successful postsecondary transition and completion.
- Be prepared to attribute success to others. The very nature of collective impact work means your foundation may not receive all the credit—if any.

***“Mobilizing the data mobilizes donors, and that mobilizes the community. We have to ask, all these young people that have been invested in different ways... where is the path for them to be successful?”***

– Elizabeth Pauley, Senior Director,  
Education to Career at the Boston Foundation

***“Create opportunities for other partners to have the win.”***

– Elizabeth Pauley, Senior Director,  
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