

Improving College Access

The St. Louis Graduates Initiative

BY E. TERRENCE JONES

Having a postsecondary education has become a universal maxim. Individuals who have associate and baccalaureate degrees have considerably higher lifetime incomes than those who don't. For metropolitan areas, increasingly engaged in a global competition in an emerging knowledge economy, the correlation between educational attainment and economic prosperity is striking: In 2007, for example, the five US metropolitan areas with the highest baccalaureate completion rates were simultaneously the five with the highest median household incomes. The positives that accrue from educational attainment are more than economic. Research suggests that postsecondary degree holders are healthier, spend more time with their children on educational development, and are more engaged in civic activities.

As of 2007, how was the St. Louis region's educational attainment performance faring? Not so well. The region's baccalaureate completion rate ranked twenty-fourth among the nation's thirty-five largest metropolitan areas. Worse yet, there was substantial racial disparity. The rates for whites were more than twice those for African Americans. In fact, St. Louis ranked thirty-first out of thirty-five for African American degree completion. Improving these marks became the goal for St. Louis Graduates (STLG), a community initiative begun in 2008.

Getting Started

Faith Sandler and Jane Donahue provided the initial spark toward a St. Louis regional effort to raise educational attainment. Sandler is the longtime director of the Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis. Passionate about enabling disadvantaged youth to achieve a college education, she was frustrated about encountering too much discussion on which nonprofit's approach to college access was the most promising and too few conversations about how collectively the St. Louis region could advance the cause. Donahue had moved to St. Louis in 2002. Familiar

with the College Summit model from her previous work with Public/Private Ventures in New York City, she helped establish College Summit-St. Louis. She became vice president of the Deaconess Foundation in 2004 and, by 2008, had earned a sterling reputation as a thought leader for regional initiatives.

Sandler and Donahue enlisted five other funders (Citi, Commerce Bank, Enterprise Holdings, Trio Foundation, United Way of Greater St. Louis) and five other providers (College Bound, College Summit, Missouri College Advising Corps, the Greater St. Louis Community Foundation's Scholarship Division, and Wyman). Sandler and Donahue wanted to strike a balance between inclusivity, having the key funders and providers involved, and workability, keeping the steering committee membership under twenty.

The steering committee members developed a case statement noting the critical importance of a coordinated effort among funders and providers in the St. Louis region and a shared strategy. They proposed beginning with two connected projects: (1) commissioning a study about the state of college access in the St. Louis region and then (2) using the study results to advance college access on the regional agenda. Members budgeted \$20,000 for these efforts and for securing funding commitments from local foundations and corporations.

Concerned about overreaching, they determined not "to address high school reform," thereby avoiding a perennially controversial thicket, and emphasized that their aim was "to spark community collaboration, not to advocate one specific strategy," signaling that they would avoid picking and choosing among the growing number of college access providers. STLG deliberately and fully embraced a "network mind-set," a concept introduced by Leslie R. Crutchfield and Heather McLeod Grant in *Forces for Good: The Six Practices of High-Impact Nonprofits*. They thought a collaborative approach was essential and, if STLG was to become a self-standing nonprofit, others would be more likely to view it as

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a competitor and therefore less likely to be meaningfully involved.

The commissioned report, conducted by two University of Missouri–St. Louis researchers and released in July 2009, reviewed scholarly studies, interviewed college access providers, and mined both state and national government data sources. Based on the report, STLG proposed a six-component college access agenda for all students but especially those from low-income households: (1) have more students set college as a goal, (2) enhance their academic preparation, (3) create a college-going climate, (4) help students and families navigate the application process, (5) make college more affordable, and (6) improve persistence toward graduation within postsecondary institutions. STLG then set an ambitious target, stating that it “is galvanized by one goal: to increase the proportion of students in the St. Louis region who earn higher education degrees to 50% by 2020.”

The report was the centerpiece for an October 7, 2009, public forum attended by about 250 civic leaders. STLG announced that its near-term agenda would have five topics: (1) ensuring low-income students receive adequate and consistent services, (2) creating college-going cultures in high schools and youth-serving organizations, (3) removing obstacles preventing low-income students from obtaining funds for higher education, (4) increasing postsecondary institutional involvement to improve academic preparation in secondary schools, and (5) making college enrollment and persistence a higher community priority.

Throughout STLG’s initial year, the steering committee took care to ensure that significant community stakeholders learned about its plans. Key business alliances, important government entities, K–12 and higher education institutions, and selected nonprofit associations all received individual briefings. These sessions stressed which parts of the STLG initiative possessed the greatest relevance for each group.

Developing a Plan

In late 2009, STLG concluded that it needed a more detailed strategic plan with a longer time horizon.

It pursued and received funding in 2010 from the Texas Guaranteed Student Loan Corporation Public Benefit Competitive Grant Program for a comprehensive planning process with considerable community engagement. STLG contracted with American Institutes of Research to design, facilitate, and draft the plan. The process involved three work groups that, respectively, addressed expanding and coordinating college access service delivery, promoting a college-going culture, and advancing college enrollment and persistence on the regional agenda.

Each work group had about twenty members representing a range of institutions: universities, community colleges, college access providers, secondary schools, state government, foundations, youth-serving nonprofits, local governments, and charter schools. Each was charged with preparing action plans that had to meet three criteria: (1) be research-based, (2) be able to be conducted with available resources, and (3) have measurable outcomes. STLG published the plan, titled “Getting Ready, Getting In, and Getting Through,” in March 2011. In late 2010, STLG had engaged a part-time consultant, experienced nonprofit professional Laura Winter, so that the organization could move seamlessly from planning to implementation.

Executing the Plan: Professional Development

Even before the planning process, STLG had discovered a lack of cross-institutional professional development programming for counselors and others having regular contact with high school students. Very few school districts or youth-serving organizations had staff specializing in college access counseling. In most situations, it was one of several job expectations tacked on to an already overworked agenda.

STLG began a blend of workshops that mine the research base and provide opportunities for peer discussion. STLG uses experienced and respected trainers who employ adult learning theory, evidence-based practice, and sharing across institutions. It regularly evaluates the programs with surveys administered immediately after their offerings as well as the end of the academic year. The ratings have been uniformly positive. Counselors call the programs “win-win” and emphasize how the sessions

help them see college access more holistically and to feel they are part of a larger college access profession.

Executing the Plan: Advocacy

STLG concentrates its public policy advocacy on need-based financial aid. Although STLG continues to urge the area's congressional delegation to support increased federal funding for Pell Grants and other national aid programs, most of its advocacy is aimed at the state level. It remains neutral about state funding for merit-based aid but advocates vigorously for need-based dollars through legislative committee testimony, one-on-one lobbying, educating, and mobilizing its own membership.

STLG also encourages universities and colleges serving the St. Louis region to rethink their internal allocation of institutional scholarship funds between merit and need. STLG understands why institutions are tempted to use these dollars to attract top-tier students, thereby raising their academic profile, but reminds them that the balance should tilt toward need-based aid to achieve the greatest equity.

At a less visible level, STLG is an advocate for state data policies that enable tracking student outcomes across K–12 districts and postsecondary institutions to enable more robust assessments about the impact of different factors on college success.

Executing the Plan: Scholarship Central

Under the leadership of two steering committee member organizations, the Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis and the Greater Saint Louis Community Foundations, STLG launched an online portal, dubbed "Scholarship Central," in 2011 with funding from Wells Fargo Advisors. For students and their parents, it is a one-stop process where they can search systematically for available scholarships, complete a common general application, and upload requested documents. For scholarship providers, it makes the system paperless, broadening the applicant pool while simplifying the review process.

By the end of 2013, over 6,000 students had created an account and about 2,500 had drafted or completed applications for one or more of the

nearly sixty scholarship programs using the system. Since its inception, Scholarship Central has enabled awarding over \$5 million to students.

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Executing the Plan: Measuring Outcomes

Reinforcing its commitment to using quantitative indicators to assess the region's educational attainment performance, STLG funded a 2012 update of the original 2009 study. The report found many promising signs but also some sobering findings. The positives included the St. Louis region having the highest percentage point increase in degree completion between 2007 and 2010 among the nation's thirty-five largest metropolitan areas; more degrees conferred by and added students enrolled in the colleges and universities serving the St. Louis region; improved high school graduation rates; more high school students taking the ACT exam; and many more families completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). On the other side of the ledger, college persistence rates were static, the economic recession had increased the number of low-income youth, African American degree attainment rate did not rise, and educational disparities within the region worsened.

These findings, summarized in a sixteen-page brochure titled "One Student at a Time: Advancing the Goal of Increased Degree Completion in the St. Louis Region," were a prominent part of a November 13, 2013, public forum attended by over two hundred civic leaders. The event enabled STLG to sound the call for degree completion once again, position itself as the premier champion for that cause, and outline its plans for improving the region's postsecondary degree performance.

Executing the Plan: High School to College Center

One barrier to college access is something going awry with the application process between the end

of the high school senior year and the beginning of the postsecondary fall semester. Students in this predicament often could not contact their counselor since schools had closed for the summer. This phenomenon, called “the summer melt,” was revealed by a disturbing shortfall between the number of students with postsecondary acceptances in the spring and the number actually matriculating in the fall.

Starting in 2013, STLG decided to fill this gap. It assembled in-kind contributions, such as a centrally located storefront from Washington University, secured volunteer staffing from both university and secondary school counselors, and raised funds to cover all out-of-pocket expenses. In its inaugural year, the center served over two hundred students from almost seventy different high schools.

Moving Forward: Organizational Features

In 2012, STLG pondered how best to organize for the future. It wanted to retain the network mindset but also add a new paradigm championed by John Kania and Mark Kramer in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*: a “backbone” model. Such a model has six essential functions, all of which seemed a perfect fit for STLG: a guiding vision and strategy, supporting aligned activities, establishing shared measurement practices, building public will, advancing policy, and mobilizing funding.

Such a network backbone organization needs funding for administrative overhead. STLG’s budget had expanded from \$30,000 in 2009 to almost \$400,000 in 2013, including in-kind contributions. STLG needs \$100,000 annually for project management and coordination and then seeks specific grants for programmatic activities. For its backbone funding, it now has three-year \$25,000 annual commitment from each of four organizations: three foundations and the region’s most prominent business alliance.

STLG: What Are the Results?

Some of STLG’s results are concrete while others are more difficult to measure. Overarching all is building a regionwide college-going culture. It has raised college access’s profile, especially the need to improve it for low-income youth. Leaders across all sectors are more frequently espousing degree completion as a top priority.

STLG has generated third-party data that credibly document the situation. Its commitment to sponsoring systematic updates every three years enables the region to track progress, identify gaps, and develop more effective approaches.

STLG has highlighted the central college access role played by school counselors, creating a sense of professionalism and community. It has stimulated sharing best practices among high schools, colleges and universities, and youth-serving agencies.

Although STLG cannot and does not claim credit for the region’s educational attainment rise between 2007 and 2010, it is seen as partially responsible for improving key inputs such as substantial increases in FAFSA submissions and ACT test taking.

STLG: What Are the Lessons?

A number of valuable lessons were learned by the leaders of this regional initiative, among them:

- *Leadership matters.* Sandler and Donahue are universally respected and admired within the region and among the national college access network. Their committing 10 to 20 percent of their working lives over the first four-plus years was crucial to STLG’s success.
- *Relationships matter.* Most of the STLG steering committee members knew each other prior to the initiative’s start. They could build on past positive relationships and have a higher tolerance for controversy and disagreement.
- *Data matter.* STLG uses data along with passion to capture the attention of civic leadership and the media. By starting with a thorough report, STLG established itself as the empirically grounded authority on college access for the St. Louis region. STLG followed a basic public policy-making principle: The first task is to define the problem carefully, thoughtfully, and thoroughly.
- *Champions matter.* STLG has one or more champions within each sector: provider, funder, corporate, higher education, K–12 education, and state government. Having proponents in multiple settings accelerated STLG’s visibility and effectiveness.
- *Appreciate collective impact.* STLG carefully and persistently assesses which organizations and

individuals could advance the cause. This started with identifying the most critical funders and providers, continued with informing other sectors, and became ongoing with correcting unforeseen gaps such as no community college representation. This process was informed by scholarly research on nonprofit organizations and community initiatives.

- *Appreciate the trenches.* STLG realized that guidance counselors and other frontline college access staff play a critical role but were isolated with little sense of a collective professional community. In providing professional development, STLG has also nurtured the sense of a collective professional community.
- *Avoid empire building.* STLG has been vigilant in avoiding the appearance or the reality of building an empire. Establishing its own nonprofit would have jeopardized the substantial cooperation from both funders and providers as well as threatened the volunteer time contributions. STLG is seen as a convener and ally, not a threat or competitor.

- *Reflecting is important.* STLG's leadership reflects regularly and thoughtfully about its current arrangements and future needs. It is open to change, as demonstrated by its willingness to manage programs where there is a need that crosses jurisdictions and required a collaborative solution.

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