

# POSTSECONDARY SYSTEMS CHANGE:

Lessons from the Learn and Earn to  
Achieve Potential (LEAP) Initiative



BUILDING A  
FUTURE  
THAT WORKS.

# Acknowledgments



Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (LEAP) is an initiative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Corporation for National and Community Service Social Innovation Fund, and a coalition of national and local partners and funders.

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## LEAP at a Glance

**WHO:** The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Jobs for America's Graduates, JFF, MDRC, School & Main Institute and 10 local partnerships in eight states.

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**WHAT:** An initiative launched in partnership with the Social Innovation Fund to connect young people with postsecondary education and employment.

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**FOCUS:** Young people ages 15-25 in the child welfare or justice system, or who are homeless.

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**WHY:** Improve educational and economic opportunities and systems for youth and young adults.



## Postsecondary Systems Change: Lessons from the Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (LEAP) Initiative

Yanamal is a first-year student at the University of Nebraska at Omaha who feared her past would make college out of reach. “I was a state ward from the age of 13 to 17, with very little stability or support. High school was extremely difficult—I was couch hopping, missing weeks of school, and ultimately had to repeat my senior year. I felt that I had hit a standstill in my life. It wasn’t until I joined LEAP [the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential initiative] that I felt that I had a chance at life once again. My first semester at UNO was filled with self-doubt and anxiety. I was trying to manage my health on top of attending classes. UNO’s financial aid office didn’t include my housing with my aid and that caused me great stress. I am so thankful that LEAP staff, Tanya and Felipe, were always by my side to help me through everything. Tanya helped connect me to a therapist on campus to work through my unresolved emotional issues and I’m glad that I did because it helped me bounce back. LEAP was always helpful in showing that they care about us and I’m proud to say I did great on my first semester at UNO, ending with a 3.3 GPA!”

Tyshawn left high school in his junior year due to issues with housing; he and his mother moved from shelter to shelter. When he started at The Door in New York, his attention was on working to help support his family so his attendance in the bridge class—designed to prepare him for college—was spotty. Still, he stayed in touch with Joyce, his counselor. “She’s like a mother to us,” Tyshawn says. Joyce encouraged him through the program, working with him individually to help him meet the program’s milestones and benchmarks. He completed the bridge program, but the urgency of earning money made working a higher priority than attending college. Joyce stayed in touch to help keep college open as an option. Finally, right before school started, he enrolled, but for every three steps forward there were two steps back. A range of bureaucratic roadblocks stood in his way—such as inadvertently bringing in the wrong paperwork—and once again Joyce was his close ally. With a lot of prompting and support, he enrolled in Hostos Community College as a business administration major. He is now doing well in courses, “networking and meeting with professors like Ms. Joyce said,” and adjusting to college life and demands. Before he started the LEAP program, he “thought college was a big sham.” Now he visits the program’s bridge classes to share what he has learned as a college student and encourage other LEAP students to take the same steps toward college.

Yanamal and Tyshawn faced barriers to postsecondary success that are typical of young adults who are system-involved. Young adults who have spent time in public youth-serving systems, such as child welfare or the juvenile justice system, often struggle to land on their feet and, in particular, to make their way into and through postsecondary education to credentials that yield a living wage. Facing the barriers of poverty and, in particular for youth transitioning from the child welfare system, unstable housing and few family supports, they critically need additional help and resources to prepare for and navigate the college environment.

The community-based organizations (CBOs) that work with these youth play a key role in making postsecondary education possible. Staff at these organizations provide academic preparation, college counseling, mental health supports, guidance in navigating the college environment, internships, and help with finding housing, among other supports. Over the last two years, through the LEAP initiative and with technical assistance from JFF, LEAP sites have built partnerships with postsecondary institutions to enable youth who have been involved in systems to prepare for and transition into postsecondary education and training. Equally important is the work these programs have done to advocate for and take advantage of changes in postsecondary institutions to improve their track record with vulnerable young people like Yanamal. These emerging institutional

and policy changes have the potential to have broad impact on the most vulnerable young adults.

This brief tells the story of these early, significant shifts in college practice, with a section on each of three critical areas for postsecondary success:

1. *Housing*
2. *Tuition and other financial supports*
3. *On-campus academic and advising supports*

We close with a discussion of two emerging fields of practice that are increasingly important for young people who are not prepared for college:

1. *Bridge programs, which help youth develop college-ready skills prior to matriculation, which are especially important for youth who graduate from high school lacking these skills*
2. *Non-college training providers, which are increasingly becoming important sources of postsecondary credentials with value in the workplace, especially for low-income youth who need to move expeditiously to a family-supporting wage*

The LEAP initiative is showing how these supports and new forms of programming can pay off especially for youth who have been system-involved—and how postsecondary institutions are picking up the mantle to offer these supports so even more youth can benefit.

# Shifts in Supports for Youth Who Have Been Involved in Systems to Succeed in Postsecondary Education

## HOUSING

*Youth transitioning from foster care or the juvenile justice system are at heightened risk of experiencing homelessness.<sup>1</sup> They may be disconnected from their family of origin, face significant poverty challenges, or lack access to safe and affordable housing, which can compound their challenges in succeeding in college.*

In New York City, The Door is working with youth who have been involved in the child welfare system who are in unstable housing situations or homeless, and staff noted that many of them were not aware that the City University of New York offers dormitory housing. Staff there have helped LEAP youth take advantage of dormitory programs offered by CUNY. CUNY's Fostering College Success Initiative, in collaboration with the city's Administration for Children's Services, includes a comprehensive dormitory program for youth in foster care attending CUNY. Wraparound services are offered within the dorm setting and include tutoring, mentoring, and academic

advising. Funding is provided by the City of New York, and enrollments are expected to quadruple to 200 by 2020. CUNY also has launched the CUNY Dorm Project, which provides year-round dorms for youth who in foster care.

In Nebraska, Nebraska Children and Families Foundation launched LEAP programming in two- and four-year public institutions in Lincoln and Omaha, and then expanded to College of St. Mary, a private institution that operates a Mothers Living and Learning program on their campus. Nebraska Children and Families Foundation helps LEAP young mothers take advantage of the opportunity to live on campus with their children in a dorm setting where they connect with one another and share child care, cooking responsibilities, and other tasks. The mothers also receive on-campus child care and access to Single Parent Success, a program designed to help young mothers with encouragement, support, and connection to community resources including campus or community-based early childhood education centers, pediatricians, and legal aid services. Single mothers also have access to "Successful Single Mother," a one-credit-hour elective class that seeks to bust stereotypes and enhance self-esteem by addressing the institutional oppression of single mothers and the feminization of poverty.

## TUITION AND OTHER FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

*Youth who have been involved in systems are more likely to live in poverty.<sup>2</sup> Tuition and fees can put college out of reach for these young people.*

LEAP's focus on postsecondary transitions and success for this population has prompted the sites to promote and expand youth's use of public benefits that can help pay for college, which would otherwise go unused due to lack of awareness. For example, in Maine, staff of CBOs in the LEAP initiative have taken significant steps to ensure their youth utilize federal Education and Training Voucher funds, which are a part of the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program. Staff in these organizations, coordinated by the University of Maine Muskie School of Public Service, seamlessly connect their eligible youth to Maine's Office of Child and Family Services, which administers the ETV funds, resulting in a significant increase in utilization of these funds by eligible participants.

Also in Maine, a young adult leader in the Maine Youth Transition Collaborative had successfully advocated, with the region's collaborative, for extending the state's Alumni Transition grant program for child welfare-involved youth up to age 26. The Alumni Transition grant program provides financial assistance and navigator support to eligible students who 1) aged out of the

foster care system, 2) lost other benefits at age 21, and 3) enrolled in a postsecondary program and are making satisfactory progress. The challenge of identifying youth who met all these criteria was a challenge, which meant youth who had been system-involved were not taking full advantage of the benefits—simply identifying formerly foster care-involved youth in their 20s, who had exhausted their benefits but were also in college, was difficult even for advocates for the youth. The CBOs in Maine's LEAP partnership, through their intentional outreach to child welfare-involved youth, have enabled youth to take full advantage of this policy and get the tuition support for which they are eligible.

In Nebraska, several colleges have reduced tuition for youth transitioning from foster care, thanks to the advocacy efforts of Nebraska Children and Families Foundation. St. Mary's College has reduced tuition for youth by 33 percent. Metropolitan Community College has decreased tuition for LEAP youth in Omaha by 50 percent.

## ON-CAMPUS SUPPORTS

*Youth who have been system-involved can feel especially isolated in a college setting. They often lack support from a family member or guardian after they transition from the system; youth who have been in the justice system can feel that their experience sets them apart from others. On-campus*

*supports specifically for the population through compassionate adult-youth relationships, with staff who are trained in the issues that can arise for system-involved youth, can be the difference between staying in and dropping out.*

LEAP's postsecondary partners are identifying specific on-campus advisors and financial aid specialists to work with their students enrolled in college. These supportive adult relationships are a core aspect of the "first-year support" component of Back on Track. For example, in Nebraska, LEAP coaches from local CBOs accompany LEAP students to the University of Nebraska's TRIO offices to learn about available supports for former foster youth, first-generation students, African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans. These students then receive ongoing coaching from the TRIO staff and, in some cases, become coaches to mentor students coming in behind them. Also in Nebraska, thanks to the work of Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, two postsecondary partners (Iowa Western Community College and University of Nebraska Omaha) offer a college success 101 class, designated meeting space, and career exploration resources to cohorts of LEAP students.

In Maine, at Southern Maine Community College, the LEAP college specialist has put in place a number of on-campus strategies that are above and beyond the

standard coaching and advising used by college staff. These include weekly study groups at a set time with food provided; support completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid and state postsecondary financing applications; an academic performance progress form, completed by faculty at the request of the LEAP student; and regular check-ins between LEAP students and their assigned academic advisors. All of these on-campus support strategies are tied to a modest (\$200 per semester for the first year) incentive program for LEAP students. In addition, the LEAP college specialist was given advisor status and access to the SMCC portal to be able to get early alerts, see grades and schedules, and help students register for their classes in a timely fashion.

In New York City, The Door has arranged for careful follow-up support for their youth when they matriculate in college: once LEAP youth transition to Hostos Community College, they are tracked with other youth coming from bridge programming as a cohort and receive on-campus support from a designated CUNY staff person.

In San Diego, South Bay Community Services partners with Southwestern College and City College for the LEAP initiative and both colleges provide faculty to South Bay to orient youth to campus life and help youth prepare for the placement

tests. LEAP has also raised the awareness of the Southwestern dean of students to the number of students who have been system-involved on his campus. The dean understands the needs of this population and the array of services offered through South Bay and, as a result, he is arranging for on-campus space devoted to South Bay staff, and has requested a list of every LEAP youth enrolled at the college so that he can ensure that they all receive the services they need from college staff. At City College, SBCS has established itself as expert in supporting youth who have experienced homelessness, and is the “go-to” when youth are identified as needing resources.

Nebraska Children and Families Foundation is working to train postsecondary partners, starting with University of Nebraska Lincoln, on the experiences of students involved with juvenile-justice and child-welfare systems, and overall how to better understand trauma. Nebraska Children and Families Foundation will adapt and deliver the Youth Thrive™ curriculum for UNL staff. Youth Thrive™ uses strength-based and positive psychology approaches to give educators, social workers, law enforcement personnel, and others the concrete knowledge they need to promote young people’s long-term well-being. UNL’s multicultural center, OASIS, has shown strong interest in the training and has offered to open it up to other on-campus departments.

## Programming for Youth Facing Systemic Barriers to Entry into Postsecondary Education

For many young low-income people, including those that have been involved in systems, the barriers to entry into postsecondary education can be prohibitive—they may not have the skills to succeed in college, or they may need to gain living-wage employment more expeditiously than a college program will allow. In this section, we describe two emerging models that have the potential to move more low-income young adults to credentials that pay off in the labor market.

### **BRIDGE PROGRAMS**

*Young people who are academically unprepared for college often enter into and cycle through developmental education courses without making progress to a credential. A core component of LEAP is implementation of bridge programs, through which CBOs recruit youth who have been system-involved and provide them with the academic supports, college knowledge and success strategies, and personalized guidance that all young people need to succeed in college – but that these youth rarely can access. Such programming is most effective and sustainable when community colleges collaborate with CBO’s in offering bridge programming.*

The Coalition for Responsible Community Development in Los Angeles partners with Los Angeles Trade Technical College to collaboratively deliver the bridge program for LEAP youth, which begins with an on-boarding process that includes a one-day intensive orientation, including “try-out” experience to ensure that the program is a good fit for interested youth. Once youth are co-enrolled in the bridge program and LATTC, youth participate in team-building activities and build a support network. Staff from both CRCD and LATTC play roles in delivering the bridge program, as youth are guided to explore career options, get an in-depth look at college resources, and learn about the pathways offered through LATTC, including Advanced Transportation and Manufacturing. They are also enrolled as a cohort in accelerated noncredit courses taught by college faculty that prepare youth to enter credit-bearing coursework in the spring or fall semesters. Once youth complete the bridge, they are enrolled full- or close to full-time in credit-bearing courses at LATTC, and receive intensive case management and support services from CRCD college navigators as they work toward the completion of an associate’s of arts degree in one of two pathway programs: Liberal Arts and Sciences, or Advanced Transportation and Manufacturing. CRCD credits LATTC for its commitment to making the bridge work for Los Angeles County youth who have been involved in foster care, many

of whom have multiple barriers, and in particular the college’s willingness to collaboratively redesign the bridge so that youth could enter credit-bearing coursework more quickly. LATTC has also been a thoughtful partner in ensuring that faculty co-teaching the bridge have the interest and skill to work with youth transitioning from foster care.

In New York City, The Door and other CBOs providing bridge programming comprise the Bronx Opportunity Network, which in the last two years has had a major influence on how two colleges in the Bronx—Hostos and Bronx Community College—support youth coming through the CBO-based bridge programs. Students had entered the college testing into developmental education; these CBOs learned that offering academic preparation through bridge programming helped their youth either reduce the number of developmental education courses they had to take, or test out of remediation altogether. The colleges worked to get special testing and retesting dates for the students coming from the CBOs. They also have on-campus space allocated for the CBO staff to support youth in their transition.<sup>3</sup>

In Omaha, Avenue Scholars worked out a partnership with Metro Community College to build the bridge program in area high schools. Youth dual enroll at the college during their senior year and

into the summer after graduation. During enrollment they get supports including career exploration, college navigation, and academic support; youth also earn college credits during the bridge. Through the LEAP initiative, Avenue Scholars has adapted this bridge for youth who have been system-involved, starting with targeted outreach to and recruitment of such youth using a central intake system. Avenue Scholars has also redesigned the bridge and first-year support programs by integrating all the core features and elements of Back on Track to allow it to better serve youth who have been involved in systems. Staff are infusing trauma-informed practices into their advising work with young people. They have been trained on the Youth Thrive™ curriculum, which uses strength-based and positive psychology approaches to give educators, social workers, law enforcement personnel, and others the concrete knowledge they need to promote young people's long-term well-being. Metro Community College is also offering a new First-Year Experience Program in Summer 2018 to include core components of bridging. This program will allow LEAP students to enroll as a cohort into intensive summer bridging on campus prior to enrollment in fall or winter terms.

## **ROLE OF “DISRUPTORS:” NON-COLLEGE TRAINING PROVIDERS**

*In many communities across the country, nonprofit training providers provide a non-college option for young adults and adults to accelerate into middle-skill jobs with advancement potential. These “disruptive” entities are proliferating and should be an important avenue for youth who have been system-involved; however, the risk is that the bar for entry is too high for youth who have been system-involved, and who may have gaps in their education and skills. Some organizations have created on-ramps to these nonprofit training providers, offering youth the skills they need to succeed in what can be demanding programs, such as IT “boot camps.”*

In LEAP, several CBOs work with area training providers to make it possible for youth who have been system-involved to participate. In New York City, The Door partners with Per Scholas to provide a bridge program for youth who score below the required skill levels for their IT training program. The bridge is co-taught by an instructor from The Door and a Per Scholas social worker—an indication of Per Scholas' understanding of the needs of this population. It focuses on skill building (math and reading), self-advocacy, and employability skills (teamwork, time management, attendance, and professional dress).

# Conclusion

Getting to scale in supporting youth who have been system-involved in obtaining postsecondary credentials requires new ways of working, both for CBOs serving these youth and for community colleges. CBOs can advocate for the specific supports and opportunities that young people need, and convey to the colleges their value-add in preparing these youth to succeed. Colleges can partner with CBOs in the ways described here and

undertake reforms specifically for youth transitioning from these systems. Perhaps most importantly, as community colleges across the country undertake reforms in how students enter and progress through more clearly articulated guided pathways, they can consider what adaptations are required specifically for youth who have been system-involved. In this work, CBOs can be powerful partners.

## Five Actions for the Postsecondary Success of Youth Who Have Been System-Involved

### FOR POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS:

- **Partner with CBOs and other stakeholders** to ensure youth are prepared through collaborative delivery of bridge programming with opportunities for retesting into credit-bearing courses
- **Provide resources to remove financial barriers** through, for example, tuition and other expense reductions for youth in foster care, and dedicated housing for students transitioning from foster care or who are parenting
- **Ensure youth have the advising they need** through designated college navigation staff or through CBO partners, and on-campus meeting space for students and counselors

### FOR POSTSECONDARY PARTNERS AND CBOs:

- **Keep youth in cohorts with peers with similar experiences**, such as through enrollment as a cohort in accelerated developmental education courses
- **Cross-train postsecondary/CBO staff** on each other's areas of expertise, such as college navigation or healing-centered/trauma-informed practices, and the experiences of students involved with public systems

## ENDNOTES

1. *Highlights from the NYTD Survey: Outcomes reported by young people at ages 17, 19, and 21 (Cohort 1)* (Washington, DC: National Youth in Transition Database, 2016), [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/nytd\\_data\\_brief\\_5.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/nytd_data_brief_5.pdf).
2. *Improving Outcomes for Older Youth in Foster Care* (Seattle: Casey Family Programs, 2008), <https://isc.idaho.gov/cp/docs/Improving%20Outcomes%20for%20Older%20Youth.pdf>; *Sticker Shock: Calculating the Full Price Tag for Youth Incarceration* (Washington, DC: Justice Policy Institute, 2014), [http://www.justicepolicy.org/uploads/justicepolicy/documents/sticker\\_shock\\_final\\_v2.pdf](http://www.justicepolicy.org/uploads/justicepolicy/documents/sticker_shock_final_v2.pdf).
3. For more information on the Bronx Opportunity Network and its partnership with community colleges, see: *Innovations in the Field* (New York: JobsFirstNYC, 2016), <http://www.jobsfirstnyc.org/uploads/JFNYCInnovationsintheFieldBON.pdf>; Cheryl A. Almeida and Lili Allen, *Common Cause: Community-Based Organizations and Community Colleges Partner for Student Success* (Boston: JFF, 2017), <https://www.jff.org/resources/common-cause-community-based-organizations-and-community-colleges-partner-student/>.



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