Guidance 1: Getting Started

1. Identify Emerging Challenges: While systems and procedures are used in public and private organizations to improve quality, minimize errors, and achieve efficiency, there are always problems created by the process for individuals, groups, species, and/or environments. This guide addresses challenges emerging from the transition to universal college preparation.

2. Build Partnerships to Focus on Promoting Social Justice: Systemic reforms tend to benefit the overall population, but not low-income families. We focus on building partnerships that promote equity in high schools and colleges and support state and local initiatives to improve college preparation, access, equity in admissions, and persistence of low-income students.

3. Use Engaged Scholarship to Identify and Test Strategies for Social Action: Changing systems requires building and testing of social action within public and private organizations and within legal and policy constraints. This guide provides frameworks that can be used in 9-16 education and adapted to address other critical challenges undermining social justice.

The challenge of educational reform not only involves expanding college opportunities for students underrepresented among college graduates and the middle class (underrepresented students) but also requires communication with students and parents about educational and career opportunities. Increasingly, low-income students are from families with at least some college. Therefore schools, community-based organizations (CBOs), and colleges must rethink strategies for reducing gaps in educational attainment and economic opportunity.
Using action inquiry—observations, reflection and information from research—educators can identify and remedy barriers to success for these students. This guide provides flexible practices for integrating advocacy of underrepresented students into educational systems using evidence-based strategies. Each chapter introduces practices with a guide for action. The reflective case studies (Chapters 2, 3, and 4) demonstrate the use of the action-inquiry cycle in bottom-up organizational change promoting:

- **Preparation**: Improving opportunities to prepare for college through quality education and social support;
- **Access**: Transforming college outreach, admissions, and support services once in college to improve diversity in collegiate learning environments; and
- **College Success**: Providing the academic, social, and financial support necessary to assure underrepresented students have fair opportunities for college completion.

Advocates for underrepresented students and activist researchers share an interest in using their knowledge and skills to inform educational improvement. When interventions are based on what worked in another area, they usually must be adapted to address local challenges and constraints. We focus on three interrelated change processes essential to efforts to reduce gaps in preparation, access, and success:

- **Overcoming Barriers Facing Students**: Identify strategies that reduce inequality using reflection on experiences, reviews of research, and analysis of information provided by accountability systems.
- **Organizing to Support Students’ Navigation of Educational Pathways**: Build partnerships to acquire information and use research to inform improvements in practice and advocacy for students.
- **Changing Systems and Practices to Support Underrepresented Students**: Address barriers due to economic opportunities that undermine family and community support as well as institutionalized practices in education that reinforce and replicate inequality.

Student advocates in educational systems need information on how well their interventions actually work. Most educational systems have planning and accountability systems that provide data on outcomes, but lack sound strategies for using this information to reduce inequality in outcomes. Student advocates working with underrepresented students must continually improve practices if schools and colleges are to succeed in reducing gaps.

**Reflect on What Your Organization Can Do (Actionable Theory of Change)**

Undergraduate and graduate programs in education provide information from theory, research and practice, providing one basis for professional knowledge and skills. Since both
society and professional knowledge change at a rapid pace, it is also crucial to reflect on practice, especially when considering remedies to educational inequality.

The growing income inequality in the United States provides a complicated and troubling context for education reforms that expect all students to prepare for college. Educators should rethink old assumptions about how poverty hinders educational opportunity. The goal of expanding and improving educational opportunity through college preparation for all students is implicit in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The theory of change used by CCSS in high schools (i.e. the evidence-based standards) assumes that pedagogies that previously worked for students to prepare them socially and educationally for advanced courses will continue to work under the new guidelines. But wealth disparities also affect achievement in required courses, college access, college success, and navigation of educational and career pathways. For more than two decades low-income students college have had to work long hours in addition to borrowing excessively to pay for college, conditions that substantially extend their time to degrees. The net costs of college after need-based grants for low-income students are now higher than at any point in history. Often parents of low-income students have attended college but did not receive the expected benefits.

So the notion that raising high school graduation requirements will equalize educational and economic opportunity for all students is a deceptive myth for some underrepresented students. This myth has been especially harmful as it has taken shape in urban school systems and universities. Attempts to change students to fit a savagely unequal system have further accelerated disparities in my urban communities.

The core challenge is to adapt educational pathways to empower students to navigate this education system with insight about potential career pathways. Using an actionable approach to educational practice can help us focus on reducing the effect of institutionalized barriers to opportunity in the current educational system. This involves testing our assumptions about the practices (content, pedagogies, networking, financial support, etc.) that will improve opportunity.

We encourage readers to use action inquiry to examine current practices and try out new approaches for empowering students. We start with a framework you can use to develop an actionable theory of change for your own practice (Figure 1.1). Consider your own assumptions and think about how your work might improve and expand educational opportunity for underrepresented students focusing on student transitions:

1. From middle school to a high school that fits students’ interests and abilities, an especially difficult challenge for low-income students in urban school systems with competing magnet and charter schools.
2. From high school to a college that is committed to their academic success, a process that requires attention to admissions, academic support, and transfer programs within colleges and universities.

3. From introductory courses into a major program that matches emerging aspirations, recognizing that most students learn about additional educational options after they enter college, and that many change their major and/or transfer to another college.
Figure 1.1 Framing Actionable Theories of College Preparation, Access, and Success

**ACADEMIC SUPPORT**
- **High Schools**
  - Funding
  - Diploma Options
  - Encouragement
- **Community-Based Organizations:**
  - Academic
  - Extended Day
- **Colleges**
  - Academic Programs & Support Services

**STUDENTS’ ACADEMIC PATHWAYS**
- **Families:** Engagement & Cross Generation Uplift
- **Academic Preparation**
  - Completing Advanced Courses
  - Building College Knowledge
- **Low-Income Families:**
  - Ease Financial Fears
  - Orientation to College Pathways
- **College Transitions**
  - College Choice
  - Major Choice
  - (Transfer)
  - (Stop Out)
  - Finding Fit
- **College Experience**
  - Academic Engagement
  - Civic Engagement
- **Academic Success**
  - Cross-generation Giveback
  - Degree Attainment
  - Aligned Employment
  - Graduate Education

**SOCIAL & FINANCIAL SUPPORT**
- **Information on Careers, Colleges, and Financial Aid**
- **Support Services:**
  - College Outreach, networks, and mentors
  - College Visits and events to learn
  - Parent Programs
- **College Pricing**
  - Tuition
  - Financial Aid
- **Financing**
  - Federal aid
  - State Coordination of Grants & Tuition
  - $ Fulfill Aid Guarantees
Reflect on your own actions using research evidence, personal observations, and insights from your knowledge of the education system. Think about your reflections in relation to the framework (Figure 1.1). To be actionable, your theory of change should identify an intervention that you can try out in your local context. Since state policies on education, local educational practices, school and college funding, student aid funding, and family cultures are highly variable, there is no single strategy that will overcome the effects of income inequality. In addition, strategies used to teach, provide support services, and finance educational choices vary across locales, and actionable theory must be adaptable to local circumstances.

**Practice: Identify Strategies Your Organization Can Try Out (Develop an Actionable Theory).**

An actionable theory of change can be tested by an intervention. Define how you expect an intervention to influence students' transitions and educational outcomes and include a means of evaluating whether the intervention had the desired results.

To prepare for action inquiry, reflect on the ways you can use evidence to improve your practice in your current role:

1. **Review the linkages in the framework to identify action points:** How do the programs and services you are engaged in relate to the trajectories students follow to educational success?
2. **Hypothesize on how your actions can empower students to navigate toward their visions of academic and career success.** Think about what you do and could do to improve and expand equal opportunities for the students you serve.
3. **Use your hypotheses to reflect on practice and outcomes using available evidence.** Thinking about how your actions link to outcomes provides an opportunity to reflect on evidence from current practices and try out new practices.
4. **Identify additional evidence that would helpful this about alternative strategies.** Is there evidence generated by your institution that you have not used to inform your decisions and those of the organization? Should you review the existing research? Is new research needed?

**Find Partners for Student-Centered Approaches to Organizing**

A local, actionable theory of change should consider how federal, state, and local policies constrain or encourage student opportunities, and how interventions influence student trajectories through educational and social systems, including transitions between systems (gaining access, transferring, changing content specialization and so forth). Low-income students face barriers because of differences in resources and support systems. To improve fairness, it may be necessary to intervene to:
• Change current practices to empower students’ navigation of systemic barriers
• Develop new intervention strategies that can change systemic barriers
• Restructure existing policies and programs to overcome systemic inequalities.

Networks Can Support Student Success

Reflection on how our assumptions and experiences inform actionable theories of change and evidence informs the construction and reconstruction of intervention strategies. When framing your actionable theory of change, think about how the intervention actually links to educational transitions. For example:

• Family engagement in education (e.g., choosing schools, supporting children) is a crucial aspect of educational preparation. Students whose parents have degrees from four-year colleges have inherent advantages in preparation compared to prospective first-generation college students. In addition, parents’ concerns about college costs can limit their engagement. Interventions in families can influence early choices about education (linkage 1, Figure 1.1), but are also possible in subsequent educational transitions (e.g. student and family support services).

• Most states have adopted new graduation requirements using the theoretical assumption that courses completed will influence eventual success (linkage 2). These policies assume improved preparation opens up pathways to college and eventual degree completion for students from underrepresented groups.

• College access organizations, including school-college networks like CFES, provide support services that introduce underrepresented students to college and career pathways (linkage 3). These networks test assumptions about how social support can empower students and develop the college knowledge they would not otherwise have.

• Many community organizations and reformers seek to intervene directly to improve academic preparation (linkage 4).

• The strategies colleges use to provide aid to students to supplement federal and state grant and loan programs influence whether students can afford to pay for college (linkage 5) and attain a degree (linkage 7). Student navigation of college costs, including the extent of borrowing and work, also influence their eventual commitment to give back to their colleges and future generations (linkage 8).

• Academic programs and student services in college have direct links to access (linkage 6) and eventual college success.

Using evidence to think critically about how these linkages work locally in students’ lives provides valuable information about barriers, opportunities, and strategies students use to navigate around barriers to actualize opportunities for academic success. Local educators and
community-based advocates often have a tacit theory of change with an implicit logic about how their intervention will empower students. The evidence they accumulate to document pathways students’ actually travel along with insights (positions) how they traverse through and around barriers provides crucial actionable information for practice.

There are many resources that can be used by schools, community organizations, and colleges to form partnerships to address challenges (Table 1.1). We encourage new partnerships to use data to build the case for funding from external sources—community, corporate, and national foundations, along with state and federal grant programs—that share their commitment to expanding educational opportunity.

When building partnerships, share understandings of actionable theories of change. Articulating and testing assumptions about change—sharing information about barriers and opportunities to address them—inform the development of actionable strategies. Build a collective understanding of the ways interventions link to—and potentially reduce—locally institutionalized inequalities in educational opportunity. Local changes in practice cannot change public policy, but can adapt to policy constraints through innovation. In Chapters 2, 3, and 4 we provide guidance and case studies to inform the development of local actionable theories of change. We structure those chapters to encourage reflections and conversations about local, actionable theories of change.

**Table 1.1: Examples of Interventions and Possible Partners Expanding Educational Opportunities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Component</th>
<th>Typical Services Provided</th>
<th>Possible Partners</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Counseling:</strong> Disseminates information and advocates for students</td>
<td>Advising and counseling, college application and financial aid assistance, workshops, campus visits, test preparation classes</td>
<td>College Advising Corps</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>College For Every Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Support:</strong> Prepares students to take and succeed in college-level course work</td>
<td>Test preparation, summer programs, academic advising, tutoring, workshops</td>
<td>TRIO - Upward Bound</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>GEAR UP</td>
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<td>AVID</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Personal and Social Enrichment:</strong> Provides opportunities for students to learn about their communities and the world around them</td>
<td>Leadership opportunities, social and professional development seminars, field trips, peer groups, cultural activities</td>
<td>Achievers Scholarship</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>College for Every Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parental Involvement:</strong> Enlists parents to learn about</td>
<td>Orientation activities, volunteer opportunities, awareness</td>
<td>Gates Millennium Scholars</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>21st Century Scholars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Washington State Scholars</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

1 This is just one way to organize programs. Other options would be by program location, program funding, or target participants (i.e. schools or individuals).

2 The format and columns follow the original source; the descriptions and examples have been modified.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College and support students’ goals and activities</th>
<th>Mentoring: Recruits and trains adult and peer mentors</th>
<th>I Have A Dream (IHAD):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring, tutoring, workshops, cultural programming, field trips, peer learning groups</td>
<td>College preparatory courses, career planning and counseling, tutoring and programming in college, field trips</td>
<td>STEM Programs LSAMP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Career-based Outreach:</strong> Links academic preparation to college majors, career goals, and long-term career planning</td>
<td>Financial Assistance: Provides college scholarships and/or helps students apply for and secure money for college</td>
<td>Advising and counseling, workshops, scholarship application assistance, and scholarships and grants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College preparatory courses, career planning and counseling, tutoring and programming in college, field trips</td>
<td>Financial Assistance: Provides college scholarships and/or helps students apply for and secure money for college</td>
<td>Gates Millennium Scholars 21st Century Scholars Achievers Scholarship Tuition Incentive Program (MI) DC TAG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networks: Connects community-based organizations, high schools and colleges that are focused on expanding educational opportunities.</td>
<td>Connects students to resources (community-based and higher education-based) and colleges. All program components can be integrated into the network based on student needs.</td>
<td>College Access Networks College for Every Student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: We extend ideas and categories proposed by McConts (2004) for this framework.

*Reflect on Alternatives with Prospective Partners*
Actionable knowledge combines reflection on experiences, understandings of the ways research can inform action, and lessons learned from testing interventions in practice. Whether or not your educational system makes a concerted effort to support your innovation through bottom-up action inquiry and change, educators in schools and colleges and advocates in CBOs can engage in social and educational problem solving to address the learning and social support needs of the students they work with. CBOs can encourage students by introducing them to college opportunities, providing social support through mentoring, and encouraging them to engage in civic activities. Sharing information across partner organization is needed to expand opportunity through:

- Alignment of high schools and community colleges
- Alignment of community colleges and four-year colleges
- Collaboration between universities and high school systems on pathway projects
• Support of community organizations for extended-day programs, internships, and service opportunities

Educational systems go through periods of rapid change as a consequence of changing policies, but such periods of change are usually followed by stable periods. When policies are stable and can be depended upon to provide a framework, it is possible to make changes in systems to really serve all students making sure students have the resources to successfully navigate educational pathways, especially critical for students who are underrepresented among college graduates. In most urban education systems, there has been wave after wave of reform creating systemic instability. Indeed, the rapid pace of policy change in the early years of the twenty-first century (e.g., new standards, rising graduation requirements, and the use of market models for school reform) has turned reform into a constant, making it difficult for local educators to develop and test new practices. Justice advocates serving students in urban communities must be vigilant about using evidence to develop actionable strategies to support students.
Learning from Case Studies

The cases in the next three chapters provide both *research briefs* prepared for school- and college-based partnerships and *reflections* on how the research was used to inform social justice advocacy. The cases are presented in temporal sequences, illustrating how researchers interacted with partners in educational and nonprofit organizations. Discussing the cases in groups provides opportunities to learn about how organizations use information, think critically about working with engaged scholars to build an evidence base to inform adaptive change, and also consider the limitations of action inquiry.

*Case Method*

The cases are real and were written by social justice advocates and researchers who worked in partnerships. They illustrate that integrating an emphasis on equity into educational...
improvement is a frustrating and ongoing process: Even when innovations address challenges and remove barriers, which is not always the case, new problems emerge. The cases present evidence provided by researchers and the practitioners with whom they worked in their own voices. Figure 1.2 illustrates how the cases focus on improving equity in access and college success.

**Figure 1.2 Case Studies Illustrating Engaged Research Projects Supporting Interventions Promoting Equity in Higher Education**

![Diagram](image)

The cases were undertaken as part of Projects Promoting Equity in Higher and Urban Education, an initiative of the National Center for Institutional Diversity funded by planning grant from the Ford Foundation. As part of this grant, we hosted a seminar on college access where Rick Dalton, Chief Executive Officer of College for Every Student (CFES) spoke; we also held a summit meeting as a means of assessing the nature of the challenges facing research partnerships in Washington, DC, Detroit, MI, and other cities. Three research partnerships evolved from these efforts: one in Washington DC; one with CFES; and the third with Detroit
public schools. Within these partnerships, we moved through assessment and organizing and on to research informing local social justice advocates seeking to expand educational opportunity by improving college preparation, enrollment, and persistence. Using this inquiry-based sequence, researchers worked with partners in high schools, colleges, community networks, and state agencies.

The case studies are aligned with the practices for building partnerships that inform interventions to reduce barriers to college preparation, access, and success. The cases are not intended as best practices. Instead, readers can analyze the cases to see examples of testing actionable theories of change. We all need better information about what has and has not worked as intended. Readers can:

- **Analyze the cases.** When reflecting on the cases, focus on your own learning by thinking about how you could develop research projects that address the challenges facing your practice. When working in small groups, discussion helps build shared actionable knowledge about potential change processes.

- **Reflect on your own experiences.** We provide questions after each case to encourage reflection on change strategies, embedded and explicit theories of change, and the strengths and limitations of intervention strategies (shaded boxes at the end of cases). Discussing the cases and sharing insights can encourage openness in discussing evidence in the ongoing improvement process.

By reflecting on the cases, community leaders, educators, and student activists can open up to learning from others’ experiences, including the uses, misuses, and limitations of data and research. Using these practices can empower you as an agent of change.