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# Aligning Policies and Practices to Advance a Postsecondary Systems Change Agenda

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS  
ISSUE BRIEFS SERIES  
DECEMBER 2013



OMG CENTER FOR COLLABORATIVE LEARNING



## About the OMG Center

Headquartered in Philadelphia, PA, the OMG Center for Collaborative Learning (OMG) provides evaluation and philanthropic services to social sector organizations. Our areas of focus include “cradle-to-career” education, asset development, community health, diversity leadership, and arts and culture, among other fields. For 30 years, our clients have been major private and community foundations, government organizations, and national and regional nonprofits. Within the field of postsecondary access and success, OMG has worked on an array of major national and regional initiatives for organizations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Lumina Foundation, the Citi Foundation, the Strive Network, Achieving the Dream, Campus Compact, and the California Career Advancement Academies.

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## Acknowledgements

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Amarillo, TX	Jacksonville, FL	Phoenix, AZ
Boston, MA	Louisville, KY	Portland, OR
Brownsville, TX	Mesa, AZ	Raleigh, NC
Charlotte, NC	New York, NY	Riverside, CA
Dayton, OH	Philadelphia, PA	San Francisco, CA

The individuals and organizations that forged partnerships in each of these communities are singularly committed to establishing a legacy of college success, and we celebrate them for those efforts. We are also grateful for their contributions as thought partners, and their insights have helped the OMG Center shape and refine what we learned over the course of the initiative.

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## Introduction

Nationally, 52% of 2011 U.S. high school graduates and GED earners from low-income families enrolled immediately in a two- or four-year college, compared to 82% and 66% of their high- and middle-income counterparts, respectively (U.S. Department of Education, the Condition of Education, 2013). Once they enroll in college, low-income youth face a number of academic and non-academic obstacles, making it more difficult to succeed. Given the increasing demand for a workforce with postsecondary credentials and the rising costs of a college education, low-income youth in the U.S. are faced with significant challenges in their pursuit of living wage employment. Postsecondary completion continues to evolve as a hot bed issue nationally, at the state level, and in individual communities.

As philanthropies and nonprofits have acknowledged the scope of these challenges, so too have they recognized that simply creating new programs, while important, will not solve the problem. Larger system and structural barriers need to be addressed if more students are going to earn postsecondary credentials and degrees.

Philanthropies and social investors are recognizing that “place matters,” and see the potential of place-based strategies for catalyzing system changes. Local communities offer a scale at which cross-sector, systemic challenges can be addressed, and provide opportunities to affect significant numbers of students. In fact, at the time of writing this Issue Brief, we can account for more than 20 national initiatives supported by federal government and national philanthropies that focus on “place-based” strategies.

This Issue Brief presents lessons from our three-year evaluation of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s Community Partnerships portfolio and illustrates how communities can implement multi-sector strategies to shift local systems and improve student postsecondary completion.

### OMG’S EVALUATION

The goal of our developmental evaluation was to gain a clearer picture of how communities build partnerships; engage stakeholders; use data; and create, align, and shift policies and practices to increase postsecondary success. Our methodology did not entail judging the effectiveness of communities’ approaches against a predetermined set of measures.

### About the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s Community Partnerships Portfolio

With a 2025 goal of doubling the number of low-income students who earn a postsecondary degree or credential with genuine value in the workplace by age 26, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation invested more than 20 million dollars in the Community Partnerships portfolio. The objective was to understand what it takes for cross-sector partnerships to advance a community-wide postsecondary completion agenda that instigates system-level changes (described in the following section) and ultimately improves postsecondary completion outcomes for students.

From 2009-2013, seven communities received Community Partnerships funding through two sister initiatives — Communities Learning in Partnership (CLIP) and Partners for Postsecondary Success (PPS) — to develop and implement a multi-sector strategy that included community and four-year colleges, K-12 school districts, municipal leaders, local businesses, community-based organizations, parents and students, and others. CLIP sites received funding for three years and nine months and PPS sites received funding for two years and four months. Communities also received support from an intermediary partner who provided technical assistance and coaching support throughout the grant period: the National League of Cities' Institute for Youth, Education, and Families worked with CLIP cities and MDC Inc. worked with PPS cities. An additional eight communities were involved in the portfolio as affiliate cities, participating in regular convenings, phone calls, and webinars with the seven implementation sites.

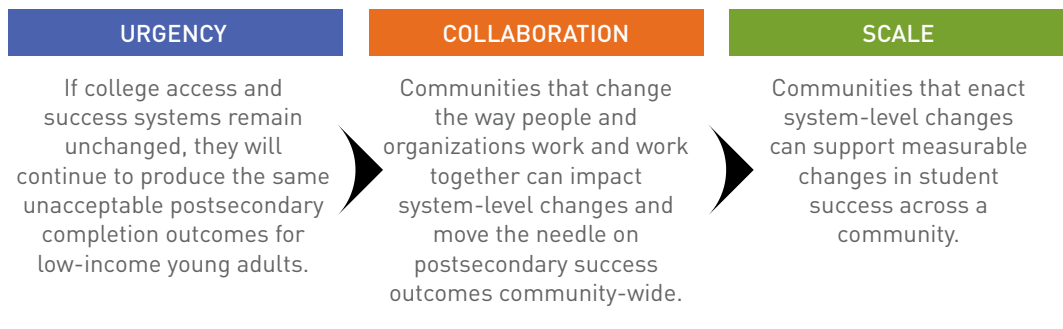
**COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS PORTFOLIO COMMUNITIES**

<b>CLIP</b>	<b>CLIP Affiliate Sites</b>	<b>PPS</b>
Mesa, AZ	Boston, MA	Amarillo, TX
New York, NY	Dayton, OH	Brownsville, TX
Riverside, CA	Jacksonville, FL	Raleigh, NC
San Francisco, CA	Louisville, KY	
	Philadelphia, PA	<b>PPS Affiliate Site</b>
	Phoenix, AZ	Charlotte, NC
	Portland, OR	

## About the Community Partnerships Theory of Change

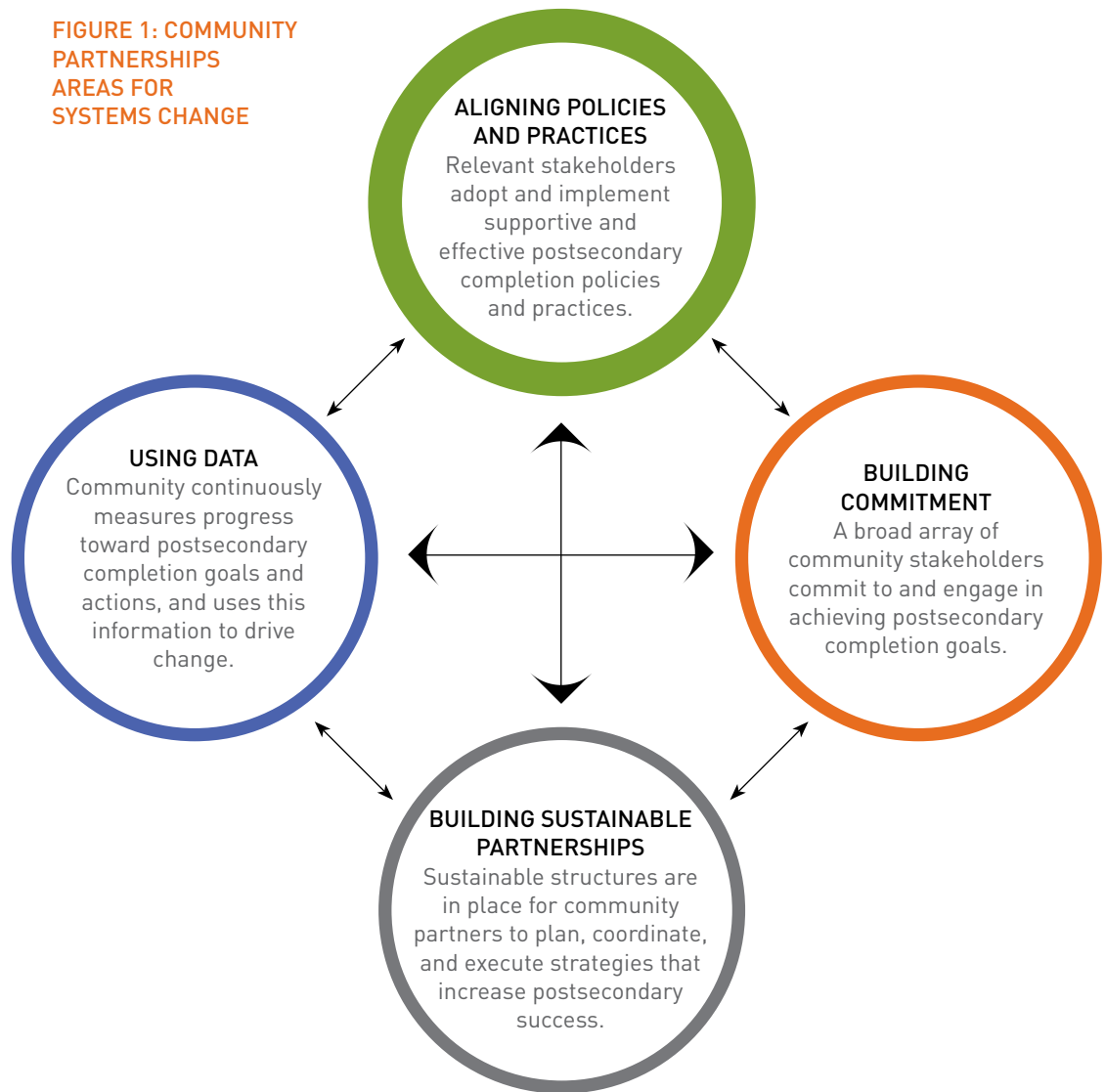
The Community Partnerships sites used a loosely defined Theory of Change (TOC) to help communities set parameters to plan and implement their respective postsecondary success strategies.

Three basic premises drove the Community Partnerships investment:



The TOC stipulated that cross-sector partnerships would use data and leverage key stakeholder commitment to align policies and practices to promote postsecondary success. In other words, evidence of systems change would emerge across four mutually reinforcing areas, illustrated in Figure 1. If we saw evidence of change across these four areas, then we would know that the “system” had in fact shifted.

**FIGURE 1: COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS AREAS FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE**



This Issue Brief focuses on the area of **ALIGNING POLICIES AND PRACTICES** to better support postsecondary completion, and addresses two questions:

**1. WHY** is aligning policies and practices important for place-based investments? and **2. HOW** can communities successfully align policies and practices to increase postsecondary success?

## Why is Aligning Policies and Practices Important for Place-Based Investments?

A fundamental belief of the Community Partnerships portfolio was that organizations and individuals within a community need to act and interact differently to create a system that better supports student postsecondary success. Based on the communities' experiences, changing the way partners act requires: 1) changing the policies that dictate what organizations and individuals *ought to do*, and 2) shifting what they *actually do* by changing practice. Truly shifting systems to support postsecondary completion requires policy and practice alignment that is predicated on *joint planning and shared implementation*.

The Community Partnerships sites pursued a variety of policy and practice interventions. While each initiative aimed to increase student postsecondary success, the interventions can be categorized along two dimensions: 1) **who** is most immediately affected by the change (e.g., students, practitioners including faculty, counselors, and nonprofit providers), and 2) the **stage** along a college access and success pipeline (e.g., while the student is in high school, during a transition, or in a postsecondary setting), as illustrated in Figure 2.

Communities that demonstrated the greatest progress in aligning policy and practice changes pursued a mix of interventions, and depended on multiple organizations to identify and implement those changes. In the best cases, organizations executed strategies together and/or implemented individual organizational changes that reinforced each other. In other cases, individual institutions or organizations shifted specific policies or practices, as a result of information they had gathered from partners.

The time frame of the Community Partnerships portfolio was enough to allow partners to interact in a more aligned fashion. However, more time is needed to fully understand the impact of these collective shifts on the ultimate goal of improving postsecondary completion and attainment rates.

**FIGURE 2: EXAMPLES OF POLICY AND PRACTICE INTERVENTIONS**

LOCATION IN PIPELINE	INTERVENTIONS	PRIMARY IMPACT
SECONDARY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>FAFSA and Apply Texas application completion</b> (Brownsville)</li> <li>• <b>Student Ambassador program</b> (Brownsville): College students return to alma maters to provide college support</li> <li>• <b>Success coaches</b> (Amarillo): Advocates for students and families</li> <li>• <b>Raleigh Future Scholars</b>: Comprehensive academic preparation, college planning, and career counseling for high school students</li> </ul>	Students
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>“Where Are They Now” reports</b> (New York City): Reports for high schools highlighting students’ postsecondary outcomes</li> </ul>	Practitioners
TRANSITION/ CROSS-SECTOR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Developmental education alternative placement policies</b> (Riverside and San Francisco)</li> <li>• <b>Priority enrollment policies</b> (Riverside and San Francisco)</li> <li>• <b>FRISCO Day</b> (San Francisco): Annual day-long event connecting seniors to local colleges</li> <li>• <b>GED to College</b> (Mesa)</li> <li>• <b>2-Year Promise</b> (Riverside): Offers a guarantee of a pathway to postsecondary completion for students meeting specific milestones</li> <li>• <b>Use of Senior Survey Data for Transition Support</b> (Mesa)</li> </ul>	Students
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Curriculum and instruction alignment</b> (Amarillo, Brownsville, Mesa, New York City, Riverside, and San Francisco)</li> <li>• <b>Shared data system across the city university and K-12 systems</b> (New York City)</li> </ul>	Practitioners
POSTSECONDARY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Career planning tools and centralized career information</b> (Brownsville and Mesa)</li> <li>• <b>Semester-long college prep seminar for first-year students</b> (Brownsville)</li> <li>• <b>Impact Raleigh Program</b>: Renewable scholarship support and service learning opportunities</li> <li>• <b>Raleigh Fellows</b>: Peers support on college campuses</li> <li>• <b>Social Services Counselor at Amarillo College</b>: Supporting non-academic needs of students</li> </ul>	Students
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Regression-adjusted performance metrics</b> (New York City): City university system uses high-school level data in new accountability metrics</li> </ul>	
COMMUNITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Raleigh College Center</b>: Community-based resource center</li> <li>• <b>NYC College Line</b>: Local, centralized online hub of college info for students, families, and practitioners</li> </ul>	Students
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>“Que” meetings</b> (Amarillo): Public coffee meetings to increase coordination among local nonprofits and faith community</li> <li>• <b>ACCESS Data</b> (New York City): Access point for sharing community college data about student progress with local nonprofits</li> <li>• <b>CBO Best Practice Forums</b> (New York City)</li> </ul>	Practitioners



## How Can Communities Successfully Align Policies and Practices to Increase Postsecondary Success?

Of the lessons learned from the Community Partnerships evaluation, four have important ramifications for aligning policies and practices:

- **Develop strategies that enable policy and practice changes to reinforce each other**
- **Balance the need for “quick” wins with thoughtful change strategies**
- **Do not stop at “change:” Monitor the implementation and impact of policy and practice changes**
- **Consider how institutions can *work together* to align policies and practices**

**Develop strategies that enable policy and practice changes to reinforce each other: Consider how a particular policy or practice can lead to measurable postsecondary impacts. Determine a clear timeframe (this could mean years) to have an effect on students, as well as what kinds of activities might be needed to support the success of a policy or practice change. Specifically, consider how a policy change can be implemented in practice, and how practice change can be reinforced by policy change.**

The interplay between policy and practice change is dynamic; understanding that relationship can result in strategies that reinforce and strengthen systemic change. For instance:

**A strategy that starts with practice change** (often a program targeting a smaller group of individuals) may: (1) seek to change behavior and/or attitudes of a particular group to a tipping point — triggering the formalization of that practice change as policy, and/or (2) demonstrate success on a smaller scale that leads to the institutionalization of a practice as policy.

In Brownsville, a program with a small group of students led to a policy change that has the potential to affect a much larger number of students. The Brownsville partnership helped a group of college student leaders develop a Student Ambassador program. Through the program, the student leaders share their college experiences with high school students. After the first year of implementation, School District

leaders worked with these college leaders to embed the program in the school day — offering class time rather than volunteer lunch time for students to meet. The partnership is also working with postsecondary partners to formalize the program as an internship and scholarship opportunity for college students.

***A strategy that starts with policy change*** seeks to affect how individuals operate in a system (e.g., establishing guidelines for how those individuals should operate). Sometimes, a policy can trigger practice change seamlessly (e.g., priority enrollment allows a student to secure a class, but the student does not realize that this experience is different). In other cases, a policy change simply sets the stage for practice change (e.g., end-of-course exams, now popular in many states, require teachers to make significant changes in how they prepare students).

Riverside City College unveiled a “2-year promise,” in which students from the two local school districts can complete a two-year degree or transfer to a four-year institution within two years. In order to implement this change, the college needed to align its own practices, including using evidence-based advising and counseling approaches to redesign its student support services.

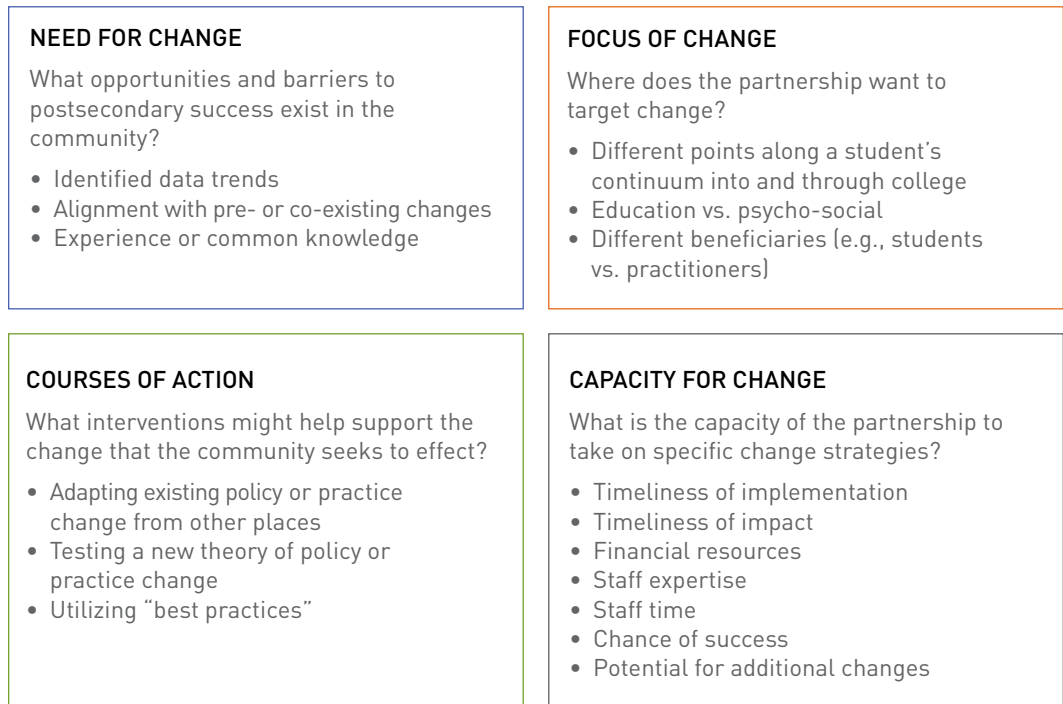
### Putting Lessons into Practice

- ✓ Identify specific policy or practice (often program) changes to undertake
- ✓ Consider the long-term objectives of a particular policy change or program; what is the ultimate goal of making this change or implementing this program? can the policy or practice change have a major impact on students?
- ✓ Learn from other communities that have engaged in similar policy or practice change efforts; what are successful strategies? what are common pitfalls?

**Balance the need for “quick” wins with thoughtful change strategies: Identify changes to demonstrate that the partnership means action. But do not be satisfied with just the quick, “easy” changes. Rather, pursue changes that are harder to attain or that may take longer to achieve impact.**

The Community Partnerships sites grappled with a series of decision points, creating change strategies that balanced thoughtful planning with the need for urgency. These decision points are summarized in Figure 3.

**FIGURE 3: CHANGE STRATEGY DECISION POINTS**



Using these decision points as a guide, communities tackled a wide range of policy and practice change efforts, including curriculum alignment projects, program pilots targeting specific students, and changes in institutional policies and processes. Many of these initiatives required different timelines.

Many partnerships wanted to demonstrate that they could quickly create change in the community — sometimes hoping to differentiate themselves from other collaboratives that had spent a lot of time talking, and not enough time doing. In New York City, data sharing efforts between the Department of Education and the city university system became an early focus, leveraging additional Gates funding support and name recognition to advance existing cross-institutional data work. In San Francisco, Bridge to Success launched Frisco Day, a highly visible event to expose high school seniors to college campuses and their knowledge about how to be successful in college. The event also provides an opportunity for students without a post-secondary plan in place to explore their options. These rapid, concrete successes helped the sites build commitment for their agendas and demonstrated the effectiveness of the partnership to other stakeholders, often opening additional opportunities to pursue change.

New York City's quick win with its data sharing efforts also highlights the importance that communities place in pursuing policy and practice changes that require a longer view. The joint data sharing system, while an important victory itself, will demonstrate its greatest value as K-12 and higher education practitioners use the data to make decisions and change practices.

## Putting Lessons into Practice

- ✓ Develop a clear and transparent process to identify change strategies
- ✓ Determine where barriers or opportunities to student success exist (through data trends and partners' experiences)
- ✓ Identify how changing or aligning existing policies and practices can ease the challenges students face, and prioritize and sequence both short- and longer-term change efforts
- ✓ Distinguish areas where pent up interest for action exists (e.g., among partners, around a particular issue, because some foundational work has already been done, etc.)
- ✓ Pinpoint changes where additional resources are needed; engage in additional research, data collection, and/or conversation and relationship-building to develop policy or practice change strategies.
- ✓ Make sure to have the capacity, resources, and relationships in place before developing a policy or practice change strategy — particularly when going for an early win
- ✓ Engage and give credit to partners and predecessors — particularly those who set the stage for early successes

**Do not stop at “change:” Monitor the implementation and impact of policy and practice changes: Make sure the work does not stop once a new policy or practice has launched. Establish processes and structures for continuing to track how a policy or program unfolds, and whether it plays out as expected. Also, anticipate unintended consequences of the policy or practice change.**

While many communities identified opportunities for policy and practice changes, initiation of a change was only the *beginning* of a process. When sites used data to track and monitor progress, they were in a better position to understand, act on, and strengthen their strategies. Partnerships used both qualitative and quantitative data to:

- ***Understand the extent to which practices changed as a result of policy change:*** While policies affect change on paper, it is critical to track the extent to which this change has an impact on the ground, with intended audiences.
- ***Monitor results of practice change (program/pilot efforts) to make the case for and/or inform policy change:*** Many Community Partnerships initiatives focused on smaller-scale practice change, often through programs or pilots. Tracking and understanding the impact of these practice changes can help make the case for expanding these changes through policy change.

- **Track results of policy or practice change to inform refinements:** Policy or practice changes, whether adapted from other communities or based on “theory,” often do not play out as expected. Implementation offers a critical opportunity for communities to ascertain the effectiveness of the policy or practice and to refine as necessary.

In Raleigh, partners took great pride in creating the first “Raleigh College Center,” a resource housed within a city recreation center, where community members could learn about colleges and receive college-going supports (e.g., assistance with financial aid). Four months following the creation of the Center, partners in Raleigh reassessed its value to the community. After conducting community meetings, partners redesigned the Center’s activities to better meet community members’ needs. Partners did not simply assume the problem was “solved,” but continually assessed the effectiveness of the change.

### Putting Lessons into Practice

- ✓ Identify the expected impact of the policy or program; what are the desired short-term and long-term changes?
- ✓ Develop clear expectations about how the policy or practice can lead to impact
- ✓ Establish data collection activities to understand and track implementation and outcomes; use data to develop clear steps to strengthen policy or practice change.
- ✓ Consider the intended and unintended consequences of the change; assess whether this information suggests that *implementation* needs to shift, or whether *expectations* about outcomes need to shift; include the individuals responsible for carrying out a particular policy or practice change in this assessment process.
- ✓ Use data to make the case to leaders to expand or modify change efforts, as needed

### Aligning Policies and Practices in Riverside, CA

Riverside's two school districts (AUSD and RUSD) and Riverside City College (RCC) addressed academic barriers to college completion through joint policy change, shifting the role of remediation from the college to the high schools. Using data to illustrate that many students who place into developmental education courses fail to persist, RCC faculty and district teachers worked together to increase preparation for college math and placement into credit-bearing courses. They observed each other's classes and compared syllabi to align expectations for students and classroom instruction at the high school and college levels. As a result, high school students who are most likely to place into developmental math — those who do not perform well in intermediate algebra — can re-take the class during 12th grade, offering an alternative pathway for placing into credit-bearing math courses at RCC. Since California does not require a 12th grade math course, the senior year provides an opportunity for students to develop math competencies and bypass developmental courses in college. This joint effort reflects how institutions can change their own policies in a way that collectively fulfills the completion agenda.




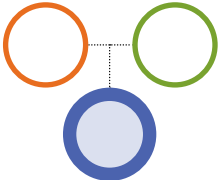
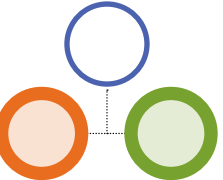
**Consider how institutions can *work together* to align policies and practices: Identify how organizations and institutions can reinforce changes together, by aligning existing policies and practices, identifying new policies, and/or creating new entities (e.g., resources and programs).**

While many organizations change *their* own policies or practices in pursuit of better student outcomes, Community Partnerships sites sought to *collaboratively* instigate such changes. Partner organizations worked together to identify and implement policy and practice changes, and ultimately increase alignment. In some cases, joint conversations among partners led individual organizations to change a policy or practice. In other cases, a policy or practice change at one organization had implications for another; the partnership provided the space for partners to coordinate their efforts and develop complementary policies and practices.

The policy and practice changes that demonstrated the greatest promise for systems change were those that required cross-partner implementation. In addition to identifying and implementing coordinated changes, Community Partnerships provided the space for considering joint responses to regional, state, or national policy changes.

Figure 4 illustrates a variety of approaches to policy and practice change, as well as specific examples from the Community Partnerships portfolio. Although the graphics depict two entities, more than two entities may be involved in such interactions.

**FIGURE 4: APPROACHES TO POLICY AND PRACTICE CHANGE**

	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>EXAMPLES</b>
<p><b>INFORMED CHANGE</b></p> 	<p>One institution changes <i>its own</i> policy or practice <i>in response to joint conversation</i> with other organizations.</p>	<p>In Amarillo, discussions between educators and employers resulted in the community college establishing a career center that provides soft skills and career advising.</p>
<p><b>ALIGNMENT OR EXTENSION</b></p> 	<p>One institution changes <i>its own</i> policy or practice, informed by joint conversation, to align with or extend policies in another institution or set of institutions.</p>	<p>In Mesa, the community college developed a Career Pathways website that organized and aligned degree information to match the K-12 system's Education and Career Action Plans for each student.</p>
<p><b>JOINT CHANGE</b></p> 	<p>Two or more institutions <i>simultaneously adopt</i> aligned policy or practice change on the basis of joint exploration.</p>	<p>In Riverside, the K-12 system established a 12th grade course for students to retake Algebra, if needed. The community college accepted a passing grade in this course, in lieu of a placement test for developmental education coursework.</p>
<p><b>JOINT ENDEAVOR</b></p> 	<p>Two or more institutions create a <i>new entity or program</i> that is jointly owned internally or exists externally to their organizations</p>	<p>In New York City, the K-12 and community college systems are establishing a joint data warehouse that will seamlessly pull data from both proprietary systems. A joint data set already exists for analyzing postsecondary outcomes across both systems.</p>
<p><b>JOINT RESPONSE</b></p> 	<p>Two or more institutions work together to <i>consider and respond to an external policy change</i>.</p>	<p>In Brownsville, a decision by the state college system to dissolve the partnership between the local two-year and four-year colleges initiated significant system changes. The two college systems, along with other partners, are considering ways to adapt to this change.</p>

For many Community Partnerships sites, this collaborative approach to policy and practice change offered a new way to consider problems and solutions within a community, shifting away from isolated and reactive change. This is not to indicate that all policy and practice changes need to be established jointly — but rather, many policy and practice changes have implications across organizations and institutions, and these changes can be stronger and more impactful if structures for ensuring alignment exist.

The Riverside example highlighted earlier in this Brief, and the San Francisco example in the box below, illustrate that individual institutions have the autonomy and authority to implement change. But, when they act in concert with other organizations, the potential for system-wide change is even greater.

### Putting Lessons into Practice

- ✓ Elevate areas of change that depend on more than one institution or organization
- ✓ Consider whether existing practices or policies in one organization or institution can be leveraged, or whether something new is needed across partners
- ✓ Draw on approaches from other communities, when possible, to learn from challenges and successes of cross-sector policy and practice change
- ✓ Continue to communicate across partners about policy or practice change, from identification of interventions through implementation
- ✓ Monitor changes to continue to identify opportunities for strengthening alignment and outcomes for students

### Refining Placement Policies in San Francisco, CA

In San Francisco, the City College (CCSF) refined two policies: ensuring priority registration for students graduating from the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) and shifting its placement testing practice to allow students to retake placement exams within two weeks of their first attempt. CCSF also piloted “bump up” placement practices that used multiple measures of students’ high school performance — such as attendance, standardized test scores, and GPA — to assess student readiness for higher level placements in math and English. While these changes required a shift in registrar and admissions policies at CCSF, the successful implementation of these efforts required unprecedented coordination between the college and SFUSD, among stakeholders from a variety of levels and departments (e.g., counseling, instruction, executive cabinet, and student programs and supports), to ensure that students could successfully take advantage of these changes.



## Some Concluding Thoughts

For many communities, aligning policy and practice was where the rubber hit the road. While creating a partnership, building commitment, and using data all had their roles, many communities measured their progress by the ability to “do things differently.” They altered the way they operated — instituting new policies and developing more targeted interventions — seeking to influence and change the informal practices of students, families, practitioners, administrators, and institutional leaders. While aligning policy and practice change remains an ambitious goal, many Community Partnerships sites took important steps forward in thinking about and beginning to implement changes that considered cross-sector resources.

Successful policy and practice “wins” offered a pathway to improve postsecondary success in a community — serving as fuel to strengthen and sustain partnerships and inspiring further action. These wins also enabled the sites to demonstrate the ability to “get things done” and to leverage resources from multiple stakeholders to achieve their objectives. Clearly, these victories enhanced the credibility of the Community Partnerships portfolio.

As communities and funders continue to support postsecondary completion across the country, they must consider key questions as they create and strengthen strategies to align policies and practices that support student success.

### CONSIDERATIONS FOR COMMUNITIES

What are the policy and practice opportunities in the community that will support change quickly and deeply?

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What resources and capacities do partners bring that can support policy or practice change in the community? What existing organizational or institutional policies/practices offer opportunities for expansion across the system?

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Where are new policy or practice solutions needed — to support alignment across institutions and organizations? for accountability and monitoring?

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### CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUNDERS

How can funders provide resources to help communities affect more students through their policy and practice interventions?

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What is the appetite among funders for supporting short-term success and long-term agendas in a community? What do funders want to see communities demonstrate in the short term that will give them confidence that longer-term changes are on the horizon?

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