A Guide to Establishing Community-Based College Access Centers

Published by The Education Resources Institute (TERI)
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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TERI also wants to express its gratitude to the staffs of the centers in Boston, Louisville, St. Louis, and Washington (DC). It is because of their strong commitment, their tireless efforts, and their unwavering belief in the ability of under-served students and adults to attend and graduate from college and other postsecondary education programs that the centers are so successful.
In 1995, The Education Resources Institute (TERI), with support from the Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund, embarked on a college access center replication project for the purpose of promoting college going among low-income students and those who are the first generation in their families to attend college. The project involves establishing community-based college access centers modeled after the highly successful Higher Education Information Center (HEIC) in Boston, Massachusetts.

TERI staff developed this Guide as part of the replication project, not only to capture and share the experiences of the first three replication sites in Louisville (KY), St. Louis (MO), and Washington (DC), but also to serve as a blueprint for other communities interested in establishing centers. The Guide describes what a college access center is and the steps that are necessary in order to start and sustain a center.

Although each college access center has its own unique characteristics, all the centers include the following features:

- city-wide open access to anyone interested in assistance, while targeting students who are the first generation in their families to go to college, without restrictions based on neighborhood, income, ethnicity, or other factors
- a major role for public schools
- strong links to local higher education institutions
- programs and services tailored to specific local needs and requirements
- and a community-based, collaborative effort among the diverse groups concerned with postsecondary access

In addition to describing the philosophy and the process used to mount a successful center, the Guide also serves as an introduction to the Toolkit, which is another part of the replication project. The Toolkit contains specific descriptions of fully operational community-based centers, as well as numerous examples of actual materials used to plan, start, and sustain a center. It will be useful to prospective centers because it is designed to add clarity to a complex undertaking—showing what is possible and what is happening at centers throughout the country.

There are two other parts of the replication project. One is a research paper that outlines the benefits of college access centers and outreach programs. The other is an evaluation of the effectiveness of the centers described in this Guide in addressing the needs of low-income youth and their families for college planning information and assistance. The assessment will document the viability of college access centers as a key strategy in promoting college going among low-income populations. The findings will inform policymakers and funders of the potential of the center model to substantially increase college going among low-income students and those who are the first generation in their families to go to college.

TERI has entered into a partnership with the National College Access Network (NCAN), a national non-profit organization that has a similar mission—advancing access to college for low-income and under-represented students. The goal of the partnership is to facilitate the development, support, and success of community-based programs that provide college planning information, advice, and, in some instances, scholarships.
For more information about this partnership or for print copies of the Guide, Toolkit, research paper, or evaluation, please contact Judy Allen, at TERI, 617-426-0681, extension 1-4332 or allen@teri.org. For access to materials on the web, please visit the NCAN website at www.collegeaccess.org.
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See the inside back cover for Center Contact Information
“When I walked out of the center, I felt excited and confident. Things were in motion. I knew I was on my way. Opportunity was going to come.”

A student visitor to the Boston Higher Education Information Center
INTRODUCTION

Students from low-income families and those who are the first generation in their families to attend college face a formidable array of obstacles to higher education access and success. Recent studies have shown that not all of these obstacles are financial. Barriers also include the following: inadequate academic preparation; a lack of college, career, and financial aid information and advising; a scarcity of strong role models; and low expectations. As a result, such students lag far behind middle- and upper-income students in college enrollment and graduation rates. Only 50% of 18-24 year olds with family incomes below $25,000 attend college, as compared with 90% from families with incomes above $75,000. Students from high-income families are 15 times more likely to have completed a bachelor’s degree than those from low-income families.

On the positive side, low-income students who do get information on college and financial aid, see a counselor for help with college planning and academic preparation, and anticipate receiving some type of grant aid are more likely than their peers to attend college.

Compounding the problem for low-income and first-generation students is the fact that there is a gap in their access to and use of the Internet. A 1999 U.S. Department of Commerce study found that 34% of households with annual incomes below $35,000 have home access to the Internet versus 78% of households with annual incomes over $75,000. One hopeful sign relates to the use of technology in community access centers. The U.S. Department of Commerce reports that those groups that lack access to technology at home or at work are making good use of community access centers.

In an effort to improve the college-going rate of low-income students and those who are the first generation in their families to attend college, The Education Resources Institute (TERI) embarked on a college access center replication project, funded by the Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund (WRD) in 1995. The project involved establishing community-based college access centers across the country modeled after the Higher Education Information Center in Boston. TERI led the effort to start college access centers in three cities: Louisville (KY), St. Louis (MO), and Washington (DC). Several years later, aided by a second grant from WRD, TERI assisted with the development of three new centers in Charlotte (NC), Milwaukee (WI), and San Francisco (CA).

This Guide provides a description and analysis of the development of the first three centers and a related set of lessons and recommendations drawn from the project. The lessons learned and recommendations focus on strategies for creating and institutionalizing community-based college information and advising services and resources. They are intended to guide planning and implementation by those wishing to create college access centers in their communities and to inform funders, policymakers, and others interested in promoting college access.
Higher Education Information Center (HEIC)

The Origins of the Project

Boston’s Higher Education Information Center (HEIC) serves as a model for the three centers started under TERI’s replication initiative.

Funded originally with less than $150,000 from private, government, and university sources, HEIC opened at the Boston Public Library in late 1984. It began with three programs: the Boston Educational Opportunity Center (EOC), a federally funded TRIO program that helps low-income adults pursue postsecondary education; a statewide toll-free telephone line providing information on college and career opportunities; and outreach activities targeting middle school students in the Boston Public Schools.

Over the next decade, the HEIC grew into a multi-service college access agency. Today, the center offers a wide array of content, including information and advising regarding college selection, college admissions, financial aid and scholarship opportunities, the educational requirements of various careers, high school course selection, and other topics. Young people and adults can get information through many vehicles: print materials, on-line resources, one-on-one advising, and workshops. HEIC offers services throughout the city: at the Boston Public Library, in the public schools, and in numerous community-based sites. This unique collaboration between business, government, and the community has helped literally hundreds of thousands of Boston-area residents, many of whom never expected to continue their education beyond high school, to become college students and graduates, and to begin promising professional careers.

In 1995, TERI received a $1.7 million grant from the WRD to replicate the HEIC and its services in several other cities. TERI managed and supported the replication of the HEIC in three other cities and provided technical assistance to these centers and to other cities interested in replicating the center model. Subsequently, in 1999, WRD awarded TERI an additional $900,000 to bring the center concept to scale by replicating the Boston center in new cities, developing resources to assist additional centers, conducting an external evaluation of four currently operating centers, and building support for long-term public and private funding of community-based college access centers.
First Three Replication Sites: Background and Selection

To select the first three cities that would receive grants to establish college access centers, TERI convened a six-member panel which included three college access practitioners, two TERI staff members, and the WRD program officer. TERI developed and disseminated a detailed request for proposals (RFP), resulting in nine proposals which the panel evaluated on the basis of the following five general criteria:

- Capacity to provide college information and advising services
- Track record of working collaboratively
- Commitment and/or identification of additional funders and sources of in-kind support
- Appropriateness and feasibility of the proposed activities
- Designation of an appropriate local nonprofit with the capacity to receive and manage the grant

Panel members also looked for the involvement of the local public schools, the applicant’s ability to build on existing programs, and a documented and compelling need in the community for college counseling services. Based on its analysis and discussion, TERI selected three sites that encompass three adaptations of the HEIC model:

- **Louisville, KY**—A center integrated with a federally funded TRIO program allowing for the leveraging of federal resources to serve many more students than was possible with TRIO funding alone.
- **St. Louis, MO**—A center embedded in a multi-faceted social service organization, the Urban League of St. Louis, allowing young people and their families using the center to benefit from various other services that can also help them in overcoming barriers to higher education.
- **Washington, DC**—A center established by a consortium of higher education institutions, housed in a large, centrally located public library, making college access services broadly accessible for people throughout a major urban area.
Louisville, Kentucky

Kentuckiana College Access Center (KCAC)

Louisville has a metropolitan area population of almost 700,000. Approximately 23% are African American and almost 3% are Hispanic or Asian, and the immigrant population is increasing. According to the 2000 Kids Count study data, 65% of Louisville’s African-American children and 42% of its Asian-American children live in poverty. In addition, 47% of graduating seniors are not pursuing postsecondary education.

In 1995, with the mayor’s interest and with support from other community leaders, two city organizations—Kentuckiana Metroversity, a nonprofit association of seven colleges, universities, and seminaries in greater Louisville, and the Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS)—took action. Together they recruited a broad collaborative group of 15 area colleges and universities, business organizations, and community programs committed to organizing a center in order to increase students’ opportunities to attend college. Kentuckiana Metroversity agreed to function as the lead organization to build the center.

Originally housed in a local alternative high school, the Kentuckiana College Access Center (KCAC) is now on the downtown Jefferson Community College campus located on a main artery for public transportation. The center is housed with myriad other career, college access/college readiness, and job placement services.

The KCAC director manages the daily operations of the center with a combined staff of 18 full-time and two part-time staff. KCAC maintains a flexible schedule including night and weekend hours.

KCAC offers a wide array of services for students and parents including campus visits, education and career fairs, college admissions and financial aid workshops, mentoring, programs broadcast on local cable, career advising, and access to a variety of college and career materials. Three TRIO programs—Talent Search, EOC, and TRIO Dissemination—are integral components of the center. All programs include parent information. An outreach coordinator continues to educate the community about the availability of center services through workshops at local churches, schools, and community organizations and activities.

The KCAC partners with local postsecondary institutions, which contribute financial and in-kind resources. Additionally, local foundation support and the TRIO Dissemination grant enable KCAC to extend services into a refugee resettlement community, an inner-city learning center, and the Urban League of Louisville’s youth program division.
St. Louis, Missouri
College Resource Center (CRC)

The total population of the St. Louis metropolitan area is 2.7 million; nearly 55% of the city’s 450,000 residents are minorities. The public schools have a dropout rate of more than 63%, with only about 45% of the graduating seniors demonstrating interest in higher education by taking a college admissions test. Eighty percent (80%) of public school students come from low-income backgrounds, and 75% are African American. The public schools have a significant shortage of guidance counselors to work effectively with students regarding college/career choices.

Since 1993, civic leaders in St. Louis have worked to improve college attendance rates among city students. The Urban League received a U.S. Department of Education grant for a small college information and referral center to help disadvantaged students in six St. Louis public schools. This work expanded in 1994 to include advising parents and students in the St. Louis Internship Program, a job readiness program sponsored by the city, and again in 1996 with the establishment of the St. Louis College Resource Center (CRC).

The CRC is located in the Urban League offices in downtown St. Louis, accessible by bus and light rail. One of the League’s vice presidents serves as the center’s manager, and two full-time counselors carry out the center’s day-to-day operations. The Urban League provides resources and facilities, which include center space, meeting rooms, phone answering, and support services. The center is open evening and weekend hours.

The CRC provides information about college and/or financial aid to students and parents through one-on-one advising, a computer database, and reference materials. The center also manages two college scholarship programs for local teens. Evening and weekend parent workshops, both at the center and in the community, focus on topics including the college planning process, financial aid planning, and the realities of college life. In addition, the center partners with St. Louis University to provide an extensive coaching program on college admissions tests.

Fourteen volunteer community organizations including colleges, foundations, and public schools, as well as education authorities and the mayor’s office, support the center. While the Urban League has major responsibility for providing ongoing assistance, two key organizations have taken the lead in center support—the St. Louis Rams and Emerson Electric. In addition, a partnership with the federal GEAR UP program (Gaining Early Awareness & Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) has enabled the center to expand its services to focus on middle school youth and their families to prepare much earlier for college. The Missouri Higher Education Loan Authority (MOHELA) originally made a three-year commitment of $20,000 annually to the center and has continued its financial support.
Metropolitan Washington (DC) is home to approximately four million people with 523,000 living within the city limits. While the metro area is approximately two-thirds white, more than two thirds of the city’s population are minorities, the vast majority African American. The city houses almost 50% of the region’s residents who live in poverty. Almost 50% of the DC public school students who begin 9th grade never complete the 12th grade.

Washington’s College Information Center (CIC) is housed in the main branch of the DC Public Library, easily accessible by public transportation and with free parking. Facilities include space for the CIC on the first floor of the library and additional office space on the third floor for staff. The CIC reference collection includes a wide range of print and electronic resources on postsecondary, career, and financial aid topics, including information for adult learners and graduate students. CIC staff has also developed many information sheets and booklets on specialized topics that are distributed widely to students, families, and schools. The center is open during evening and weekend hours to allow maximum opportunities for students and parents to visit. The original staff included one full-time director, with volunteers from local colleges and universities recruited to assist with on-site advising activities. Subsequently, with the addition of the Educational Talent Search program and local grant-funded projects, the staff now includes five full-time and two part-time staff and 25 volunteers.

The CIC offers a variety of services including academic and financial aid advising, a telephone information line, on-line information resources, seminars and workshops for students and families, and in-service training for staff from community-based organizations. In addition, the center houses Kids to College, Talent Search, and a special project that provides resource materials and training for the DC School-to-Career initiative. The center also provides outreach activities in community settings such as schools, youth programs, churches, libraries, and community centers. The center’s first satellite site opened in October 2000 in the Benning Branch Library in the northeast part of the city and is staffed two afternoons per week.

As the CIC sponsor, the Consortium of Universities of the Washington Metropolitan Area assumes responsibility for the personnel and financial functions. In addition, support comes from the U.S. Department of Education, the DC School-to-Career initiative, Sallie Mae, and several local foundations, with the in-kind contribution of space provided by the DC Public Library.
DESCRIPTION OF IMPLEMENTATION AT THE THREE CENTERS

Based on the experience of the first three replication sites, TERI has identified a number of key areas that communities considering the creation of college access centers need to address in order to establish a center.

These issues, and the implementation strategies with each, provide a useful framework for moving forward in an organized, efficient, and effective way.

Services provided by community-based college access centers include phone hotlines, one-on-one counseling, and access to a wide variety of materials that are helpful in the college application and financial aid processes.
Selection of a Lead Agency

Establishing and sustaining a college access center requires creating and managing an effective infrastructure for delivering services, recruiting partners and facilitating their meaningful participation, and securing funding and other resource support, particularly funding that is ongoing. In light of these requirements, the lead agency for a center should have the following:

- A mission that includes or is strongly consistent with promoting college access
- A positive reputation in the community and a record of successful collaboration with other organizations
- A capacity for advocacy that is both passionate and politically sensitive
- An interest not only in starting programs but also in growing and sustaining them
- A commitment to spearhead the efforts to raise funds that will sustain the center beyond startup funding

College access centers provide students with a wide variety of college materials, along with staff available to offer assistance.
Various Approaches to Governance Issues

Centers must explicitly address issues of leadership, governance, accountability, and ownership in the planning phases. Within any organizational structure, clarity of purpose for the center’s services and leadership structure and clarity of roles for both individuals and institutions are of the utmost importance.

The leadership must consider a number of questions in designing the collaborative structure of a college access center. These include:

- What organization will serve as the institutional home for the center?
- What leadership role will the “institutional home” play, particularly with regard to fundraising?
- Through what vehicles will the center link to other relevant programs, organizations, and initiatives?
- What are the specific programmatic, organizational, and financial goals of those linkages?
- Who is ultimately accountable for the center’s success, and what are the parameters of that accountability?
- How does that accountability relate to expectations to be involved in generating funding and in-kind support for the center?
- How are decisions made, both short term and long term, about the direction of the center’s outreach and service delivery activities?

The first three replication sites have taken different approaches to these issues. The KCAC in Louisville is integrated with three federally funded TRIO programs, allowing it to leverage federal funds to expand the number of students served. Metroversity (the administrative umbrella for both the center and the TRIO programs) has assumed the leadership role, particularly in fundraising, and is responsible and accountable for the center’s success. A second group has been formed called the Auxiliary Committee of the KCAC. This committee is composed of representatives from community organizations, churches, school systems, universities that utilize or interface with KCAC services, and staff. The committee has three subcommittees—Youth, Adult, and Community Organizations. The responsibility of the committee is to assist KCAC in meeting its goals and devise strategies for an exchange of services between and among committee members and with KCAC.

In St. Louis, because the CRC is embedded into the Urban League, young people who use the center can benefit from a range of other programs and services that help them overcome barriers to postsecondary education. Under this model, the Urban League’s program and management staff and its organizational leadership have taken responsibility for the center’s operational direction, for sustainability, and for the development of collaborations with organizations and institutions in the community. As the center’s work has grown, Urban League board members have become more involved in local sustainability efforts.

In Washington (DC), the CIC grew out of the efforts of a consortium of higher education institutions to establish a broad-based partnership of organizations and institutions interested in expanding and improving access to information about higher education opportunities for local residents. The CIC operates as a program of the Consortium of Universities of the Washington Metropolitan Area with its own advisory board composed of city and corporate leaders who assist with fundraising and sustainability.
Development of a College Access Partnership

Cities find it helpful in launching new centers to have the support of a broad-based community partnership as part of their implementation plan. These partnerships function as forums for general discussions of college access issues and generate belief in, and support for, the center. In some cases, subgroups of the partnership focus specifically on operational issues or efforts to secure sustainable funding.

There are many potential partners in every community. Extensive outreach to community organizations, associations, and agencies, to higher education institutions, and to public schools can result in a broad-based collaboration that provides the center with additional expertise, enhanced public awareness, wide-ranging support, and possible funding sources. Potential partners include:

- Public schools
- TRIO and GEAR UP programs
- Public libraries
- Mayor’s office
- Local AFL-CIO chapters
- Business organizations
- State departments of public instruction
- Community organizations
- Community foundations
- Colleges, universities, and other postsecondary institutions
- Urban Leagues
- Higher education loan authorities
- Civic leaders
- YMCAs
- Local scholarship foundations

In Louisville, the leadership convened a collaborative specifically to manage and coordinate the development of the center. The collaborative has helped involve postsecondary institutions that are not members of Metroversity, the lead agency, including two-year career colleges. This partnership has proven valuable, providing ongoing leadership on advisory and advocacy committees of the center.

In St. Louis, the collaboration provides opportunities for networking among college access professionals and has served as a catalyst for program development and collaborations between and among committee members. Participants have become involved in day-to-day center activities.

In Washington (DC), several organizations involved in promoting college access formed the Higher Education Information Partnership. One of the Partnership’s first tasks was to address the low postsecondary enrollment rate for low-income students, and the partners agreed to participate in the creation of the CIC. As the center has developed into a functioning entity, the Higher Education Information Partnership has continued its broader mission of addressing issues that affect access to postsecondary education in the DC area.
Understanding Individual and Institutional Commitment

In the early stages of implementation, collaborating organizations and institutions may demonstrate a lack of understanding about the resource commitment that they need to make to support the center. It often happens that organizations enthusiastically support a funding proposal as a show of good faith and collegiality, and they anticipate that the details of their programmatic, organizational, and financial involvement will be specified if and when the proposal is funded.

Another dynamic that can limit a collaborator’s ability to follow through on commitments made during the proposal development phase is that the guarantee of time and resources made by individuals does not necessarily lead to a corresponding commitment by the institutions they represent. As a result, the resources provided by an institution’s representative can be limited because there is no mechanism to broaden the support and involvement of the partner institution. In fact, without institutional support and commitment, often the representative from the institution will be the only participant. Also, the resources pledged by an individual can be precarious; if that person leaves his or her position, the resources often disappear as well.

It is essential that center leaders solicit institutional assurances at the highest levels within the partner organizations very early in the planning and implementation phases, and work with the committed and active collaborators to transform their individual participation into institutional commitment and resources.

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Postsecondary Institutions: Essential Partners

Postsecondary institutions are essential partners in establishing and sustaining college access centers. They can provide funding, facilities, volunteers, expertise, advocacy, credibility, and leadership. A college access center’s staff and leadership need to educate colleges and universities about the value that centers offer, both to the community and to their institutions.

In doing so, center staff needs to analyze and understand the orientation of postsecondary institutions toward such issues as minority and low-income student recruitment, their resource flexibility, their capacity and inclination to support community-based initiatives, and their specific needs that college access centers can meet. Larger, private institutions, for example, often recruit students nationally and internationally, and so do not perceive a significant recruitment benefit from college information centers that target local youth. By contrast, community colleges, public colleges and universities, and private colleges and technical institutions that draw students primarily from their local area express great interest in the centers’ potential recruitment resources.

If postsecondary institutions are motivated by the student recruitment benefit, they should be encouraged to be specific about meaningful objectives related to their interests. The center then should clearly document the programs that help the institutions reach their articulated goals. Cultivation should be done on an individual, institution-by-institution basis to achieve maximum long-term commitments. Postsecondary support is critical, and efforts should be made to ensure college and university involvement in, and commitment to, the center.
Importance and Challenges of Collaborating with School Systems

A top priority for college access centers must be developing a positive collaborative relationship with the local school system. Schools can be a very effective means through which to reach students and parents; they collect a wealth of student data that can support program planning and evaluation; and they are important partners in sustainability efforts because they have access to a wide variety of public funding from state and federal sources. Relationships with school systems must be built over time, based on a clearly understood mutual benefit, and strengthened by a demonstrated record of high-quality services and results.

Strong collaborative relationships between a center and the school system leadership and staff can generate important opportunities to do the following:

- Provide training and professional development for school teachers and guidance staff
- Create revenue-generating contracts for the centers to provide direct services to students including:
  - advice and direction with identifying appropriate postsecondary programs
  - assistance with admissions and financial aid forms
  - career exploration and advising
  - SAT/ACT preparation and academic support
  - early awareness activities with middle school students
- Present school-site workshops and information sessions to students and parents
- Develop joint service delivery and/or fundraising activities

Schools can benefit substantially from partnering with a center. A key indicator of a school system’s success for parents, teachers, administrators, and policymakers is the percentage of graduates who pursue postsecondary education, and school systems welcome resources that can advance that goal. In addition, schools are increasingly involved in addressing a wide range of student issues such as violence, pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, substance abuse, and suicide. As a result, teachers, guidance counselors, and student support services staff frequently have less time for college and career advising, and may seek community-based resources that can provide those complementary services.

With budget cuts, school guidance counselors often are burdened with excessive administrative duties, such as scheduling, testing, and discipline; as a result, they have less time to provide in-depth career and college planning assistance to students, particularly those who need extra support and motivation. In addition, most counselors do not have time to stay current with the rapid changes in college admissions and financial aid requirements because of their numerous responsibilities and demanding schedules. Finally, schools do not have the resources to sustain ongoing contact with local postsecondary institutions, or to organize educational awareness activities, campus visits, or other relevant college planning programs. College access centers can serve as the vehicle for creating and developing these important links between schools and postsecondary institutions.
Center leaders encounter several challenges in working to build positive relationships with local school systems. Guidance counselors may feel somewhat threatened because they perceive the center as an external entity doing work that is within their jurisdiction, rather than providing services that complement the assistance they provide students. Inner-city school faculty and administrators also may believe that college planning is not a priority because their students have no realistic expectation of going to college, for both academic and financial reasons. Because their students have many other needs, some school leaders think that college advising is not essential and are reluctant to invest resources in such programs.

- Relationships with school systems must be built over time, based on a clearly understood mutual benefit, and strengthened by a demonstrated record of high-quality services and results.

Center staff should assess the climate within their community and develop strategies that target the particular needs of the local population. Emphasizing ways that centers can support or enhance in-school efforts, including the types of joint ventures highlighted at the beginning of this section, may help school staff to view the center in a collaborative rather than competitive light.
The Identity and Location of the Center

In addition to a reputation as a source of high-quality and current information regarding college planning and financial aid, a college access center must develop an identity that is welcoming, a location that is easy to access, and an approach to service delivery that is user friendly and respectful of the needs of its various target populations.

An important part of this identity is the name of the center, which needs to be clear and inviting. It should be carefully considered and determined during the planning process to ensure that it accurately reflects the services provided by the center. The Kentuckiana College Access Center (KCAC), for example, conveys to the public the wide range of services and programs that the center provides in order to assist people with college planning.

Another important part of this identity is location and physical facility. The center should be in an area that users can easily, conveniently, and safely access and where there is already a large volume of foot traffic.

The Boston HEIC is centrally located on the lower level of the Boston Public Library in downtown Boston. There is ample space for print resources, computer work stations, and one-on-one advising. Services are available seven days a week, including evenings, and the center is convenient to public transportation. In addition to the library, the Boston HEIC provides services through satellite centers at the Vietnamese-American and Asian-American civic associations, the Roxbury Multi-Service Center, Bunker Hill Community College, and two churches.

In Louisville, the center is housed in a newly renovated building owned by Jefferson Community College, and it has become a "community center" for postsecondary and career information. The space accommodates print resources and computer workstations. The center is located in the heart of the city, easily accessible by public transportation.

In St. Louis, the CRC, located at the Urban League offices, has space for print and electronic resources, advising, small workshops, and staff offices. Emerson Electric donated funds to expand the computer lab, and currently there are 15 terminals for after-school tutoring and college access information. The center’s association with the Urban League initially raised concerns about its ability to serve the full range of potential users. However, it has been able to attract many youth through its school affiliations and serves a mix of white, African-American, and Hispanic youth.

The Greater Washington CIC is situated on the public library’s main level in a dedicated area in the young adult section, and has ample room for print and electronic resources, as well as advising and one-on-one assistance. The CIC satellite site at a branch library in northeast Washington is open eight hours per week.
Basic Approach to Service Delivery and Outreach

Centers provide comprehensive college access programming to a broad range of students and adults that includes the following components:

Information
- Print and electronic information resources about careers, college exploration and planning, and financial aid
- Early awareness and pre-college planning targeted at middle and high school students
- Workshops that highlight specific topics within the college preparation and planning process and resources for making college affordable

Advising
- One-on-one advising about college admissions and financial aid, high school course selection, general readiness for college, and the educational requirements of various careers

Practical Support
- Assistance with college searches, admissions applications, and financial aid forms
- Academic tutoring and SAT/ACT preparation through grant-funded programs such as Talent Search and through referrals to other provider organizations
- Writing and study skills workshops, both at the center and in the community
- Fee waivers for admissions and financial aid applications and admissions tests

Experiential Activities
- Campus visits
- College fairs
- On-site information sessions that bring admissions counselors to the center for informal discussions about their college or university

Training and Technical Support
- Training to staff and advisors at schools, youth-serving community organizations, churches, and other pre-college access programs

College access centers conduct early awareness workshops in the community, both as an outreach and recruitment strategy for center-based services, and as educational opportunities for students and parents. They also sponsor college and career fairs and community events designed to heighten the awareness of students, parents, and teachers about postsecondary education.

In many cases, the most challenging barriers to college access for students and their families are low expectations and the feeling that college is not a possibility. Many families have all but ruled out college because they feel their child is not academically prepared, and they assume they cannot afford the costs of a college education. Outreach workshops challenge these assumptions, help young people and their families develop positive and realistic expectations regarding the importance and attainability of college, and provide them with essential information about the steps involved in planning to attend college. Workshops cover topics such as the following:
- The relationship between postsecondary education and long-term earnings
- The range of postsecondary options
- General college admissions requirements and financial aid eligibility guidelines
- Financial aid and scholarship opportunities
- Practical tips for completing admissions applications
- The realities of college life
- The process of conducting a scholarship search
## SERVICES PROVIDED BY COLLEGE ACCESS CENTERS

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# For the period 9/00-8/01
## For the period 9/01-12/01
* Smaller number served due to staff reductions
** Includes telephone assistance
Outreach: Information Dissemination and Recruitment of Users

Aggressive and strategic outreach activities are critical for college access centers to attract diverse users, many of whom will not come to a central location without encouragement. Outreach activities include general promotional activities, informational workshops, participation in college fairs and other community events, and collaboration with staff from youth and family service organizations.

Centers develop outreach efforts based on several considerations. Outreach strategies primarily target under-served and hard-to-reach segments of the community so that services reach racially and ethnically diverse youth and adults, especially those who are low income and first generation in their families to attend college. Ideally, outreach also should include a "training of trainers" component to enable the staff of community-based organizations to provide basic college information and awareness programs for their constituencies.

The Louisville center created an outreach plan that focuses on collaboration with local schools and community organizations. This collaboration helps to enhance the image of KCAC and to increase referrals to the center. It also has generated a growing demand for services and increased community visibility for the center. KCAC works with 56 community-based programs including Black Achievers and the Girl Scouts. It also conducts many workshops and presentations in schools, provides ACT and SAT preparation classes, and presents education awareness and financial aid workshops at various organizations, college fairs, and other youth-oriented events. In addition, KCAC co-sponsors a large local college and career fair held annually at the Jefferson County Fairgrounds and promotes its services at large community events targeting youth.

The St. Louis outreach plan focuses on activities in schools, linkages with youth internship and summer jobs programs, and collaborations with community organizations and churches. The plan includes activities designed to target the Latino community and coordinates with other Urban League youth and family programs, especially several scholarship programs. The staff provides community-based awareness workshops and presentations on college planning at area high schools, local organizations, college fairs, and other youth-oriented events.

The Washington CIC uses the network of DC-area community organizations for outreach. Through the Kids to College and Talent Search programs, staff provides outreach services in schools and has created links with youth jobs programs that bring hundreds of young people to the center during the summer. Center staff has also established relationships with a number of youth-serving community-based organizations and mentoring programs in order to attract students to the CIC. In addition, with the aid of volunteers, staff conducts outreach workshops at churches and youth organizations in low-income neighborhoods. Community groups and summer

Through programs like Kids to College and Talent Search, college access center staff provides outreach services in schools and creates links with youth jobs programs that bring hundreds of young people to the center during the summer.
youth employment programs also schedule workshops at the center throughout the year.

Successful outreach generates users. However, when a center is still in the beginning phase, outreach must not create more user demand than center staff can handle effectively and well. This concern is particularly relevant for centers with small staffs. To manage the demand for services generated by successful outreach, a center can do the following:

- Increase volunteer recruitment in anticipation of major outreach activities
- Develop a formal schedule for the center (including extended day and weekend hours) so users can reserve time for workshops and/or advising
- Postpone major outreach activities if the center is operating at capacity
- Provide information services through mail, telephone, and/or the Internet
- Build the capacity of community-based organizations to provide services at their own facilities
Need to Build the Capacity to Deliver Services

By their very nature, centers are involved in outreach and information dissemination activities that, if successful, encourage students and families to want even more information and services. In the early stages of development, centers face the challenge of walking that fine line between effectively promoting their services and having the resources to meet the demand.

There are several key components that centers need to incorporate as part of building capacity before they can implement strategies for expanding capacity. They include:

- Qualified staff and volunteers who are knowledgeable about current college access resources and issues and who have strong organizational and communication skills
- A strong governance structure that supports rapid growth
- Organizational relationships that support both outreach and service delivery
- A plan that coordinates outreach efforts with staffing and service delivery capacity

Important ways that the centers have been able to expand capacity and to serve greater numbers of students and parents are by taking an integrated approach to service delivery, by incorporating federally funded programs with locally funded activities, and by collaborating with other organizations, associations, and agencies.

Several examples of how these collaborations have broadened the services that centers offer and the populations they serve come from the experiences of Boston and the three replication sites.

- The Boston center, in partnership with the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education, has developed a Think College Early web site. This site targets middle school students and raises awareness among children, parents, teachers, and counselors regarding the importance of early planning for college.

- In the early stages of development, centers face the challenge of walking that fine line between effectively promoting their services and having the resources to meet the demand.

- As a result of the Kentuckiana CAC’s outreach to agencies that serve immigrant populations, the center has established a strong working relationship with the Americana Community Center, used by immigrants from 27 countries.

- The St. Louis CRC staff provides information and advising sessions to youth in two city-sponsored summer employment programs and an ACT prep course at St. Louis University. Youth in the Urban League’s scholarship programs have used the center’s college admissions and advising services extensively. As a result, the scholarship program has grown dramatically.

- The Washington CIC created partnerships with several youth-serving organizations to maximize time spent on service delivery. The organizations bring students in small groups to the CIC for advice and assistance. This model enhances the program offered by the youth-serving organization by adding a college planning component and enables the CIC to use limited staff efficiently.

In addition, centers can apply for funding from federal programs, including TRIO and GEAR UP, that will allow them to grow their base and expand their activities. The three replication centers and Boston have received federal and other grants that have increased their capacity to provide services at schools and community sites, and also have increased the number and age range of the students they serve. Examples of the...
expanded services available as a result of integrating federal programs into the centers’ activities are described below.

- Boston’s funding from GEAR UP and Talent Search has greatly expanded the services provided and the populations served by the center. As a result of the GEAR UP grant, HEIC is able to provide mentoring, tutoring, advising, and a variety of supplemental college readiness activities for area public school students. The Talent Search program provides low-income middle and high school students with intensive advising and support around college planning onsite at the schools they attend.

- KCAC’s Talent Search program makes it possible for the center staff to serve more than 850 middle and high school students in seven schools. In addition, with a three-year TRIO Dissemination Grant from the U.S. Department of Education, the KCAC staff is able to teach community-based organizations the best practices of its Talent Search program. A local community foundation grant has assisted in staffing for the TRIO Dissemination project and added a fourth center for service delivery.

- For St. Louis, funding from GEAR UP enables the staff to present early awareness programs to 5th, 6th, and 7th graders in the city’s public schools.

- Washington’s Talent Search program has enabled the staff to expand its services and provide academic enrichment and advising and college preparation services to hundreds of DC students, not only in the schools but also at the CIC. School-to-Career funds support additional center staff working in the public schools.
Human Resource Considerations: Paid Staff, Volunteers, and Consultants

The staffing pattern for a center varies greatly, depending on available funding, the types of services that the center offers, the free services that funders and partners provide, the use of volunteers, and the number of people whom the center serves. The currently operating centers use a creative combination of paid staff, volunteers, and consultants/independent contractors to ensure they operate effectively. Volunteers are essential, particularly in starting a center, when resources are limited; consultants play important roles related to training, coaching, and supporting the center director and staff.

In order to operate effectively, a center needs at least three full-time employees as follows:

- **Director/Manager**—This person focuses on fundraising; promotes the center; supervises staff, consultants, and volunteers; and oversees center planning, implementation, and operations.
- **Counselor/Outreach Coordinator**—This person focuses on all aspects of post-secondary advising and assistance to parents and students, coordinates outreach activities, and prepares workshop curriculum, informational handouts, and promotional materials.
- **Administrative Assistant**, preferably full time—This person performs basic administrative and clerical duties, including answering the phone, handling mailings, preparing documents, and organizing and maintaining the files.

In addition, a center needs:

- **Experienced consultants**—They can provide a variety of services, including but not limited to the following: help with developing the center’s operations and internal management systems; advice on the use of technology and computer systems; fundraising and proposal writing; facilitation of assessment activities; and assistance with developing partners.
- **Volunteers**—Volunteers can be enormously helpful in enabling the center to deliver basic services. Admissions and financial aid advisors from postsecondary institutions, for example, can provide expert advice on a one-on-one basis and workshops on financial aid and the admissions and financial aid application processes.
Resource Development and the Elements of a Sustainability Strategy

There are many challenges that a center faces in securing the multiple and diverse funding sources needed in order to assure its long-term viability. Key considerations include the following:

- Role of the center’s leadership in fundraising
- Need for a multi-year plan that the center can use with numerous and varied funding sources, including those at the local, state, and federal levels
- Importance of having sufficient organizational capacity within the center to launch a long-term fundraising campaign
- Cultivation of community leaders who are/can be strong advocates for the center
- Need to document the importance of the services a center offers and the success it has had in serving the public schools and the community

A sustainability strategy is not just a plan to send an updated version of the center’s funding proposal to as many sources and prospective funders as possible. Rather, the center’s organizational capacity must be developed to position it for effective long-term fundraising. A number of activities designed to cultivate funding sources should precede any specific request. Also, a vision of a broad array of funding sources is necessary. Activities on all these fronts, with related targets and benchmarks, must be part of a multi-year plan. Finally, a center must first demonstrate its importance and value by documenting students’ need for college access services and the center’s ability to meet that need in order to secure long-term, in-kind, and financial resources from collaborators and funders.

Several elements are required in order to build organizational capacity. First, a center must have staff, volunteers, and/or consultants with skills in proposal preparation for government and philanthropic funding, donor research, program development, marketing and public relations, data analysis, and/or graphic design. In addition, the center needs systems for collecting and managing data, and mechanisms for using data to cultivate prospective donors. Finally, staff and/or consultants must be specifically designated or assigned to fundraising and marketing functions. While the center director can oversee the tasks necessary for effective fundraising, additional support is necessary to successfully carry out and complete the work.

The director’s strong leadership is particularly important in the development of both short-term and long-term resources. The director, with assistance from advisory board members, must develop and implement an aggressive fundraising plan that targets diversified funding sources. The director solicits prospective donors; pursues federal, state, and local funding sources; investigates private foundations and corporate support; explores memberships and sponsorships; and builds relationships with other potential funders for future and long-term funding.
Types of Advisory Groups

Various types of advisory boards and committees can be very important and helpful to centers. Some advisory boards focus on developing strategies to secure short- and long-term funding and in-kind support and to influence policy and resource allocation. Membership on these boards usually includes foundation, corporation, and agency leaders who have stature in their communities, who are excellent resource people, and who represent organizations that, ideally, will be interested in funding the center. There are also advisory groups that do not fundraise but do provide direction for the center regarding site selection, program offerings, and the coordination and expansion of services. In addition, there are marketing and public relations advisory groups whose purpose it is to make the center more visible to city leaders, prospective funders, and influential corporate heads. Advisory board/committee members bring experience, contacts, expertise, and credibility, as well as enthusiasm about and advocacy for the center; therefore, they are very valuable resources. Because of their importance, center leadership needs to choose advisory board/committee members carefully and use them wisely.

Demonstration of the Need for Annual Support

For the cultivation of significant donors, center leadership must develop a case statement for support. A good case statement includes elements of a future vision on two fronts. First, a compelling vision of the center’s future should include center-based and community-based services, important collaborative relationships, and plans to expand the various program components over a three-to-five-year period. In addition, a vision of the center’s future funding should be described, such as the projected mix of public and private financial and in-kind support.

A case statement for college access centers includes the following components:

- The importance of postsecondary education especially for low-income and under-represented groups
- The lack of similar services in the community

- The demonstrated need for and impact of information/advising services on college access
- The commitment and credibility of the lead organization and partners
- The service delivery model and its connection to goals and objectives
- Center utilization and impact data
- The role of financial and in-kind support in the center’s envisioned revenue mix, and a vision of financial sustainability
- The long-range vision of the center’s role and impact

Center leadership should disseminate the case statement to donor constituencies. It is also a reference document that informs all fundraising materials and presentations. The case statement can support both fundraising and partner recruitment.
Cultivation of Donors

Once the case statement is complete, center leadership needs to conduct an analysis of donor constituencies and individual prospects and develop a donor cultivation plan. This plan includes developing annual and long-term fundraising targets; identifying potential individual, government, foundation, and corporate prospects and the appropriate staff to cultivate these prospects; determining the activities appropriate in order to reach each potential donor; and providing a timetable for implementing cultivation activities. Cultivation requires leaders, i.e., prominent members of the community, preferably donors themselves, who commit to contacting major prospects, educating them about college access, listening to their interests, and finally, requesting appropriate support. As part of the sustainability effort, the leadership must include individuals who can provide access for the center staff to key donor constituencies. Recruiting advisory board members who are credible community leaders with stature, have in-depth community knowledge, and know many prominent contacts whom they are willing to approach for support is critical.

Center leadership must monitor plans for each prospect and donor constituency and ensure that all board members/partners are accountable for the fundraising activities to which they have committed. Staff and consultants’ roles are important, but the sustainability effort will ultimately succeed on the basis of community leaders who step forward as champions of the center.

Incorporation of Diverse Funding Resources

Successful sustainability depends on the centers’ ability to attract funding and in-kind support from diverse sources that potentially include the following:

- In-kind staff and infrastructure support from the host institution and the partners
- Private philanthropic support, especially those with college scholarship programs, including foundation and corporate grants, corporate sponsorships, individual donors, United Way, and other federated funds
- Contracts with employers to provide services to their employees
- College and university support
- Government support including:
  - federal and state college access programs such as TRIO and GEAR-UP
  - grants from quasi-public higher education finance entities (usually at the statewide level), state boards of higher education, and departments of education (K-12)
  - school system support, most often from staff development and/or student services line items
  - tax-base and grant funds that flow through local municipalities and school districts

Accessing a sufficiently wide array of funding opportunities requires broad-based community partners and leaders serving as active members of a center’s advisory board. Some funding opportunities require the center to develop a collaboration or joint venture with a partner who is eligible for certain types of funding.
Public-Private Partnerships

While private support is an important resource for program start-up, it is necessary to have a long-term strategy for ongoing support, ideally including public funds, service contracts, and in-kind support to augment private grants from corporations and foundations. Active involvement of both public and private partners creates opportunities wherein one component of a center’s revenue base can “leverage” additional resources.

Public funding is important because it can provide substantial ongoing support that serves as the foundation of the organization’s financial stability. TRIO, which already has been mentioned, is an excellent source of funding. Other possible federal funding sources for centers to explore include Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Health and Human Services (HHS), the Department of Justice, and the Department of Commerce. Other examples of public funding sources include the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education and the Missouri Higher Education Loan Authority (MOHELA), the state’s higher education finance agency (a quasi-public entity).

All of the centers have had significant in-kind support, particularly the physical space for the centers. In Boston, Louisville, and Washington, the public schools, community colleges, and/or the public library systems donate space and related in-kind costs.

Fee-for-Service Contracts

Fee-for-service contracts with public and private entities are an important part of the centers’ sustainability strategies. Kentuckiana CAC provides services under contract to a local youth foundation. In St. Louis, the Urban League contract with the city to manage its Summer Work Program for youth included the CRC’s providing college information and advising services. In Washington, the CIC received funds to establish in-school college resource centers. In Boston, the Boston Public Schools contracts with the HEIC to support outreach in the public schools. In addition, the Boston Private Industry Council (PIC) contracts with the HEIC to provide advising services to entry-level health care providers.

The centers have worked hard to ensure their long-term sustainability. They have used consultants for proposal preparation, donor research and identification, marketing, and strategy development. Committed staff and community and volunteer leaders attract public and private support. The centers effectively use data to make their case and develop fee-for-service contracts. The centers have shown substantial results, particularly in federal funding, foundation and corporate support, and fee-based contracts.
## CENTER FUNDING SOURCES

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*Examples of in-kind contributions include space for the center, volunteer hours to staff center, computer wiring, and colleges hosting youth at camps and workshops.
Lessons Learned and Recommendations

The experiences of the replication centers have generated important lessons that college access centers in other communities can apply to their design and implementation.

Importance of a Planning Phase Prior to Implementation and the Challenges of Starting a Center

When creating a college access center, particularly one that involves a diverse group of partners, the importance of planning prior to implementation cannot be overstated. In establishing a center, the leadership needs to develop plans appropriate to community needs for the structure and model of the center; governance, including the role of the partner organizations; documentation and program evaluation systems; and long-term sustainability. In addition, prior to start-up, it is imperative to establish clarity and consensus among the participating organizations concerning the expectations of individual partners to commit resources. Without this clarity, efforts to create college access centers can be delayed or derailed.

Key Planning Steps

1. Clarify the model for service delivery. Determine what services the center will offer and how the center will deliver them, i.e., one-on-one advising, workshops, the Web.
2. Establish a timetable for implementation.
3. Locate space, furniture, and equipment, donated if possible. Determine use of space and facility.
4. Determine needs for technology and how to acquire it. Assemble print and electronic resources.
5. Design and implement administrative and record-keeping systems. Set service goals initially and develop simple forms to determine if center is meeting goals.

Key Implementation Steps

1. Build and institutionalize committees and advisory boards necessary to ensure a center’s long-term sustainability. Involve staff, planning committee members, and partner representatives as members on committees, such as program development and sustainability.
2. Develop and implement plans for promoting the center’s services throughout the community and to targeted segments within it.
3. Recruit and orient staff and volunteers. Conduct extensive outreach, including advertising the center and sending notices to higher education institutions and community organizations, in order to attract qualified staff and interested volunteers.
4. Build strong relationships with community organizations for outreach service delivery. Involve community organization staff on committees and the planning team.

Centers need a clear sense of the priorities and sequencing of these activities during the startup phase and a multi-year strategic plan that ties all
strands of activity together. They also need adequate staff at the beginning of the implementa-
tion phase in order to successfully launch a center.

Planning and implementation activities can be daunting and significantly more time consuming than they appear. Examples of activities that often take longer than imagined are outreach to partner organizations, management systems development, staff hiring, collaborations with the local school system, and the numerous facilities issues. During start-up, the center’s leadership group must meet frequently to manage these responsibilities and ensure that all of the important activities receive the planning time and resources they require.

Time Required for Successful Implementation

Starting up, developing partnerships, creating visibility, and securing sustainable funding are time-consuming, multi-year endeavors. Systems for management and coordination and trusting, productive relationships between partners, both of which are necessary for effective collaboration, must be tested and refined over time. Centers also need to establish a track record of providing quality services in order to support effective partner recruitment and fundraising. Building such a record takes time. Centers need two to three years to develop a service delivery and management infrastructure, to build both an effective governing partnership and the other necessary collaborative relationships, and to cultivate funding partners. Unexpected problems, mid-course corrections, and staff turnover can affect this timeframe.
Use of Technology to Enhance the Center's Work

Technological resources play an ever-increasing role in the way that centers deliver information and resources. The Internet, Web, and other technological tools offer the potential for increasing both the number of people a center can serve and the scope of information that the center can provide. The choices made in this area are particularly critical because centers target under-served families who are more likely to lack access to technology and the Internet at home or at work.

As part of the planning process, a community needs to make careful decisions about the role of computers, the Internet, and other technological tools in the work of its center. Center planners need to address several questions.

• What is the center’s philosophical commitment to the use of computers and technology? How will computers, the Internet, and other technological resources add value to the work of the center? Is their use integrated with the center’s goals and strategies?
• How can the center fund technological resources? To what extent is the center willing to invest in hardware and software both initially and on a long-term basis? Will the center hire staff or contract with outside vendors to develop and implement its technology? Will it gather its own information on colleges, financial aid, scholarships, and related areas and/or license or purchase software?
• How will the center ensure the privacy of information, particularly if staff uses tracking elements available through software to collect evaluation data?

• How mobile is the information that centers will offer through computers and the Internet? Are there plans to make the information accessible beyond the four walls of the center? If so, how and where? In addition to the center, will users be able to access information at home, schools, local libraries, and/or community centers?
• To what extent will center users, both youth and adults, have to be self directed in their use of technology? To what extent will staff be available to assist them? What provisions are there for initial and on-going staff training so that the use of technological resources can be maximized?

• How will the center ensure that barriers commonly related to Internet content—lack of local information, literacy barriers, language barriers, and lack of cultural diversity—are addressed?

College access centers have numerous computer resources available to them. Countless web sites offer free information regarding college and career choices, and many companies sell and lease software designed to assist people in making college and career choices.

How can a center make the best decisions about which programs or resources to purchase, lease, and/or use? The college access center in Milwaukee, launched after the first three replication centers were established, developed a set of criteria to judge software systems and designated a day for demonstrations by software vendors. Planning team members, guidance counselors, and community representatives attended the demonstration day and provided feedback, based on the criteria on the next page.
Currently operating centers have learned many lessons as they have sought to incorporate computers, software, and the Internet into their service delivery. Some of these key lessons are summarized below.

- Centers need to make certain that the technological resources they choose are integrated with the services they offer and add value to their work.
- It is essential to involve potential users, librarians, teachers, guidance counselors, and others in the process of making decisions about technology through focus groups, interviews, and other means.
- Centers must recognize that there is both an initial and ongoing cost to technology and should have a carefully developed plan for sustaining this component and for responding to ever-changing technology.
- While some use of technological resources can be self directed, the center must have sufficient staff available to provide help to users. As a corollary, initial and ongoing staff development is a cornerstone of any plan to use technology.

- Internet-based software systems offer many advantages to college access centers. Systems can be updated continually, offer the potential for availability at multiple sites, and can be linked to other web sites.
- Legal issues can often arise in the area of technology, particularly with regard to software licenses. Centers need to make certain that adequate legal assistance is available and that it is clear who the signatory is for any contractual arrangements.
- Centers that choose to utilize outside vendors, rather than staff, as webmasters and technical experts should evaluate the vendors’ history and reputation with care. This is particularly important given the rapidly changing nature of the entire information technology field.

Technology can be a great resource for connecting staff, particularly if they work in more than one location, and for communicating with other professionals. Setting up an effective infrastructure for voice, data, and electronic communication results in more cost-efficient internal operations.
Creation of a Data-Driven College Access Center

Assessment information is key to successful center implementation, survival, and expansion, as successful fundraising efforts often rely upon data that demonstrates the program’s success.

In creating a college access center, it is important to develop systems that ensure the center is continually providing the highest quality services possible. To do that, center leadership and staff need reliable and valid data to help them answer the following three types of performance questions:

1) whether the center’s services have been implemented as planned or proposed
2) whether the users are satisfied with services they received and
3) whether the services have had the impact that was intended, enabling users to take the steps toward making higher education a reality.

To assess program implementation, customer satisfaction, and impact of the services, a center needs to collect and analyze an array of data to inform program performance on an ongoing basis. All staff should participate and understand program performance based on the analysis of implementation and outcome data. Ideally, assessment processes should be put in place prior to the start of service delivery.

These processes should occur continually and over time so that center staff knows anecdotally, qualitatively, and quantifiably how services have been implemented, how users regard them, and how they result in changes in attitude, aspiration, and behavior. Ongoing assessment strategies must be embedded in the center culture and integrated into program services.

Undoubtedly, it is overwhelming to put all the pieces of an assessment strategy in place during the first year of operation, given all other aspects of program start-up. It is of critical importance, however, to recognize the value gained by integrating assessment into the center’s culture. Creating a culture which values the use of data will sustain the leadership and staff’s assessment strategies over the life of the center.
Creation of an Assessment Culture

It is challenging to create a culture that values the use of data to inform staff about program implementation, user satisfaction, and impact. The leadership must not only deliver a clear message that the center holds itself accountable for performance, but also support these statements through practice and resource allocation. To ensure that this message moves beyond rhetoric, center leaders should consider several issues:

• Hire staff members who value integrating assessment into service delivery. Staff should share the belief that services can always be improved. Job descriptions must clearly set the expectation that all staff participate in assessment work and be willing to change practice as deemed appropriate by the analysis of data.

• Allocate resources to hire and support a person with the responsibility of facilitating the assessment effort. This person can be a technology specialist or a part-time assessment specialist responsible for creating ways to collect data, to manage the information system, and to analyze data across the center. Also, this person must be able to translate complicated data into understandable graphs and tables and to facilitate discussions with staff.

• Involve the center’s board and partners by appointing an assessment specialist to the board. Having this person on the board ensures that assessment work stays a top priority and that the center has in-house expertise in the design and implementation of the assessment strategy.

• Create an organizational structure that supports staff dialogue. Center leaders must shape the operation schedule to give staff ample time to focus on collecting and analyzing data. This means using meeting time effectively and scheduling monthly data-focused meetings with staff.

Whatever the approach, center leaders must share one important ground rule: staff are neither judged nor blamed when data shows performance problems. Although data will point to problem areas and may suggest corrective actions, center leadership must approach the information with a spirit of seeking ways to improve, not with an eye toward pointing fingers and ferreting out poor performers. Leaders who effectively use data to drive decision making and program practice are able to create a culture within their staff in which they welcome the identification of problem areas because only then can they improve program services.
Definition of the Assessment Strategy

To launch this effort, it is important to create a common framework or language to define the center’s assessment strategy. The center leadership should involve the staff, and perhaps community stakeholders such as high school and college representatives, in a meeting or retreat in order to focus on defining and answering the following types of questions concerning goals, measurement, and data usage.

**Goals:** What are the center’s implementation goals over the next several years? What impact will the services have on users? What will users gain as a result of program services? What does the center want to report about program implementation and user outcomes at the end of the first year, third year, and fifth year?

**Measurement:** What information and measurement tools will help staff understand whether the center has met its goals? How will staff know if those served are succeeding in attaining their goals?

**Data usage:** How will the leadership and staff use the information that has been collected?

The answers to these types of questions form the center’s assessment strategy. Staff and users will know what they want to achieve from the program services, how they will measure the program services, and, ultimately, how they will use the data to inform program practice.
Definition of an Assessment Strategy

Center leadership and staff can go in many directions when creating an assessment strategy. However, they must put in place several critical indicators. At a minimum, the center needs to collect the same information from all of those served. Often, centers do this by instituting a standard intake form that all users complete before receiving services. This basic demographic information allows the center to track indicators such as the number of people served and where they come from.

In addition to this information, the following indicators help staff understand whether the center is meeting its goals: gender, neighborhood location, language spoken at home, place of birth, family composition (single family household, for instance), highest level of education of parents/guardians, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status (or free and reduced lunch if working with students), and current school, if applicable.

The key to determining what to request on an intake form is to be thoughtful about what information the center actually needs in order to understand its performance. For example, if center staff think the outcomes will be different for students who come from different high schools, then it would be an important question to include on the intake form. On the other hand, staff should be mindful of asking for too much information or for information that the users find intrusive. For instance, if gathering data in order to determine socioeconomic status creates a level of discomfort for users, staff should discuss whether the effort to collect this information is worthwhile. It is important to strike a balance so that both the center staff and the people served are comfortable.

In addition to collecting intake information, the staff needs to develop instruments to show how users perceive the services they receive. Staff should develop a satisfaction survey for the users to complete after they participate in various center programs. Data from these surveys should be synthesized and used at least twice each year to show staff how the users perceive center services and to point out what they need to improve.

It is more difficult to construct a strategy to assess the impact that program services have on the people served. The primary goal of college access centers is to provide people with information and advising to help them go to college. Since this goal may take several years to attain, a center should identify interim outcome measures and ways to gather information from students regarding these measures. Examples of ways to collect this information include using follow-up surveys, asking for help from local schools, or conducting interviews and focus groups with users.

It is important for a center to put its data management and collection system in place as part of its technology plan because these two key areas are closely linked. A center needs to decide what systems and protocols are appropriate in order to determine the impact of the center on the young people and adults who drop in to utilize center services. Staff may also want to look beyond just the impact of center services, as critical as this is, and design a system that will also meet funder accountability requirements and raise new dollars.
ability requirements and raise new dollars. At the same time, staff needs to decide how to ensure the privacy of information, particularly if they use tracking elements through software in order to collect evaluation data on everyone who uses center services.

In designing any system, it is necessary to address the tension between ensuring data quality and access. When access to data is in the hands of a few, there is much more control over data quality. Therefore, it is important to balance these equally pressing issues by instituting thoughtful policies and protections regarding who has access to what type of user information and who is able to make changes and additions. There are excellent examples of databases that allow for multiple uses, with password protection and security measures so different users can view records and change only certain data.
CONCLUSION

We know from a variety of research studies and reports that low-income students and those who are the first generation in their families to attend college face numerous obstacles to higher education access and success. The college access centers described in this Guide are dedicated to promoting college access, particularly for under-served students and adults, and they do so by offering free career, college, and financial aid information and advising and by organizing an extensive array of early awareness/outreach programs for students. The impact of these college access centers is enormous and widespread, based on the numbers of students and adults served and the resulting increase in the college-going rate. These successes point to the potential of community-based college access centers to assist large numbers of young people and adults who could benefit greatly from going to college.

TERI has developed this Guide in order to serve as a blueprint for communities interested in establishing centers in other inner-city and rural areas across the country. A Toolkit has also been developed in order to provide numerous examples of actual materials used to plan and start a center. TERI hopes that these resources will help other cities to establish college access centers, as the need is great and the rewards tremendous.
CENTER CONTACT INFORMATION

Boston Higher Education Information Center
Information and Counseling Services
Boston Public Library
700 Boylston Street
Boston, MA 02116
617-536-0200
1-800-442-1171 (Massachusetts only)
www.heic.org

Educational Awareness Programs
100 Boylston Street, LL-1
Boston, MA 02116
617-542-3900

Greater Washington College Information Center
MLK, Jr. Memorial Library, 1st floor
901 G Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20001
202-393-1100
www.collegeinfo.org

Kentuckiana College Access Center
Jefferson Education Center, 7th Floor
200 West Broadway
Louisville, KY 40202
502-584-0475
www.metroversity.org

Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis
College Resource Center
3701 Grandel Square
St. Louis, MO 63108
314-289-0342

For more information about the Toolkit,
please call The Education Resources Institute (TERI),
617-426-0681, extension 1-4332,
or visit the National College Access Network (NCAN) web site at
www.collegeaccess.org/toolkit

TERI
The Education Resources Institute
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Boston, MA 02116-5237
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Web: www.teri.org