SUPPORTING STUDENT SUCCESS TOGETHER | FULL REPORT

Understanding the What, Why, and How of Partnerships Between Community-Based Organizations and Postsecondary Institutions

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About Education Northwest

Education Northwest is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to helping all children and youth reach their full potential. We partner with public, private, and community-based organizations to address educational inequities and improve student success. While most of our work centers on the Pacific Northwest, our evaluations, technical assistance, and research studies have national impact and provide timely and actionable results.

Contact

## Suggested Citation

Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

While postsecondary education can provide a critical pathway to socioeconomic mobility, inequalities persist in college enrollment and completion. The global pandemic exacerbated these challenges and increased the visibility of basic needs insecurity among college students. A 2020 nationally representative survey found that, among undergraduates, 23 percent experience food insecurity and eight percent experience homelessness—higher rates than for the broader public (Goldrick-Rab, 2023). Students of color are most likely to experience basic needs insecurity, which affects over 35 percent of Black-identifying students and 30 percent of Native American students (Goldrick-Rab, 2023). *Meeting college students' basic needs is essential to their well-being and academic success* (Daugherty et al., 2016; Goldrick-Rab, 2021; Haskett et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2017; Trawver et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2018).

In recent years, postsecondary institutions have begun partnering with community-based organizations (CBOs) to enhance services to support students (April et al., 2020). In California, there is a statewide movement of higher education institutions partnering with CBOs. Through a statewide web search, we located nearly 150 California higher education institutions that are partnering with more than 60 CBOs to provide holistic student supports, which includes addressing basic needs insecurity and supporting students' future financial stability.

In 2021, during the height of the global pandemic, College Futures Foundation partnered with five CBOs providing holistic student supports: **Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County and the Inland Empire, Braven, OneFuture Coachella Valley, the Rise Student Navigator Network, and United Way Bay Area's SparkPoint program.** The foundation partnered with Education Northwest to conduct a qualitative, participatory, formative learning engagement to identify common successes and challenges across CBOs and institutions. We draw on interviews with CBO grantees, their institutional partners, and students to better understand the value of CBO-institutional partnerships, describe the conditions supporting partnership, and identify key strategies and recommendations for initiating and sustaining partnerships.
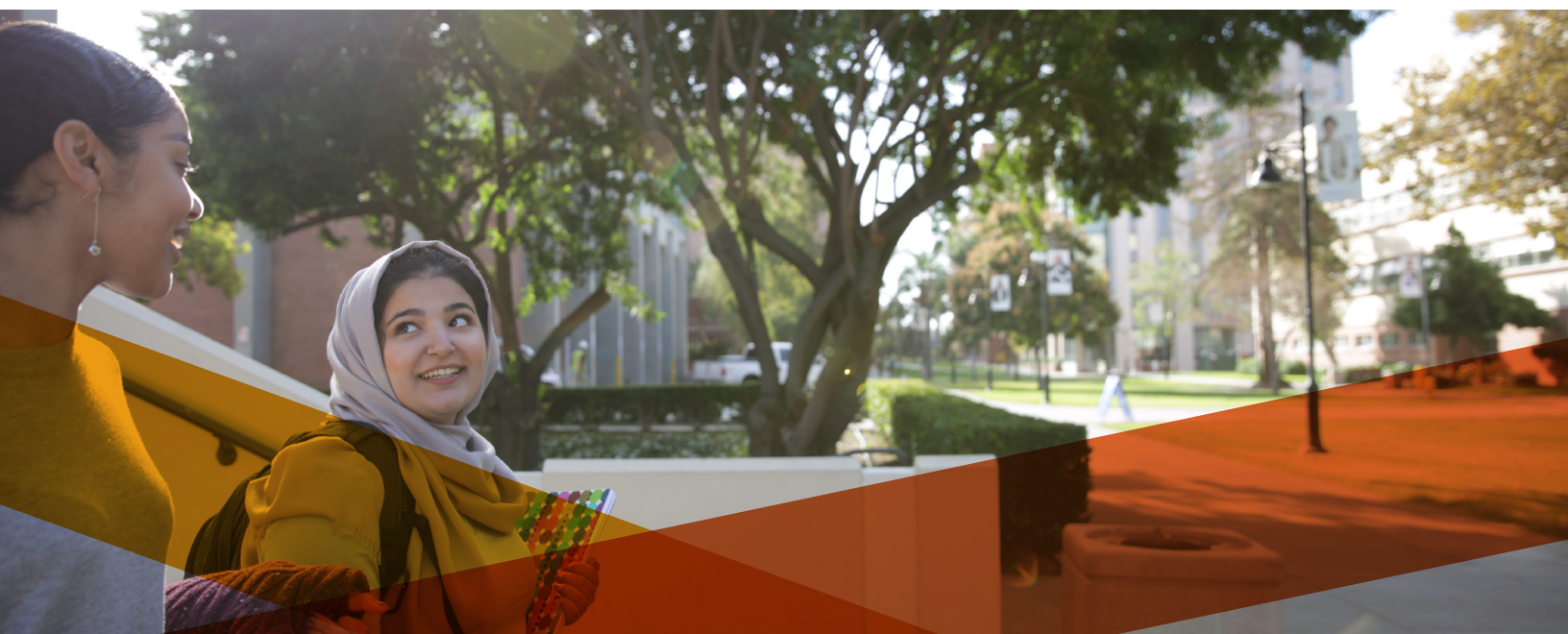
COLLEGE FUTURES FOUNDATION CBO-INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIP PROJECT GRANTEES

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County and the Inland Empire focuses on expanding personalized college and career support and entry-to-career pathways for youth up to age 24. The organization's mentoring program is a critical work-based learning opportunity that provides case management and wraparound support.

Braven, a national organization focused on closing the education-to-employment gap, partners with universities, employers, and philanthropists to provide a credit-bearing course on career education, one-on-one mentoring, and connections to career opportunities.

OneFuture Coachella Valley works across sectors and aligns the strategies of a variety of community partners, including K–12 systems, higher education institutions, and employers to enhance the experience, educational success, and economic future Coachella Valley students. Services focus on providing guided college and career supports, scholarships and financial aid assistance, leadership development, college success coaching, mental wellness, internships, and bridges to careers.

The RISE Student Navigator Network (SNN) is a student-led, high-touch, one-on-one case management program. SNN follows a student-led case management model where college students are training as "Navigators" and help fellow students identify, apply for, and access resources.

United Way Bay Area's SparkPoint program at postsecondary institutions offers basic needs and financial health resources that help students stay in school, succeed, and fully engage in college programs.

The value of CBOs as partners

The CBOs featured in this project represent a powerful resource for colleges seeking to bolster their capacity to support students' basic needs and future financial stability. Across our interviews, CBO grantees, institutional partners, and student participants spoke of the value CBOs bring to these partnerships:

- **Deep knowledge of the region and culturally relevant expertise** to bridge the gap between the institution and the community.

   "I'm drawn to their commitment to the community, their way of helping students understand higher education, and, not just the students, but also the family members."
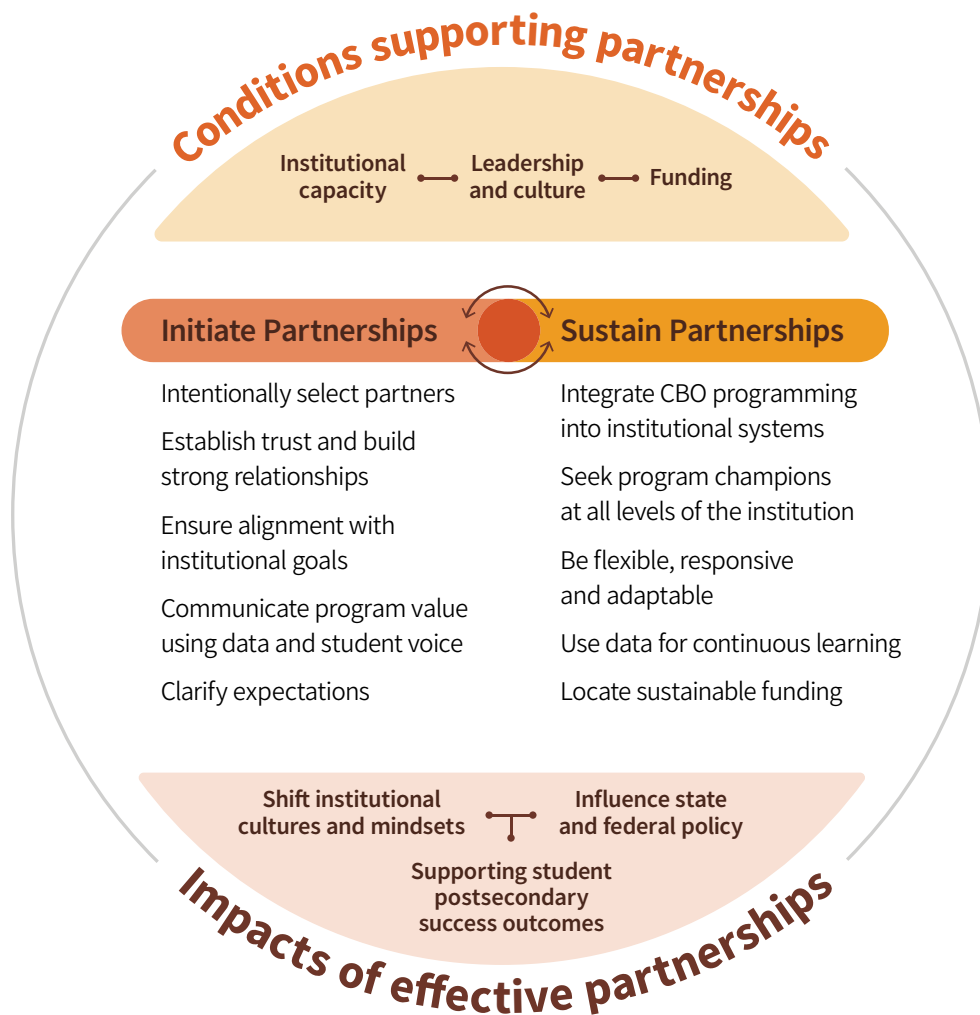
   — Institutional partner

- **Content expertise** in providing equitable, asset-based services to support students' success.

- **Cross-sector connections** that uniquely position them to bring together external partners to meet students' needs.

CBO-institutional partnerships framework

Drawing on interviews with CBO grantees, institutional partners, and student participants, we developed a framework to organize and offer perspective on ways to effectively develop CBO-institutional partnerships. Each component of the framework is described below.

Figure ES–1. Community-based organization-institutional partnerships framework

Conditions supporting CBO-institutional partnerships

At the top of the framework are **conditions** that support the development, implementation, and success of CBO-institutional partnerships. CBOs found that institutions with existing capacity to support CBO services facilitated a strong partnership. **Institutional capacity** can include existing systems, processes, and structures—for example, a basic needs center, staff members who can support CBO services, and capacity to refer students. CBOs and institutional leaders spoke of the importance of **leadership and culture** that

values community-based partnerships and holistic student supports. Institutional leadership can set up structures and allocate resources to facilitate CBOs' efforts to provide services to students. Finally, CBOs need the **funding** to initiate connections with postsecondary institutions and carry out program services. CBOs are resourceful and procured funding to support their services and institutional contributions as well.

In the framework, the two phases of partnership (initiating and sustaining) are embedded within the conditions to indicate how existing conditions can support or hinder partnerships and how partnership development can influence institutional capacity, culture, and funding.

Strategies for initiating partnerships

The left side of the framework represents the **planning, initiating, and building of the partnership.** On the inside of the model, there are two double-facing arrows to demonstrate the connection between how partnerships are developed and their sustainability. Sometimes the higher education institution initiates the CBO-institutional partnership to tackle a problem in the community. However, in most cases the CBO reaches out to the institution to initiate a partnership. Key strategies that CBOs can implement to initiate partnerships include:

Intentionally select institutional partners

- **Consider the local context** and adapt program services to the nuances of a particular institution and the needs of students from a specific region.

- **Leverage relationships** with existing institutional and community partners to introduce new partners.

- **Work directly with students** on campus to advocate for the program.

Make a strong case for the partnership

- **Establish trust** and build strong relationships with prospective institutional partners.

- **Ensure program alignment** with institutional goals, including equity and strategic plans, or educational programming.

- **Communicate program value** using data and student voice around how students could be supported by accessing services.

- **Clarify expectations,** such as through a memorandum of understanding, to create clear lines of responsibility and accountability.

Strategies for sustaining partnerships

The right side of the framework shows **processes and practices for sustaining** CBO-institutional partnerships. CBOs and institutions can use several strategies to sustain the partnerships they establish.

Integrate CBO services and programming into institutional systems

- Institutions **intentionally introduce a CBO to campus,** such as by including CBO staff members in all staff email communication, professional development opportunities, staff meetings, and newsletters.

- Institutions **consider the physical location of the CBO on campus,** ideally housing it near other student services such as the food bank, basic needs center, or financial aid office.

- CBOs **embed services into institutional curriculum, policies, or programs.** In some cases, students can fulfil curriculum requirements by attending CBO programming. In others, CBOs partner directly with a program on campus to support student referrals and integrate services.

- CBOs and institutions **set up structures for ongoing communication,** such as through advisory teams or committees, with a set meeting time and broad representation across campus.

Strong relationships support partnership sustainability

- CBOs seek **program champions** across all levels of the institution, from support staff to faculty to leadership.

- Institutions and CBOs should be **flexible, responsive, and adaptive.** CBOs can show commitment to the partnership by responding to the institution's ongoing needs. Institutional partners should collaborate with CBOs on recruiting and retaining students and provide the opportunity for the organization to expand its reach on campus.

- CBOs can **communicate data,** including on student use of program services or student academic progress and retention, to institutions for continuous learning. Sharing data with institutional partners demonstrates transparency and can highlight the value of the partnership. Institutional partners can support continuous learning by allowing CBOs to access student data to track academic progress.

- CBOs are partnering with institutions to apply for **federal and philanthropic funding** to sustain partnerships.

Impacts of effective partnerships

At the bottom of the framework, we describe the changes that can result from successful CBO-institutional partnerships. **Student participants** shared that the programs not only support their immediate basic needs, but also impact their overall well-being and sense of community. Students often referred to CBO staff members and student participants as family who they trusted and who had life experiences similar to their own. CBOs shared how **institutions are shifting mindsets and organizational cultures** around CBO partnerships. CBOs increasingly find that their partner institutions recognize the value of their services and the expertise that CBO leaders bring to campus. As a result of these partnerships, CBOs and institutions are working together to **influence federal and state policy** around holistic student supports.

The two phases of partnership are embedded within the changes to highlight how change happens as partnerships are being implemented. We emphasize that the framework is cyclical. As CBOs and institutions support students, shift mindsets, and influence policy, the conditions supporting partnership are improved.

CBOs and institutions are partnering to influence policy

- **Braven** is partnering with the San José University president to advocate for additional federal funding to go to public institutions for credit-bearing courses focused on career outcomes.

- **Big Brothers Big Sisters** is working to change state policy that would provide credits for community college students who are participating in mentorship programs.

Next steps for initiating partnerships

Based on CBO and institutional perspectives, we recommend the following next steps to higher education institutions, philanthropists, and other funders to support **initiating partnerships:**

Higher education institutions can shift mindsets around supporting students holistically

- **Prioritize student well-being** by devoting funding and staffing to providing holistic student supports and institutionalizing basic needs services, such as through a basic needs center or in an equity or strategic plan.

- **Create a campus culture that understands students as whole people with academic and non-academic needs.** Shift mindsets across all levels from staff to faculty to leadership.

- **Recognize that community-based organizations increase institutional capacity to support students holistically.** Proactively reach out to local CBOs about partnering and offer intentional, structural support.

"One of the challenges is that we're still seen as an add-on. We're this extra thing for them, and if we can change that mindset to where now we're a partner for them, we're building onto their programs, then I think that'll help move the partnership along."

— CBO grantee

Funders and philanthropists can provide planning or start-up grants for CBOs to form new partnerships

- **Offer planning or start-up grants** to cover initial planning costs to support CBOs moving into the space of higher education, developing and expanding partnerships, innovating, or scaling up.

- **Be flexible—partnership initiation is a dynamic process,** and it is important to allow grantees the opportunity to change their approach or goals mid-stream.

- **Make a long-term commitment** to the process of forming new partnerships or help the CBO identify long-term funding to maintain momentum.

Next steps for sustaining partnerships

Based on CBO and institutional perspectives, we recommend the following next steps to advocates, policymakers, and funders to support sustainable partnerships:

Advocates and policymakers can call for federal and state policy promoting holistic student support

- **Advocate for policy that supports the provision of basic needs services** on college campuses, like California Assembly Bill 132 with community colleges.

- **Develop a policy agenda aligned with community workforce needs** to incentivize higher education institutions to partner with CBOs, such as through policy and funding focused on student career or workforce outcomes.

Philanthropy can encourage sustainable funding and support collective learning

- **Support CBOs in identifying and applying for public sector funding** aligned with their program goals, such as through a map of dynamic funding opportunities related to holistic student supports in higher education.

- **Encourage private and public partnerships** to offer CBOs long-term, sustainable funding.

- **Create community of practice networks or coalitions** to provide a space for CBO leaders to share promising practices and guide other CBOs interested in partnering with institutions.

- **Support CBOs in collectively defining metrics** to capture success across organizations and demonstrate the impact of CBO services on students' postsecondary success.
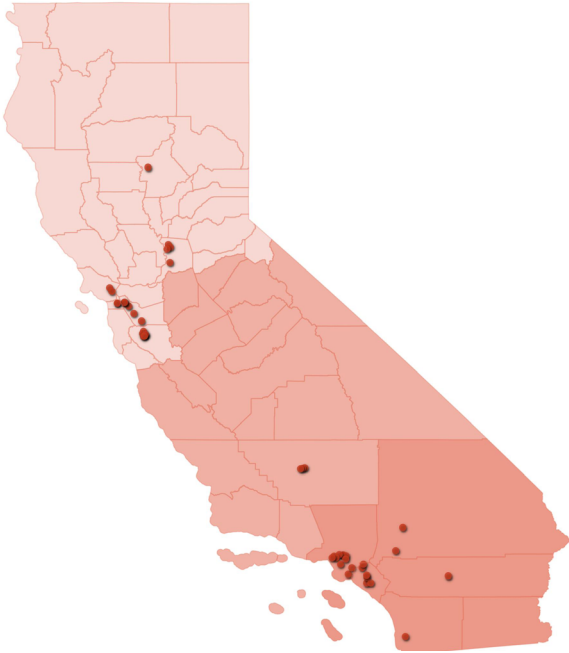
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Introduction

While postsecondary education can provide a critical pathway to socioeconomic mobility, inequities persist in college enrollment and completion. The global pandemic exacerbated these challenges and increased the visibility of basic needs insecurity among college students. A 2020 nationally representative survey found that, among undergraduates, 23 percent experience food insecurity and eight percent experience homeless—higher rates than for the broader public (Goldrick-Rab, 2023). Students of color are most likely to experience basic needs insecurity, which affects 35 percent of Black-identifying students and 30 percent of Native students (Goldrick-Rab, 2023). Meeting college students' basic needs is essential to their well-being and academic success (Daugherty et al., 2016; Goldrick-Rab, 2021; Haskett et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2017; Trawver et al., 2020).

In recent years, institutions have begun partnering with community-based organizations (CBOs) to enhance the services offered to students (April et al., 2020; Henderson, 2021). In California, there is a statewide movement of higher education institutions partnering with CBOs. Through a statewide web search,[1] we located nearly 150 California higher education institutions that are partnering with more than 60 CBOs to provide holistic student supports (see appendix A).

Figure 1. Headquarters of community-based organizations partnering with California higher education institutions

Early evidence demonstrates that students who receive CBO services at their institutions are more likely to persist, complete credit-bearing coursework, and maintain higher GPAs than students who did not (Almeida & Allen, 2017; Anderson et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2018). While there is a high potential for CBOs to expand institutions' capacity to provide holistic student supports, there remains limited research on how CBOs and higher education institutions initiate and build partnerships, the factors associated with their success, and the outcomes of these partnerships on student participants.

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[1] CBOs and institutions were identified through a systematic scan of student support pages on California community college and California State University websites as well as recommendations by leaders in the field. The map includes local and nationwide organizations that are partnering with private and public colleges and universities in California.

Project background

In 2021, during the height of the global pandemic, College Futures Foundation partnered with five CBOs providing holistic student supports (see appendix A for more information about these grantees and the support they provide institutions). In addition to funding the CBOs' work, the foundation was motivated to learn more about how CBOs are partnering with higher education institutions, including promising practices, and changes for institutions, students, and families. College Futures Foundation partnered with Education Northwest to conduct a qualitative, participatory, formative learning engagement for the CBO-Institutional Partnerships Project.

Approach

Education Northwest sought to identify common successes and challenges that can inform the future work with College Futures and contribute to the fields of postsecondary education and holistic student supports. Across the learning engagement, we collaborated closely with CBO partners and College Futures Foundation on planning, data collection processes, and making meaning of and communicating findings. To support ongoing learning and capacity building, we provided space for dialogue and reflection among the CBOs and College Futures Foundation. We facilitated three learning engagement meetups to provide an opportunity for CBOs to share and learn from one another, to share our processes and results, and to solicit reflection and feedback on preliminary findings.

Guiding questions

The learning engagement was guided by three overarching questions:

1. How do CBOs and higher education institutions initiate and build sustainable partnerships?
2. What conditions need to exist at a CBO and institution to effectively partner?
3. How do partnerships support the needs of students who are low income, first generation, Black, Indigenous, and/or people of color?

Methods

From April 2022 to December 2023, the Education Northwest team conducted a series of data collection activities to better understand the guiding questions. We facilitated two sets of interviews with CBO grantees, once in July to August 2022 and a second time in June to July 2023, to better understand changes in partnership development over the year. From February to March 2023, the evaluation team visited a higher education institution that partnered with a CBO grantee. During the visit, we interviewed key institutional partners and a conducted a focus group with current student participants.

Table 1. Interview participants for learning engagement

Research partner	Timing	Total number of participants
CBO grantees	Summer 2022	12
	Summer 2023	12
Institutional partners	Spring 2023	13
Student participants	Spring 2023	18

To select higher education institutions for site visits, we asked CBO grantees to identify one institutional partner to participate in the site visit. The institutions include:

- College of the Desert, Palm Springs
- Mount San Antonio College, Walnut
- San Bernardino Valley College
- San José City College
- San José State University

The team analyzed interviews using thematic content analysis, coding interview data both deductively and inductively. During the first cycle of coding, we used an open coding technique to identify segments of data that answer the research questions. We also included a priori codes derived from the literature and research questions. During the second cycle we used pattern coding to organize and attribute meaning to codes. A team of three coders worked independently to assign codes using the Atlas.ti software application and regularly convened to discuss the use, definition, and boundaries of each code and any challenges encountered, and to refine coding accordingly.

Report outline

We begin this report by describing the value of CBOs as institutional partners and why developing and sustaining partnerships is important. We then present a new framework, based on data collected through this learning engagement, that provides a guide for effectively developing CBO-institutional partnerships. The framework identifies the conditions underlying effective partnerships, two phases of partnership—initiating and sustaining—and the changes that can result from partnership. We then draw on perspectives from CBOs and institutions that participated in this learning engagement to describe how each component of the framework reflected in their experiences. Throughout the report, we highlight CBO partners' stories about their successes and challenges as well as recommendations of strategies to establish and sustain effective CBO-institutional partnerships and how philanthropists and other key stakeholders can best support the work.

The value of CBOs as partners

Across our interviews, CBO grantees, their institutional partners, and student participants spoke of CBOs' value as partners—citing their deep knowledge of the region, content expertise, and cross-sector connections to support student well-being and academic success.

CBOs bring deep knowledge of the region and culturally relevant expertise to their institutional partners and students

Researchers find that educators, case managers, and advocates are most effective in working with people who are from underserved populations when they employ culturally competent and responsive methods (Calzada & Suarez-Balcazar, 2014; López et al., 2017; National Association of Social Workers, n.d.). CBOs deeply understand the region they serve and are often led by individuals from their communities. This connection to the community allows CBOs to provide culturally and linguistically responsive services to students and their families. For example, as one institutional partner described:

> *"We know Big Brothers Big Sisters is from the area. We are from a lower socioeconomic area, and we have a really diverse student population, so understanding that was key."*
>
> — Institutional partner

Similarly, students trusted CBO staff members who had similar backgrounds and experiences to their own. As one student shared:

> *"Most of the people that work here [at the CBO] are first-generation college students. You can relate to them. Everything you're going through, they went through, and they can help you."*
>
> — Student participant

CBOs serve as an important link between public and private agencies and the community (Change Lab Solutions, 2023). In addition to providing culturally and linguistically responsive services, CBOs can provide a voice for their communities and assist higher education institutions in authentically reaching out and connecting to students and families.

> *"I'm from the region so I can speak to my own personal experience and what I've seen. I think that established a level of vulnerability because most of the presidents or other folks coming into the region are not from here. So really basing it on the experiences of the students and the people who are from here, who live here, and who trust this institution."*
>
> — CBO grantee

POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS RECOGNIZE ONEFUTURE COACHELLA VALLEY'S CONNECTION TO AND ADVOCACY FOR COACHELLA VALLEY COMMUNITIES

As one partner described:

> *"I'm drawn to their commitment to the community, their way of helping students understand higher education, and, not just the students, but also the family members."*

> – Institutional partner

OneFuture Coachella Valley has partnered with the College of the Desert at community outreach events to encourage community members to attend the college. The organization has also provided holistic supports and help with navigation of campus resources to underrepresented male students.

In addition, K–12 districts and college partners participate in OneFuture's alignment teams, which bring together a range of community partners and networks to study the regional landscape, educational environment, and potential obstacles that impact student success outcomes.

CBOs have content expertise about how to provide equitable, asset-based services to support college students' success

In addition to having similar lived experiences as the student populations they serve, CBO staff members have education, training, and expertise in how to provide students with equitable, asset-based programming. CBOs often embed youth development principles and case management techniques to encourage positive growth in young people (Coles, 2012). For example, Mount San Antonio College valued that staff members at the Rise Student Navigator Network were trained social workers and could use their expertise to support training of their student Navigators. San José University values Braven's equity-focused course development and teaching practices, including using a cohort model, recruiting volunteers from the community, and facilitating field trips to local employers. As one student participant reflected, "I haven't taken a class this engaging, and it's an environment where they truly care about you." Institutional leaders who work closely with CBO partners reflected on how they learned to be more asset-based:

> *"They really understand what it's like to be a first generation, a student of color, someone who doesn't really know how to work the system, someone who doesn't know how to represent themselves, someone who doesn't know how to talk about their assets. And I think that they've really helped us think a little bit more about being more asset based."*

> – Institutional partner

CBOs' cross-sector connections uniquely position them to bring together external partners to meet students' needs

A strong network of partners collaborating toward a common goal can increase the likelihood that community outcomes will improve and that the programs can be sustained (Agonafer et al., 2021; Towe et al., 2016). CBOs can bring together a diverse group of cross-sector partners to pursue the goal of supporting students' postsecondary and career success. CBOs are attuned to student needs and able to locate community partners to meet those needs. For example, **United Way Bay Area's SparkPoint program** at the City College of San Francisco has begun leveraging partnerships with early child care providers, including Wu Yee Children's Services in the city and county of San Francisco, to support students and parents. The CBOs interviewed in this study had a diverse range of partners including employers (e.g., LinkedIn, Google, Deloitte), nonprofits (e.g., Self-Help Credit Union, Bay Area Legal Aid, other basic needs services), K–12 institutions (e.g., local public schools, charter schools), health care providers, child care providers, and government agencies (e.g., San Francisco's Office of Empowerment). One institutional partner reflected that "these relationships that they've built with all of these partners is something we couldn't do ourselves." CBOs partnering with institutions can convene and bridge the gaps among public and private agencies, community-based organizations, and higher education institutions. As one CBO grantee explained:

> "It helps that a CBO works cross sector. Hospitals need the workforce, K–12 needs
> support for college success. To get industry partners at the table is a big deal, and
> they're saying we'll work together instead of competing with one another."
>
> — CBO grantee

Students who participated in CBO programming benefited from the organization's cross-sector partnerships by receiving support that met their unique goals and needs. One student described how the **United Way Bay Area's SparkPoint program** provides personalized support through connections to a wide range of programs:

> "SparkPoint feels much more personal and they're truly trying to help you in the best
> way they can, in any way that they can. The college also offers a lot of different help, but
> I think sometimes it's so big and they tend to forget about you. SparkPoint is connected
> with so many different programs, these programs that are specific to your needs help
> much more."
>
> — Student participant

CBO-institutional partnerships framework

Drawing on interviews with CBO grantees, institutional partners, and student participants, we developed a framework to organize and provide perspective on how to effectively initiate and sustain CBO-institutional partnerships. In this section, we provide a brief overview of the framework. The rest of the report describes each of the components in more detail.

Figure 2. Community-based organization-institutional partnerships framework
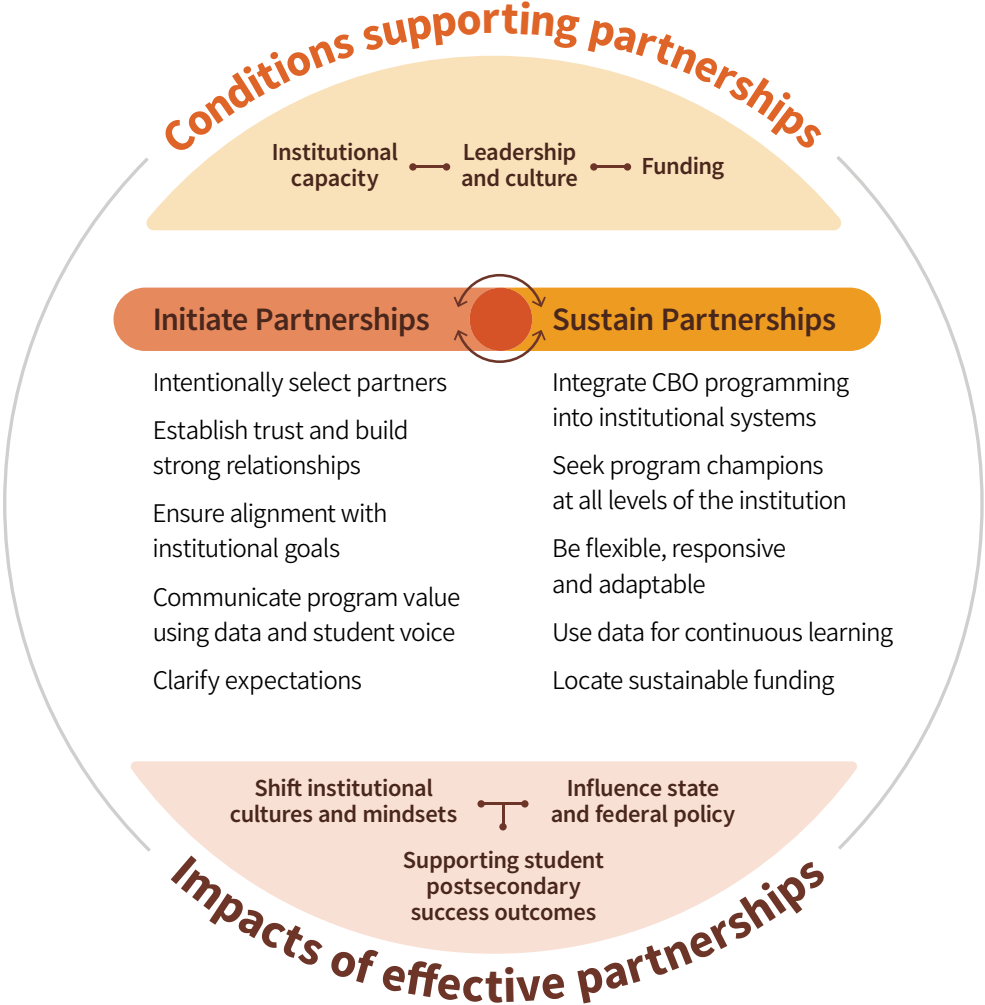
At the top of the framework are **conditions** that support the development and implementation of CBO-institutional partnerships. We highlight the importance of understanding the institution's capacity to support a partnership, including pre-existing structures, systems, and processes for CBOs to embed services. Second, we acknowledge the importance of institutional leaders in supporting these partnerships. When leaders facilitate an organizational culture that supports these partnerships, they are more likely to

be accepted by staff and faculty members and to be sustained. Finally, adequate funding and staffing by both the CBO and institution is imperative to forming a sustainable partnership. In the framework, **the two phases of partnership** are embedded within the conditions to indicate how existing conditions can support or hinder partnerships and how partnership development can influence institutional capacity, culture, and funding.

The left side of the framework represents the **planning, initiating, and building of the partnership.** Included are strategies identified by CBOs and institutional partners as key to building an effective partnership. The right side of the framework features the **processes and practices for sustaining CBO-institutional partnerships.** On the inside of the model, there are two double-facing arrows to demonstrate the connection between partnership development and sustainability. Further, we found that existing partnerships with institutions and other community organizations can support the development of new ones.

At the bottom of the framework, we describe the **changes that can result** from successful CBO-institutional partnerships. These include shifts in institutional mindsets and cultures around partnering with CBOs and supporting students holistically, changes in state and federal policy to support CBOs' work, and improved postsecondary success for students. The two phases of partnership are embedded within the changes to highlight how change happens as partnerships are being implemented.

Finally, we emphasize that the framework is **cyclical,** as depicted on the outside of the model by the connection between the conditions and outcomes. We found that as CBOs and institutions support students, shift mindsets, and influence policy, the conditions supporting partnership improve.

Conditions supporting CBO-institutional partnerships

We start by acknowledging the conditions at a CBO and institution that support partnerships. CBOs and institutional leaders reflected on the importance of institutional capacity, leadership and culture, and funding to successfully develop partnerships.

Institutional capacity

CBOs found that institutions with existing capacity to support CBO services facilitated a strong partnership. Institutional capacity can include systems, processes, and structures at an institution in which to embed CBO services and activities. For example, prior to the partnership with **Rise Student Navigator Network,** Mount San Antonio College had a basic needs center, director, and staff, which allowed Rise to enhance its staffing structure. The partnership model between the two entities was shared; Rise staff members oversaw the program development, management, and training while the director of the basic needs center managed the day-to-day needs of student Navigators. Other examples of key institutional capacities include:

- **United Way Bay Area's SparkPoint program** has a full-time staff member at San José City College to schedule students' meetings with coaches and connections to other services and to promote services to students and faculty and staff members.

- **Big Brothers Big Sisters** partners with the <u>Valley-Bound Commitment</u> at San Bernardino Valley College to support student referrals and coordinate student supports.

Leadership and culture

CBOs and institutional leaders spoke of the importance of leadership and of a culture that values community-based partnerships and holistic student supports. Institutions should view CBOs as partners rather than as "add-on" services. Institutional leadership that values partnerships facilitates CBOs' work and can set up structures and allocate resources for CBOs to provide services to students. For example:

- Leaders at San José City College were intentional about introducing **United Way Bay Area's SparkPoint program** to their campus. SparkPoint representatives reflected that leadership at San José City College "paved the way for everyone to accept us … We had a more collaborative relationship with other programs in the college and an increase in students coming in for services."

- Leadership that supports CBO services can expedite the initiation of partnerships and open the doors to additional collaboration. For example, **Braven** formed a strong relationship with the San José University president, who directed the inclusion of the organization in the university's federal grant applications.

Funding

CBOs need funding to initiate connections with postsecondary institutions and carry out program services. Likewise, institutions need resources to support a CBO partnership, including funding and staffing. CBOs are resourceful and located funding to support their services and institutional support. A few examples include:

- **Rise Student Navigator Network** funds student Navigators using federal Work-Study dollars. Institutions support additional costs, such as overseeing Navigators, through state funding for community college basic needs services.

- **OneFuture Coachella Valley** receives funding from College of the Desert to implement a male student success program designed to improve college persistence and completion. The organization has also partnered with California State University, San Bernardino to apply for federal grants aligned with program services, including grants supporting college access for migrant students and the High School Equivalency program.

- **Braven** locates collaborative funding pathways to support programming. The collaborative funding pathway includes a mixture of corporate, philanthropic, and institutional dollars. At San José State University, Braven became a line item in the provost's budget. In some cases institutions are jointly applying for grants with Braven, while in others Braven is being included on grant applications submitted by the partner institution.

Strategies for initiating partnerships

One purpose of this learning engagement was to identify facilitators of and barriers to effective partnerships. For many of the CBOs, the success of a partnership began with how it was initiated. In this section we present partnership initiation strategies, including how CBOs intentionally select partners, make a case for the partnership, and set expectations.

CBOs intentionally select institutional partners

Initiating partnerships can be a challenging process. For example, some organizations solicited partnerships by sending emails to directors of basic needs centers at higher education institutions, focusing primarily on community colleges, minority-serving institutions, and public universities. While some institutions responded to these informational emails, the initiation period was slow and sometimes those partnerships would fizzle out. In some cases, the institutions signed a memorandum of understanding without supporting the CBO in publicizing the program and doing outreach, resulting in the partnership ending. In our interviews, we found that CBOs find success in intentionally selecting institutions that have the capacity to support partnerships, including institutional champions, funding, and a shared vision for supporting students.

CBOs are attuned to the local context and adapt services to institutional and student needs

When selecting institutional partners, CBOs use a localized approach to understand the nuances of institutional and student needs. For instance, CBOs spoke of the importance of understanding the unique bureaucratic concerns among Universities of California (UCs), California State Universities (CSUs), and community colleges that change the structure of their programming. Further, CBOs note the nuances of student populations by region. As one CBO partnering with institutions within the CSU system described, "each CSU is very unique and situated in a community that is also equally unique." One community college partner exemplified this sentiment in stating:

Considerations when selecting partners

- The CBO and institution share a common vision for supporting students

- The students at the institution have unmet needs that the CBO could support

- The institution offers some type of structural support (i.e., college credit for CBO courses or services)

- The institution is willing to support the program in recruiting students and reaching scale

- There are institutional champions advocating for the program

- The institution provides funding to support CBO services

- The institution is collaborative and willing to establish a long-term, mutually beneficial partnership

"As an institution, it is important for the CBO to understand how we operate as community colleges. Every community college is a little bit different, too. They may think this is one system, and if we do it here, we can do it there. But I think helping to educate our community partners is important ... There may be things we need to customize based on our institution, our student population, and their needs."

— Institutional partner

CBOs leverage relationships with existing institutional or community partners to form new partnerships

Partnerships are relationship driven. Interviewed CBO representatives spoke of the importance of leveraging relationships with other postsecondary leaders to initiate partnerships. For example, **SparkPoint** shared that some of their partnerships developed through word-of-mouth. As the grantee described, "the networking community is small. Someone usually hears about SparkPoint programming, and they reach out to learn more about it."

CBOs also describe actively leveraging their connections to form new partnerships. For example, **Braven** uses existing institutional champions or partners in the community, such as representatives at Tipping Point and LinkedIn, to make introductions to institutional leaders. The organization finds that this strategy leads to increased buy-in and support from college leadership. Other CBOs also leverage relationships with institutional champions to connect with other postsecondary leaders.

"Once we had a relationship with leadership, it was an easier task ... it was like, 'Hey, can you introduce me to the other president?'"

— CBO grantee

CBOs found that there is momentum to forming partnerships. CBOs are more likely to form a partnership when the institution is familiar with the CBO, their services, and their existing partners. CBOs reflect that potential partners are "already primed from our previous conversations to move forward with partnerships," thereby accelerating partnership growth.

CBOs work directly with students on a particular campus

Some CBOs work directly with students rather than (or in addition to) partnering with institutional leaders. In these cases, student participants help recruit other students on campus. CBOs develop relationships with student clubs with similar goals to support outreach. Some CBOs spoke of developing this more grassroots approach in response to challenges in initiating partnerships with institutional leadership. As one CBO shared:

> *"It is so much easier for us to work directly with the students to identify what are some other student organizations on campus that we can connect with to generate awareness of our program, or we're able to have the students investigate ways to connect with other folks on campus. And you just don't have to deal so much with some of the pushback and the long waits that we experience with administrators."*
>
> – CBO grantee

CBOs identify key strategies for making the case for partnerships

Once a partner institution is identified, CBOs implement key strategies for making the case for partnerships, including building trust and strong relationships, aligning program services with institutional goals, and strategically communicating program value through data and student voice.

Trust and strong relationships are critical to forming a new partnership

CBO staff members emphasized the importance of connecting with representatives of institutional partners on a personal level to create real, authentic partnerships. CBOs commented that, "It takes time and consistency. That is how you build trust." To support trust and relationship building, CBOs strive to form collaborative relationships with institutional partners. As one CBO stated:

> *"In terms of establishing trust, for us, we're not trying to sell them on anything. These presidents are sold every single day on something, like they could buy or scale. We can go slow or go fast; we really listen and make it a collaborative partnership. We want a real partnership that is authentic and co-shared versus selling and marketing."*
>
> – CBO grantee

Institutional awareness of the CBO and their programming prior to the partnership facilitates trust. For example, institutional leaders at College of the Desert were aware of **OneFuture's** work in the community and had worked with the organization across multiple regional plan strategies. Similarly, San Bernardino Valley College leaders were drawn to **Big Brothers Big Sisters** because, as one said, "it's been established. Everyone knows the name." Institutional leaders who hear about the CBO from other postsecondary leaders also tend to facilitate trust and buy-in.

CBOs ensure program alignment with institutional goals, including equity or strategic plans, or educational programming

Institutions seek partnerships that are authentically aligned with their goals and that serve students. Likewise, CBOs build partnerships based on community needs. One CBO grantee discussed how every institution has its own priorities and goals and outlining how the CBO's programming can fit those goals is a necessary step in making the case for partnership.

> *"There's no one-size-fits-all strategy. Each strategy is individualized based on the partner. How do we put together almost like a toolkit of opportunities that we bring to every meeting, with every educational partner, so that we know what's on the table and all the different avenues that are available for partnership?"*
>
> – CBO grantee

For example, the Dean of Students and Director of the Basic Needs Center at Mount San Antonio College heard about **Rise** through an outreach email. At that time, the college had invested money in professional social workers but realized student need was greater than they had capacity to serve. The college was drawn to Rise's peer-to-peer case management model and saw the potential for student Navigators to provide the first level of engagement, allowing social workers to work more intentionally with high-level cases.

> *"We needed a peer-to-peer case management support that can create that first level of engagement, so then our social workers can do more intentional work with high level cases … As I got to know Rise and they kind of share their philosophy, they shared their engagement and their roles, I was like, okay, this can really be helpful. It's not where they just want to sell something or something, they're going to be very engaged in the whole process."*
>
> – Institutional partner

Soon after funding was identified, Rise and Mount San Antonio College signed a memorandum of understanding to initiate the partnership.

CBOs use data to communicate program need and value

CBOs use data to demonstrate program need and impact. For example, CBOs present data to institutions around the prevalence of student basic needs insecurity. Interviewees remarked that data specific to the institution or region, rather than general statistics, can create a more compelling message. Another CBO grantee spoke of how they use data to demonstrate the impact of services on students and the broader community.

> *"In terms of approach to the partnership, we always lead with data and how this program is going to not only benefit their students, but also their entire ecosystem. We always like to package everything with a bow and present it on a platter. That way, they can just focus on those relationship with the students and getting us in front of those students."*
>
> — CBO grantee

Similarly, institutional champions use CBO data to advocate for the partnership across the college.

> *"I feel like the other thing that I can bring to the table when I talk to people about this, I'm like, 'Well, they're evaluating this at every single campus that they're on. And the data show that this works. It's not just like some fly-by-night fluke thing. It's working at campuses around the country.'"*
>
> — Institutional partner

Data supporting program need and value

- Regional need for the program, including high school graduation outcomes, college and career readiness, basic needs insecurity, and workforce outcomes

- Number of students served and their characteristics (i.e., demographics, locale)

- Participant postsecondary persistence and completion outcomes

- Comparative analysis of participant and non-participant outcomes

- Participant self-reported data on program experiences (i.e., surveys, interviews)

CBOs bring student voice to speak to the value of the program

CBOs partner with student participants to champion and raise awareness about the program and its services. If a CBO has already formed institutional partnerships, it may ask students to be program ambassadors at a new site. One CBO grantee highlighted the importance of bringing students to advocate for the program with institutional leaders:

> *"If you can get four or five students to sit down with a department chair, or with an administrator, and have a real discussion together and listen to each other—that can be super powerful, very effective."*

> – CBO grantee

CBOs shared stories of student success in making the case for partnering with an institution. As one CBO grantee shared, "when you have successful stories … it starts to crack open the door for more engagement."

CBOs and institutions clarify expectations at the start of the partnership

CBOs and institutions recommended setting clear expectations at the outset of a partnership. The CBO and institution should clarify what each is contributing to the partnership, including staffing and funding. CBOs also recommended developing joint metrics with the institution to foster collaboration and so that "you all are working together as opposed to working on the same thing, just in different places." Similarly, one institutional partner discussed challenges that arise when expectations are not clearly outlined, including staff burnout and decreased capacity, stating:

> *"I think it's important for the institution to ask those additional questions. Well, what does this mean? So, you provide the service, but if it's occurring here, then what responsibility may there be of the college? Do we need help with staffing? I think just making sure what part of the partnership are we responsible for and what will you do, to make sure that both sides in agreement with that, because once it starts, you don't want anything to ruin the partnership or create tension or confusion or misunderstanding."*
>
> — Institutional partner

Considerations when formalizing a partnership

- Funding provided by the CBO and the institution
- Staffing requirements of the CBO and the institution
- Joint growth and progress metrics for the CBO and institution
- Commitment by the institution to support student recruitment
- Check-ins between the CBO and institution as the partnership progresses to determine whether agreed-upon responsibilities are working for both parties

Institutions and CBOs discussed the importance of formalized documents like memorandums of understanding or strategic plans to document the expectations of each partner. CBOs emphasized the importance of including all relevant partners in determining the goals of the partnership and expectations. Then, during the partnership, as one participant said, "we're not arguing about what needs to be done. We're figuring out how we get there." As the partnership develops, CBOs and institutional partners should regularly check in about the partnership to determine whether the expectations for each entity need to shift.

Strategies for sustaining partnerships

CBOs and institutions can use several strategies to sustain partnerships once they are formed. Representatives of both CBOs and institutions emphasized the importance of integrating CBOs into the institutional culture, relationship-building between the CBO and institution, and sustainable funding for the partnership.

Institutions and CBOs can integrate services and programming into institutional systems

A formalized partnership does not mean full institutional buy-in. For example, faculty and staff members can be skeptical of the CBO's role at their institution. As a result, they may be hesitant to refer students to the CBO for services, potentially sidelining the CBO at the institution. As one institutional partner shared, when their partnership with the CBO began, there was skepticism among staff members:

"A lot of people were wondering, 'What is this?' Or 'How is this going to impede or interfere with what I'm trying to do or deliver to students?'"

— Institutional partner

Institutions can enact a series of strategies to support CBO integration into their campus systems and culture.

Institutional leadership should intentionally introduce a CBO to campus

Partnerships between CBOs and postsecondary institutions are strengthened when the CBO is integrated into the institutional culture. This integration begins when the CBO is first introduced on a campus. When institutions introduce a CBO to members of their faculty and staff, it is helpful to clearly identify roles and responsibilities and to include the CBO in organizational norms and routines. For example, CBO grantees and institutional partners shared that by including CBO staff members in all staff email communication and professional development opportunities, CBO and institutional staff members are better able to align their approaches to supporting students. As one institutional leader reflected:

"I realized very early on that how you introduce a program or an entity to a college and organization really sets the tone. I made it a point to be intentional, added them to our staff meetings, added to professional development, add them to our newsletters, added them to district."

— Institutional partner

Institutions should consider the physical location of the CBO on campus

Another important element to consider is the physical location of the CBO. At some colleges, CBOs are co-located with other departments on campus, which allows students to access services regardless of the provider. This also helps faculty and staff members to be more aware of the services provided by the CBO.

CBOs and institutional partners reflected that the location of the CBO on campus matters. One CBO grantee described that, when their partnership began, they were located in a building away from the other student services. A new president at the college led to a restructuring of services and the movement of the CBO. CBO leaders reflected on the importance of the move, saying:

> *"We were in the technology building, which is way on the other opposite side of campus. And it made more sense for us to be here because this is where all the student service offices are. So, they moved us here. It was an amazing move. I feel like we had more a collaborative relationship with other programs in the college."*
>
> – CBO grantee

According to the CBO grantee, moving their office to the student services building led to an increase in the number of students accessing services and to a more collaborative relationship with staff members on campus.

Institutions embed CBO services into institutional curriculum, policies, or programs

In addition to co-locating a CBO's physical space with existing services, embedding CBO services into an institution's curriculum, policies, or programs can reduce the barriers to access students may face. For example, the College of the Desert recently broadened program policies to support **OneFuture.** Students participating in the college's "Engage. Develop. Grow. Empower." program can now fulfill program requirements through support services offered by OneFuture, including programming and events. Previously, getting information out to students was challenging. Now, the college is encouraging students to participate in the program and engaging faculty to refer students, thereby integrating OneFuture into its culture, policies, and practices. Another example is **Braven,** which provides a credit-bearing course on career readiness for sophomores, juniors, and transfer students. Institutionalizing program services with course credit encourages students to participate because the course is not an extracurricular that might inhibit them from graduating on time. Some of Braven's partner institutions are requiring sophomore students to take the course.

Institutions and CBOs set up structures for ongoing communication

Institutions can sustain partnerships by setting up structures for ongoing communication about CBO services across the college. For example, San José State University created a "Founders Committee" with broad representation across campus to ensure that **Braven** wasn't "sidelined by the university."

"We have this committee; we call it the Founders Committee. And what we've been trying to do is make sure that there's representation on that committee from each of the colleges at the university. This is really important. Having the associate deans on it, so they can work with the department chairs in their college. I think if we didn't have that Founders Committee, they could very quickly be sidelined by the university."

<div align="right">– Institutional partner</div>

Similarly, **SparkPoint** recommends that their partner sites develop an advisory team or planning committee to regularly meet to discuss the partnership. One SparkPoint institutional partner developed a planning committee consisting of vice presidents and external partners such as the local food bank. This broad representation of interested parties set the stage for full institutional buy-in and support.

Strong relationships support partnership sustainability

Relationships between CBOs and institutions are critical to long-term partnership sustainability. However, such relationships take time, consistency, and regular communication to cultivate.

CBOs seek program champions across all levels of the institution

Institutional turnover is frequent and can change the commitment of leaders and staff members to supporting the CBO partnership. One institutional partner described the challenge of maintaining institutional buy-in through leadership and staff changes:

"The other piece that I would say is super important for sustainability is the relationship between the staff at Braven and the faculty and staff here on campus. I just think with any relationship, this issue of continuity and sustainability is one that is fragile, right? Because you have the devoted people who get involved in the beginning and then in the long term, how do you sustain that? How do we create that same sense of dedication and urgency with somebody else?"

<div align="right">– Institutional partner</div>

Strong relationships and program champions across all levels of the institution can support partnership sustainability. CBOs and institutional partners shared that CBOs should build relationships across the college, from members of the faculty and support staff to leadership. Oftentimes the people interacting directly with students and referring students to a CBO are members of the faculty and support staff, so it is important to develop strong relationships with a variety of partners. Some CBO grantees even recommended building relationships with staff members who work directly with students before approaching deans, presidents, and other college leaders.

"My advice would be, don't go high, high up and try to contact the dean and the president, and up here is your first go-to. Find your boots-on-the-ground, hardworking faculty member or admin person that is your champion and work your way up."

<div align="right">– CBO grantee</div>

Institutions and CBOs should be flexible, responsive, and adaptive

CBOs grantees agreed that it is important to be flexible, responsive, and available to support the institution. CBOs can show commitment to the partnership by responding to ongoing needs of the institution and following through on agreements.

"Being willing to be an active listener to what the institution's needs are and being responsive to that. I think establishing together with the partner, the framework that we're going to operate in and who's responsible for what, and then honoring that so that we come through with what we say we're doing to do."

<div align="right">– CBO grantee</div>

Similarly, CBOs reflected that institutional partners should be flexible, responsive, and open to collaboration. CBOs valued institutional partner collaboration on how to recruit and retain students in their programs and opportunities to embed their services in various areas of the institution, rather than restricting them to a particular service or area on campus. As one shared, "Our partnership was just more fluid and flexible—more of an open collaboration. It felt very open, like we were equal partners and really building this out."

CBOs can communicate data to institutions for continuous learning

Another CBO strategy to build and maintain strong relationships is to communicate student progress and outcomes data. Sharing data with partners demonstrates transparency and can highlight the value of the partnership:

> *"If there's not communication around outcomes, how the students are being served, how they're progressing, and how they're actually being impacted by the services, then institutions see less value in the partnership … So, there's continuous feedback loops around how the actual community is being served and what measurements we are looking at and if we should think about how to reevaluate what services might be offered on a regular basis."*
>
> — CBO grantee

CBOs collect and report data on program impact

- **Braven's** 2022 graduates are outpacing their peers nationally in strong job attainment by **17 percentage points** (64% vs. 47%) within six months of graduation

- **Big Brothers Big Sisters** shares the impact of its mentoring program in its **annual report**

- **SparkPoint** shares qualitative and quantitative findings in its **evaluation report**

Institutional partners can support continuous learning by allowing CBOs to access student data, such as academic outcomes, services needed (i.e., early alert systems, intake forms), or student participation in other campus support programs to track student progress and needs. In addition, CBOs can build trust with partners by directly addressing and discussing challenges they are experiencing. Trusting relationships among CBO and institutional staff members impacts the effectiveness and reach of these partnerships. As one CBO reflected, "building trust has opened up the door to serve more students." Ultimately, CBO-institutional partnerships are more sustainable when they are built on trusting relationships.

CBOs are partnering with institutions to apply for funding

CBOs are partnering with institutions to apply for federal and philanthropic grants. For example, one CBO is working on federal grants to support institutions in developing courses focused on student career outcomes.

> *"Last month they [institutional partner] reached out about a grant that they were applying to … what stood out is they were applying to it with the intent of institutionalizing the work that we're doing, which is a major breakthrough for us. It's not a contract that's year-to-year."*
>
> — CBO grantee

Braven strategically seeks federal grants that fund an institution's undergraduate career courses or credit-bearing courses focused on career outcomes. Braven has also located state funding for California institutions based on the number of Pell Grant-eligible students that attend the school to help students access Work-Study and internship money. As a Braven staff member shared, "We're trying to send all that money to the institution … there's a whole layer of complexity that goes with that and how Braven is thinking about staffing ourselves to support the institutions interested in applying for the grants." This type of strategic planning supports the sustainability of Braven's partnerships.

Federal and state grants supporting CBO services

- **High School Equivalency Program** provides funding to higher education institutions and CBOs that support migrant and seasonal farmworkers and members of their families

- **Title III-A** provides funding to colleges and universities to expand their capacity to serve low-income students

- **Title III-B** provides funding to Historically Black Colleges and Universities

- **Learning-Aligned Employment Program** supports students at public colleges and universities with funding and education-aligned, career-related employment

- **Postsecondary Success Grant** provides funding to higher education institutions and CBOs to equitably improve postsecondary outcomes

Impacts of effective partnerships

We conclude this report with early signs of change at the student, institution, and policy levels that are driven by CBO-institutional partnerships. This evidence draws on our conversations with CBOs, institutional partners, and students.

Students are benefiting from CBO services

Across campuses, student participants spoke of the benefits of participating in CBO services. They reflected that the organizations not only met their immediate basic needs (i.e., provided food, emergency support funds, housing), but also impacted their overall sense of well-being. One student we spoke to described how her participation in the CBO program supported her academics and also fostered a sense of belonging on campus:

> *"I want to note this has been my best two semesters that I've worked here. I made the President's List and I'm planning to transfer to Cal Poly in the fall. It's not just about working and fulfilling my purpose. It's really about having a family. They know who I am. They know what I've been through."*
>
> *— Student participant*

Participants often referred to CBO staff members and fellow student participants as "family" who they trusted and who had life experiences similar to their own. While students said they value the holistic student supports their colleges provide, they found the CBOs to be more accessible.

Rather than putting the burden on the student to ask for support, students felt that CBO staff members were deeply invested in understanding their needs, providing hands-on support, and connecting them to relevant services. As one student explained, "The college is so big, they tend to forget about you a little bit. If you don't reach out, they forget about you." In contrast, students find that the CBOs proactively reach out to determine if they need support and are responsive to their needs, which mitigates barriers students may face to accessing needed services. One student described that the CBO is "very responsive. Anytime, I can call or text them and get some type of help. I can get a response." Similarly, another student described, "every single person there is like, we'll do this for you, we'll do this for you. You just got to let us know, and we have all of these resources."

Institutions are shifting mindsets and cultures around CBOs as partners

In interviews, representatives of both CBOs and institutional partners spoke of shifts in institutional mindsets and cultures around their partnerships. CBOs reflected on how, through partnerships, institutions are recognizing the value of CBO services and the expertise that CBO leaders bring to their campuses. Over the two-year learning engagement, CBO grantees increasingly found that institutions are:

- Increasing referrals to the CBO
- Offering the CBO space on campus
- Providing data and data-sharing agreements for evaluation
- Relying on the CBO's expertise in supporting students and their knowledge of the community
- Partnering with the CBO beyond direct service activities, including policy advocacy, training, and participation on the organization's alignment teams

CBOs and institutions are influencing federal and state policy on holistic student supports

CBOs and institutions are taking a systems-change approach to working together to increase support for students, and in some cases to institutionalizing their partnerships. CBOs and institutions spoke of several examples of state and federal policies that provide funding mandates for basic needs support for students, such as the **Hunger Free Campus Bill** and **California Assembly Bill 132**. CBOs find that these policies first provide funding to start basic needs programs and set the tone at the institutions, which can pave the way for more openness to partnerships and to prioritizing holistic student supports.

CBOs shared that they are leveraging these policies and advocating for similar policies in their state or region. For example, CBOs and institutions are working together to influence federal and state policy around holistic student supports. **Braven** is partnering with the San José University president to advocate for additional federal funding to go to public institutions for credit-bearing courses focused on career outcomes. **Big Brothers Big Sisters** is working to change state policy that would provide credits for community college students who are participating in mentorship programs.

Next steps for initiating and sustaining partnerships

Findings from CBOs, their partner institutions, and student participants provide key recommendations for higher education institutions, funders, advocates, and policymakers to support initiating and sustaining CBO-institutional partnerships.

Next steps for initiating partnerships

Higher education institutions can shift mindsets around supporting students holistically

The pandemic demonstrated that institutions must shift mindsets around supporting students holistically and adapt to fully integrate whole person supports. The increase in awareness, research, and policy emphasizing the importance of holistic student supports created a space for higher education institutions—including leaders and members of the faculty and staff—to rethink how they serve their students.

The CBOs and institutions interviewed for this study reflected on the increased attention to student basic needs services and future financial stability, such as through career readiness opportunities. We recommend that institutions continue to prioritize student well-being by funding and staffing holistic student supports. We also recommend institutionalizing basic needs services, such as through a basic needs center or in an equity or strategic plan. Institutions can turn to their local communities for support in developing the capacity to support student well-being. By leveraging culturally responsive, community-based support—including employers, workforce associations, community-based organizations, philanthropists, and funders—institutions can provide students with the services they need to be successful. As one of the institutional partners reflected, "we certainly cannot do it all alone and the stronger partnerships are, the better able we're able to serve our students." In doing so, higher education can begin to shift mindsets around who can support students and how, returning agency and power to their communities.

Funders and philanthropists can provide initial funding for new partnerships and consider long-term support

CBO grantees reflected on the need for seed funding to stimulate partnerships. Foundations are in an ideal position to offer planning or start-up grants to begin institutional support and cover initial planning costs. Philanthropy can also play a key role in supporting CBOs' move into the space of higher education partnerships and in supporting CBOs already in partnerships to innovate or scale. Further, **CBOs found that institutions were more open to partnership when the CBO came with existing philanthropic funding.** While such funding can jump start a partnership, organizations must also recognize that

forming institutional partnerships is a dynamic process. Nearly all the interviewed CBOs reflected on how their initial plans for partnership changed since applying for the grant. Grantees valued funder flexibility and the ability to switch plans or approaches mid-stream.

Throughout our interviews, we learned that forming partnerships is a challenging and time-consuming process. Therefore, funders interested in supporting CBOs in forming new partnerships should make a long-term commitment. Long-term funding for partnership initiation can help the CBO keep up momentum with new partnerships. As one CBO leader reflected, "you don't automatically start raising funds, it's a long journey for that if you really want to get to sustainability." Long-term funding streams provide CBOs with the space to form new partnerships, cultivate trust, and locate and apply for other funding sources, such as federal grants, with institutional partners.

Next steps for sustaining partnerships

Advocates and policymakers can call for federal and state policy promoting holistic student support

CBO grantees and institutional partners discussed the importance of federal and state policies in promoting the provision of holistic student supports. Policy sets the tone for institutional leaders to support students holistically. For example, CBO representatives and institutional leaders reflected on the impact of **California Assembly Bill 132** (AB 132) on strengthening their partnerships and capacity to provide basic needs services. AB 132 was passed in 2021 and allocated $100 million to establish new basic needs centers and support existing centers across the California community college system, with the goal of establishing centers on all community college campuses. CBOs providing holistic student supports are ideally positioned to partner with institutions to meet the requirements of AB 132, paving the way for more partnerships.

A policy agenda aligned with community workforce needs can support students' current and future financial stability. For example, policies that promote the provision of credit-bearing courses focused on career outcomes or expanding holistic student supports to four-year colleges and universities will continue to support students and partnerships. Policies that include options for sustainable funding streams are particularly important.

Philanthropists can encourage sustainable funding and collective learning

Sustainable funding. While philanthropy can support CBOs begin or expand partnerships, there remains a need for sustainable, long-term funding streams. Federal, state, and other public funding is provided to institutions to provide holistic student supports. The CBOs interviewed for this project found success in partnering with higher education institutions on longer-term federal grants to support their work. Private funders can support CBOs in identifying public sector funding streams aligned with their program goals to apply for along with their institutional partners. CBOs valued philanthropic funders who had context

expertise and knowledge of state and federal policies that may support or hinder how the organization provides services. To support CBOs' future funding, philanthropists could create a map or resource of dynamic funding opportunities related to holistic student supports in higher education. Additionally, philanthropists can encourage private and public partnerships to offer CBOs long-term, sustainable funding.

Collective learning. The CBOs involved in the CBO-Institutional Partnership Project valued the opportunity to learn from one another and share practices. Similarly, interviewees recommended developing a space for ongoing collective learning and partnerships among CBOs across the state. Community of practice networks or coalitions could provide spaces for practitioners to share practices and learnings as well as a guide or framework to help CBOs interested in partnering with institutions to establish themselves. These networks use continuous improvement practices to learn what works, for whom, and under what conditions. In addition to sharing practices, a coalition of CBO representatives could work to influence or develop public policy around college student basic needs and holistic student supports to foster sustainable change.

Collective impact. Early evidence from evaluations of CBOs partnering with higher education institutions demonstrates their impacts on student persistence and retention (Almeida & Allen, 2017; Anderson et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2018). However, there remains limited data on the collective effects of CBO-institutional partnerships. CBO grantees recommended that they begin to push toward an accountability framework including collectively defined metrics to capture successes across programs. CBOs could leverage data demonstrating their collective impact to make the case for partnerships with higher education institutions and other entities, secure private and public funding, and advocate for state and federal policies to provide partnership incentives and supports.

Conclusion

In the face of increasing college student basic needs insecurity across the country, there is a movement in research, policy, and advocacy to recognize and support such needs (see the social media hashtag #RealCollege). In California, higher education institutions are increasingly partnering with CBOs to provide necessary basic needs supports to students. As a learning partner working alongside College Future Foundation grantees, we heard how these CBOs act as critical partners to higher education institutions. CBOs directly support students by providing culturally responsive, asset-based services and by advocating for the needs of students, their families, and their communities. However, we found that partnerships between CBOs and higher education institutions can be difficult to initiate and sustain. The findings in this report highlight strategies CBOs, higher education institutions, funders, and other stakeholders can take to create the conditions for thriving partnerships that support students' well-being.

We also learned about what's needed at a systems level to strengthen the partnership movement so that students continue to benefit from critical services. Advocacy, funding, and policy can shift mindsets and culture in higher education, institutionalize holistic student supports, and increase the prevalence of CBO-institutional partnerships. High rates of student basic needs insecurity, and disparities among who have access to support, necessitate a change to better support students (Goldrick-Rab, 2023). CBOs, higher education institutions, funders, policymakers, and others should recognize this need and work to address it by institutionalizing comprehensive student supports.
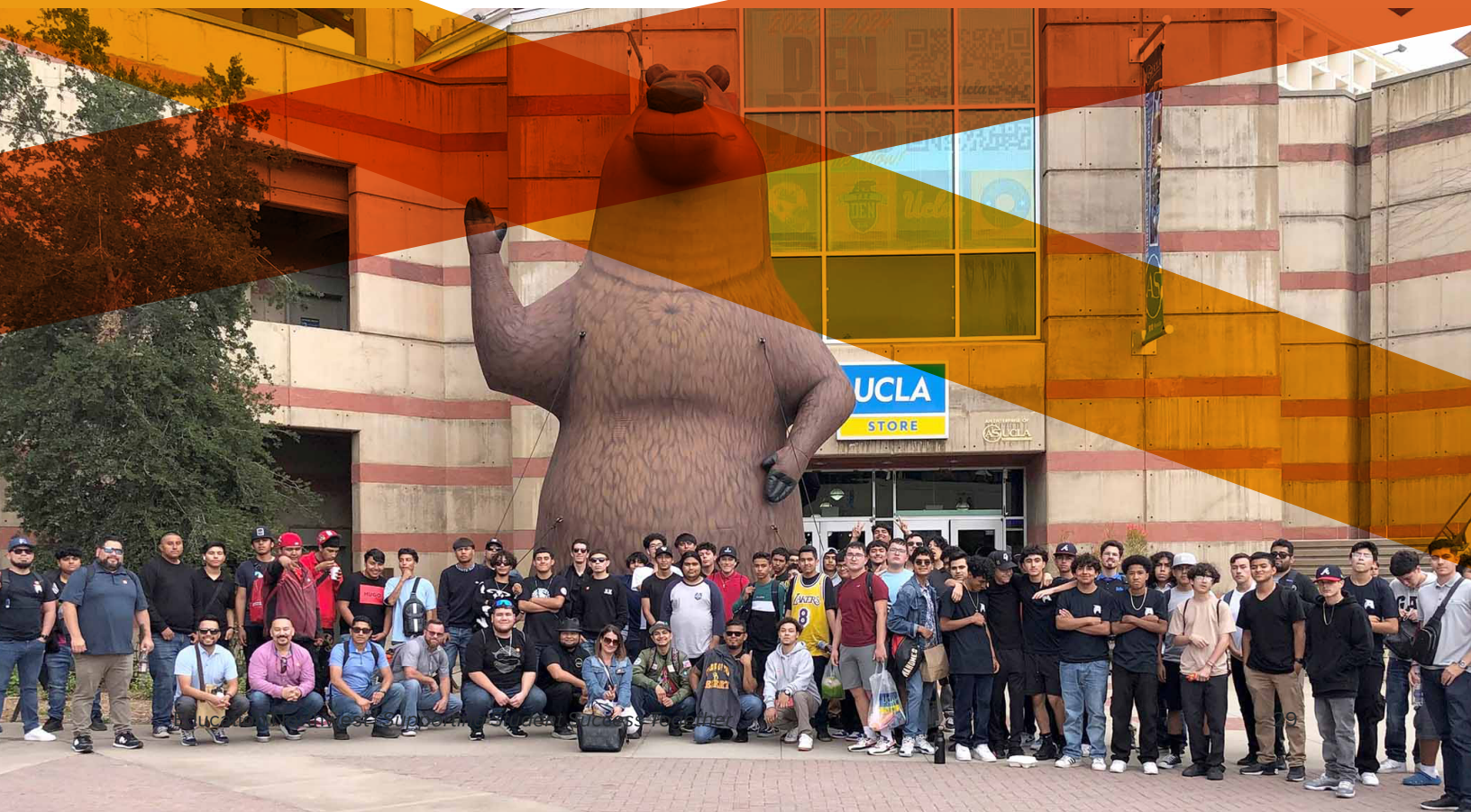
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Appendix A. Resource Links

Landscape Scan

https://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/pdf/cff-landscape-scan-508c.pdf

CBO Directory

https://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/pdf/cff-directory-cbos-508c.pdf

Case Studies

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County and the Inland Empire. https://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/pdf/cff-casestudy-big-brothers-sisters-orange-county-508c.pdf

Braven. https://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/pdf/cff-casestudy-braven-508c.pdf

OneFuture Coachella Valley. https://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/pdf/cff-casestudy-onefuture-coachella-valley-508c.pdf

Rise Student Navigator Network. https://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/pdf/cff-casestudy-rise-student-navigator-network-508c.pdf

United Way Bay Area's SparkPoint program. https://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/pdf/cff-casestudy-united-way-bay-area-sparkpoint-508c.pdf