

Postsecondary opportunity for immigrant high school students: Promoting equity through schoolwide structures, programs, and culture



Students from Brooklyn High School, NYC

Abstract

High schools play an important role in immigrant students' journeys to postsecondary readiness. Schools with expertise in serving immigrant students have developed different strategies and systems to support that readiness. Using a process of inquiry and reflection, [Internationals Network for Public Schools](#) worked collaboratively with a group of New York City-based high schools to strengthen existing postsecondary readiness systems. This brief shares some real-world examples of how schools that center immigrant English learners (ELs) address their college readiness needs.

Introduction

Immigrant students who enter the United States during middle or high school are but a few years shy of applying to college, giving them only a short time to become familiar with the U.S. college application process and its requirements. While students who are the first in their families to attend college face significant barriers to accessing postsecondary pathways, immigrant students who enter U.S. schools in their high school years and their families face additional hurdles (Suarez-Orozco, Yoshikawa & Tseng, 2015). These include the complexity of the U.S. postsecondary school system and its multiplicity of options, such as two-year and four-year programs in public, private and for-profit colleges and universities, as well as trade schools and institutions offering training but not accreditation. Crucial information may not be linguistically accessible or culturally comprehensible. Further difficulties may emerge from the many complex facets of financial aid, subsidized and unsubsidized loans, grants and scholarships, and the circulation of significant misinformation about college access (Tornatzky, Cutler & Lee, 2002).

High school students and families who are new to U.S. postsecondary education often rely on their high schools for support in negotiating the hurdles mentioned. Yet high schools serving immigrant students and multilingual learners have not always attended to the **distinct needs of new immigrants** throughout the process of exploring colleges, applying for admission, and accessing financial aid. Regardless of whether a high school

has two dozen or two thousand immigrant students and multilingual learners, it must create systems and structures to address their particular postsecondary readiness needs.

This issue of Internationals Network for Public Schools' Learning Brief series lays out the importance of systems, structures, programs, and school culture in supporting immigrant high school students in their journey to postsecondary readiness. In the pages that follow, we share our unique, data-driven perspective on the routes to college readiness and lay out a strategic process tested by educators in Internationals Network's New York City region to support improving their institutions' college access infrastructure. This second brief explores the rationale for doing so and shares the strategies employed, along with the artifacts produced and the changes that emerged. Central to the work we describe is an inquiry approach that relies on process mapping and gap analysis to explore and improve intentional school-level structures for supporting immigrant students along the pathway to learn about, apply for, and enroll in college.

About Internationals Network's Learning Briefs

Learning Briefs share Internationals Network's successes, learning and recommendations from across our network of public secondary schools. Our first brief detailed our exploration of the post-secondary pathways of multiple high school graduation cohorts of immigrant high school English learners.

[Read Brief 1](#)

Who Enrolls in College?

In the United States, the path to college and career commences in high school, where students learn academic content and skills to prepare them for independent lives. They may apply to universities and seek out financial aid in the final year of high school, but the journey begins much earlier, ideally as early as in middle school. The U.S. high school graduation rate has risen over time, and in 2018-19 stood at 86 percent nationally. (Note that there are varying exit requirements among states, some of which require multiple exams before giving a diploma, while others have no exit exams.)

Not all those who graduate enter postsecondary programs, and the numbers differ along a number of indicators. Nationally, 76 percent of seniors who graduated in 2018 from low-poverty high schools (those in which less than a quarter of students qualify for a federal program providing free or reduced-price lunch, or FRPL) enrolled in college immediately (National Student Clearinghouse, 2019). Among the graduating class of 2018 in schools classified as high poverty (having more than 75 percent qualifying for FRPL), immediate enrollments dropped to 55 percent.

While existing datasets identify students as low-income, as immigrants, and as English learners, there is no exact data on the rates of college enrollment among high school graduates who are ELs and/or immigrants. In the first issue of the [Learning Brief Series](#), we outlined the limitations of the existing data on immigrants who were educated in U.S. high schools, as well as the lack of data on English learners and former ELs in U.S. postsecondary institutions. We know that, of the 19.6 million students currently attending U.S. postsecondary institutions, 1.7 million, or about 8.7 percent, are immigrants, of whom about 427,000, or 25 percent, are undocumented. The data limitations mean that we do not know how many of these immigrant students were educated in a U.S. high school. In addition to those students, 914,000, or 5 percent, of non-immigrant international students attend U.S. postsecondary institutions (Higher Education Immigration Portal, n.d.) Because they are included in the same subset of students, it is difficult to tease apart which immigrant students graduated from a U.S. high school before attending a U.S. postsecondary institution.

Prior research has found significant disparities in college access among U.S. K-12 students, and these differences fall directly along lines of ethnicity, immigrant

generation, and citizenship. In research examining these and other intersecting factors, Covarrubias and Lara (2014) illuminate massive disparities in college enrollment and completion among young people of Mexican origin, with foreign-born and undocumented youth enrolling in college and completing degrees at a fraction of the rate of their U.S.-born and naturalized counterparts. Other research has shown that foreign-born status, especially among those whose parents have not completed higher education, is aligned closely with diminished likelihood of attending college (Suarez-Orozco, Yoshikawa & Tseng, 2015). For immigrant students who are underrepresented among college-goers, high school can play a transformative role in the access, readiness and enrollment process. Evidenced by Internationals Network college enrollment rates, recently arrived immigrant youth **can** go on to college when given responsive and appropriate support at the high school level.

About Internationals Network for Public Schools

As the only national school development and support organization that focuses exclusively on immigrant learners in U.S. middle and high schools, Internationals Network for Public Schools has developed significant expertise over more than 30 years, with an innovative research-based, practitioner-driven approach that has led to success for thousands of newcomer adolescents. Every element of an Internationals Network school is designed to prepare immigrant youth for success beyond graduation. These include culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy, hands-on project-based learning in content areas that develop academic knowledge along with English proficiency, and teachers and staff who continue their own professional learning to deepen expertise and share it across the network.

As outlined in our first [Learning Brief](#), about 70 percent of Internationals Network's New York City graduates enroll in U.S. colleges, a rate somewhat lower than the reported 75 percent average for graduates of low-poverty schools, but significantly higher than the U.S. average of 55 percent for students at high poverty schools¹ (NSC Research Center, 2019). Internationals Network schools are designed holistically to address academics, language development, and socioemotional needs to ensure that students are prepared for whatever

¹ The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center defines low poverty schools as having less than 25 percent of the student body qualifying for federal lunch assistance and high poverty schools as having 75 percent. Internationals Network's New York City schools average 90 percent.

direction they choose to take after high school. To support those students seeking to enter college, Internationals developed a college guide for immigrant parents in 2012, in partnership with the New York Immigration Coalition. This [College Action Guide](#) (available also in [Spanish](#) and [Chinese](#)) details what families can do to help their students through the college readiness process. Schools in the Internationals Network intentionally develop communities to include families in that process. Our current work, with generous support from [The Carol and Milton Petrie Foundation](#), also provides direct support to school staff in pursuit of improved postsecondary access.

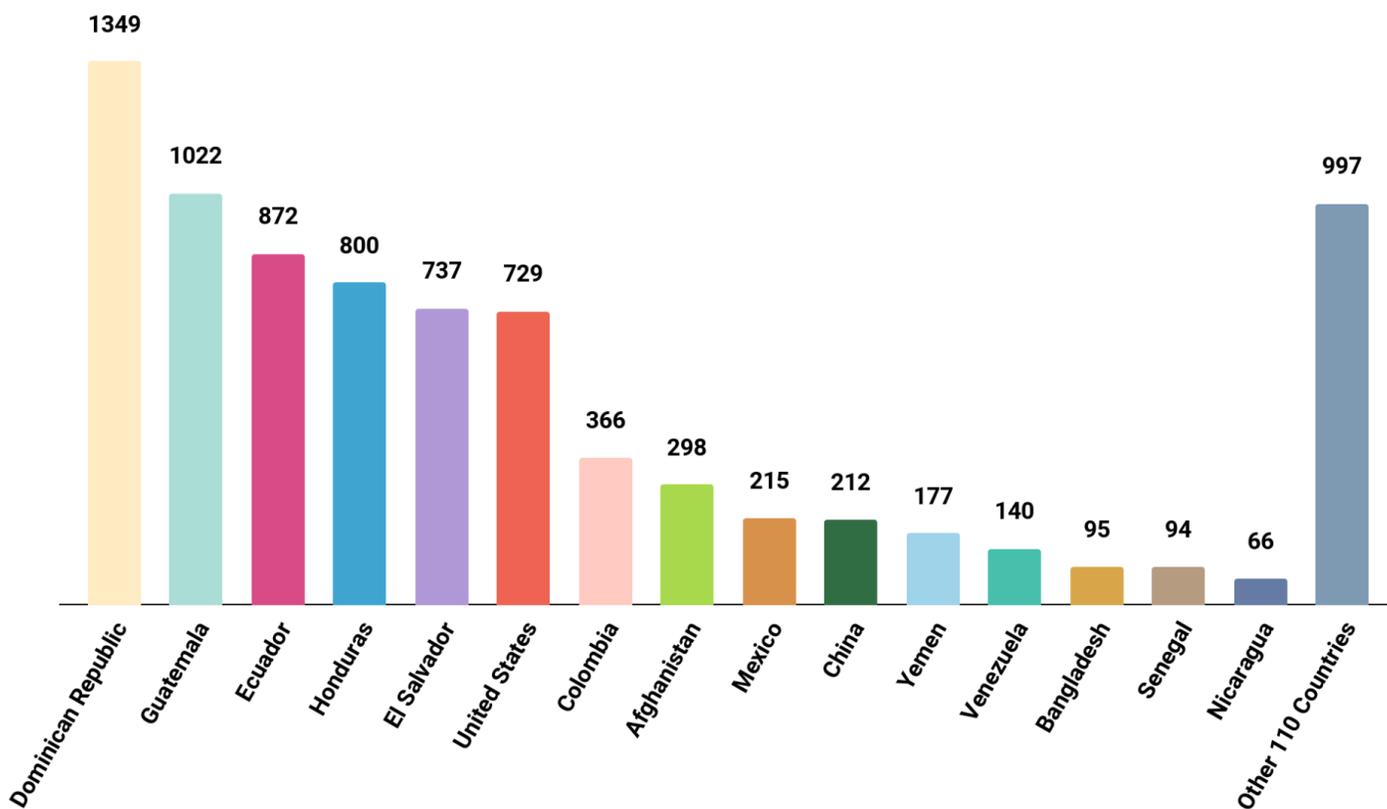
Bolstering Postsecondary Readiness Within Our Network

Starting in Summer 2021, with funding by The Carol and Milton Petrie Foundation, Internationals Network set out to codify and strengthen the work of postsecondary readiness in its New York City network high schools. Internationals Network schools are district-run public high schools with enrollments of between 350 and 500 students, all of whom enter in ninth grade identified as English learners with fewer than four years in the U.S. At the start of school year 2022-23, there were more than 8,000 students enrolled in Internationals schools across nine public school districts and 30 middle and high schools. Schools accept students on a rolling basis throughout the school year; this number will rise over the coming months. About 9 percent of these currently enrolled students were born in the U.S.; the remaining 91 percent were born in 124 countries across the globe. Below illustrates countries of students in our network schools.



Internationals Network SY 2022-23 Enrollment by Place of Birth

Based on enrollment data from 27 schools & academies in Internationals Network



-----> 15 Most Represented Countries -----> Other 110 Countries

Nearly 90 percent of Internationals' students were born in the 15 countries listed above on the left; the remaining 10 percent were born in an additional 110 countries. Students in Internationals Network schools hail from North and South America, the Caribbean, Europe, Central, Eastern, and Southeast Asian, the Pacific Islands, and North, West, Central, East, and Southern Africa. Geographically, they represent 125 countries, and linguistically, 99 languages. While all students in our schools are classified as English Learners when they first enroll, many enter with proficiency in two or more languages other than English.

As the only organization in the United States that supports a network of schools focusing on immigrant multilingual learners, Internationals Network has deep expertise in innovative instruction, structures, and leadership to best support immigrant youth toward graduation. Our network has demonstrated success in graduating multilingual learners at rates beyond those of their peers (Kessler, Wentworth & Darling-Hammond, 2018; Roc, Ross & Hernandez, 2019; Zeiser, Mills, Wulach, & Garet, 2016).² To address postsecondary readiness, we have explored the complexities of how exactly to help students new to the U.S. school system become ready for their postsecondary journeys. In collaborative work with schools, we have learned what systems are in place within our network, what resources are available, and have used data and connections with alumni to explore how our graduates are doing once they have high school diplomas in hand. Our approach to supporting schools has led to our current focus on engaging our entire network while digging into inquiry work with smaller cohorts, described later in this brief. To begin this process, we have had to explore the concept of *postsecondary readiness*.

The Complexities of “College Readiness”

With the growth of accountability culture in U.S. K-12 education and the widespread collection and tracking of student level demographic and achievement data, each public high school in New York City is awarded a college readiness index score. This score comprises the percentage of students who have demonstrated academic achievement through a predetermined set of primarily traditional test-based academic indicators, which include SAT, ACT and New York Regents exams (New York City Department of Education, 2020). Most districts have some version

of such a score, with key indicators from a combination of course titles, grade point averages, and tests (Conley, 2007). The underlying logic is that students must be academically prepared for college in order to succeed and that these tests are suited to evaluate that readiness.

Defining readiness as solely a measure of academic preparation has been shown to be reductive along multiple dimensions. Internationals Network schools draw on research that seeks to broaden the conversation about readiness: Multiple scholars have identified more comprehensive knowledge and skills youth need to be able to apply to, enroll in, and succeed in postsecondary pathways (Conley, 2007; Hooker & Brand, 2009, 2010; Tornatzky, Cutler & Lee, 2002). This expanded definition of “college knowledge” (Conley, 2007; Hooker & Brand, 2009, 2010) includes understanding the landscape of postsecondary U.S. education (e.g., types of institutions and their differences; available options to apply for and receive financial aid; types of interpersonal and developmental skills needed to succeed; ways that high school differs from college). It also includes logistical knowledge and resources to navigate the complexities of the application process itself. According to the American Youth Policy Forum, college knowledge “involves the development of a wide variety of skills, abilities, and dispositions well beyond the academic domain” (Hooker & Brand, 76). Traditional readiness indices do little to capture the size of the gap between the college knowledge that **students and families bring** to the process of preparing for postsecondary paths and what **schools do** to close that gap.

In its report *Success at Every Step*, American Youth Policy Forum (Hooker & Brand, 2009) evaluated 23 programs that had a measurable impact on the postsecondary readiness of first generation low-income youth. As a result of their findings, they recommend that schools create programs that provide support along the key dimensions of college knowledge (see Table 1 below). The multifaceted school-based programs that foster college readiness involve multiple stakeholders, including the college counselor, teachers, administrators, and community partners. Internationals Network schools in New York City have worked to include these elements in their postsecondary access programs. Our College Access work since 2021 has focused on how to strengthen, connect, and streamline these elements.

² Additional research about Internationals Network for Public Schools can be found at <https://www.internationalsnetwork.org/about/#our-impact> under “Impact.”

Contrasting Elements of College Readiness

As defined by NYC DoE College Readiness Index

This metric shows the percentage of students in a high school's four-year cohort who, by August after their fourth year, graduated and met the standards of the City University of New York (CUNY) for college readiness in English and math.

This includes benchmark scores on

- Regents Exams
- SAT Exams
- CUNY Assessment Tests
- College credit in Algebra II/Trig/Pre-calculus (dual enrollment)

Recommended by research – Elements integrated into Internationals Network schools

Holistic programs that provide:

- Academic preparation
- Research skills
- Self-efficacy
- Support to navigate the college search
 - Exposure to/information about different majors and careers
- Guidance with admissions processes
- Support in completing FAFSA/financial aid forms
- Information about
 - Types of institutions
 - Financial aid (including for undocumented students)
 - Varieties of loans
- Exposure to college environments through
 - Dual enrollment
 - Campus visits
 - Mentoring relationships
 - Affinity group connections on campus

Allocation of resources is key to the success of domestic immigrant high school students³ (Núñez et al., 2016). They may be English Learners or former English learners. Regardless of nomenclature, the pathways immigrant students can take to postsecondary success differ qualitatively and quantitatively from those of U.S.-born students who have attended school entirely in the U.S. (see Learning Brief 1; Núñez et al., 2016). Their journey to and through the postsecondary space is partly shaped by the willingness and foresight of local and state governments to allocate, support, and/or create EL-specific resources that facilitate readiness, access, and persistence. To understand what college-readiness, access, and success can look like for domestic immigrant college students, it is imperative to explore the allocation of funds in support of these students and their families. Financial allocations specifically supporting English language development are largely done at the state level (Millard, 2015), and how funds are used differs widely by state, district, and school.

Financial and personnel resources are necessary for schools to provide support in developing college knowledge among immigrant high school students and their families, and in addressing readiness gaps. Federal Title III funding is available to districts to provide services for English learners. In addition to addressing English language development, it is key that districts and schools allocate resources to foster postsecondary readiness among their multilingual learners. Given the documented disparities, it is clear that some students require more resources and support to prepare for and enter college. The New York City Department of Education has sought to mitigate funding disparities among schools by making available grants such as [College Access 4 All](#), which provides funds, resources, and support to individual schools to bolster postsecondary readiness.

³ We use the term “domestic immigrant students” to refer to foreign-born students who immigrate to the U.S. in middle or high school and complete their high school in the U.S.

High Schools' Singular Role in Fostering College Readiness

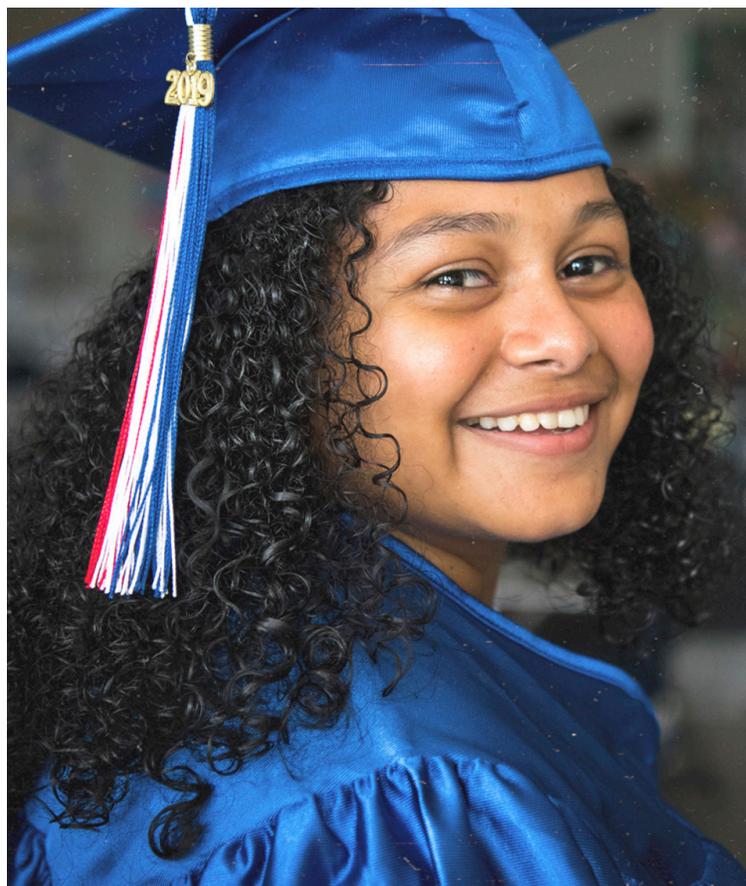
High school plays a significant role in the postsecondary readiness journey of all students. However, for students who are the first in their families to attend college and unfamiliar with the U.S. school system, who may have little access to adults at home with college knowledge, the high school is the singularly most important source of information and support (Lee & Eckstrom, 1987; Shill, 1987). College counselors are the key contact for postsecondary applications, but they traditionally have workloads oriented more toward scheduling and administrative duties. This, coupled with excessive student caseloads, leaves high school counselors with little time to provide one-on-one support to individual students who need assistance along their pre-college pathway (Johnson, Rochkin & Ott, 2010). As a result, students who lack college knowledge are disproportionately disadvantaged, as contact with the counselor has been shown to impact course-taking and college applications (Lee & Eckstrom, 1987). In some traditional high schools, some students – in particular those planning to attend community college or those with no concrete college plans — have no access to pre-college counseling at all, nor any opportunity to discuss postsecondary plans with a counselor (Chapman, O'Brien, & DeMasi, 1987; Lee & Eckstrom, 1987). Postsecondary guidance in high school has been revealed to be an often one-way process, initiated by the student rather than teachers or counselors, leaving students who have gaps in college knowledge even further behind.

“Recruiting students for dual enrollment programs, communicating market and labor information, assisting with applications, promoting goal setting, and identifying personalized strategies for attaining goals are often provided only for a few students who know the right questions to ask or who are in the right place at the right time to receive these services.” (McWhorter, 2007, p. 14)

Internationals Network schools have learned how challenging it can be to build postsecondary readiness programs. As outlined, it is no small feat for high schools to foster college knowledge so that first-generation domestic immigrant college-goers have sufficient information, knowledge, and skills to succeed in their postsecondary journeys. These are the students who “are least likely to be able to turn to their families as an alternative or supplemental support of information in these matters” (Lee & Eckstrom, 1987, p. 306). Guidance counselors,

teachers and all school staff involved in the process must be knowledgeable about factors that affect students' college access, including immigration status (Kreisberg & Hsin, 2021), English language proficiency, and scores on standardized tests, which are often used as proxies by colleges to channel students into remedial coursework (Núñez, 2016, pp. 44, 66). In addition, readiness programs must foster financial awareness and ensure that eligible students apply for aid.

The process of navigating financial aid and understanding eligibility can discourage potential applicants (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013; Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos & Sanbonmatsu, 2012; Bell, Rowan-Kenyon & Perna, 2009). Intentional, targeted programs that demystify financial aid, engendering the accurate understanding of college costs and financial aid options, coupled with college counseling, can support behavior that improves college access (George-Jackson & Gast, 2015, p. 217), including FAFSA completions and Pell Grant attainment (Bettinger et al., 2012). The assumption that students, specifically newly arrived immigrant students, have the full agency to advocate for themselves in accessing postsecondary options has been revealed time and again to be an approach that undermines first-generation, immigrant, and undocumented students in applying to college.



Student from Alexandria City High School, VA

Alternatives to the Lone Guidance Counselor: Schoolwide Structures

Recent research on reforms to address inequities in school counseling has underscored the importance of schoolwide systems and collaborations across roles to ensure that students receive the information, skills, and support needed to succeed (McKillip, Rawls & Barry, 2012). To address the more complete picture of college readiness, Internationals Network high schools design structures and processes to close the gap between what students know when they enter high school and what they need to know and be able to do to be truly, holistically college-ready. Postsecondary guidance in Internationals Network's New York City high schools is designed with precisely the whole-school, collaborative approach that research has determined to be pivotal for students who need to build social capital to access college (McKillip et al., 2012). To the right is a list of schoolwide systems and structures designed by Internationals Network high schools to address the college knowledge needs of newcomer multilingual youth.

Postsecondary advising in Internationals Network New York City schools is not left to chance; it is intentionally built into students' schedules. Many Internationals Network schools use advisory class time to strengthen students' college knowledge, help them explore majors and careers, foster understanding of financial aid options, and to provide support for college applications. While advisory and college awareness classes are growing in popularity across the U.S., Internationals Network schools structure them with immigrant multilingual learners in mind. Rather than using scripted or "off the shelf" college lessons, Internationals Network schools use homegrown or heavily adapted strategies and materials that are linguistically accessible and alert to students' specific realities. Internationals Network schools also provide students one-on-one time with counselors to work on college applications. In addition, counselors reach out to parents and have in-person or virtual meetings. Some schools have partnered with community organizations to provide linguistically and culturally responsive workshops to parents, in particular on financial aid.

As public secondary institutions designed to foster success among recently arrived immigrant youth, Internationals Network schools seek to prepare graduates for their next steps. The structures put in place lead, nearly without exception, to every eligible senior applying to a postsecondary program. Imperative to the success of this approach is building connections with colleges.

Internationals Network Schoolwide Postsecondary Readiness Supports

- **Advisory**
Example: [Overview](#), [Scope & Sequence](#)
- **One-to-one student support (pull-out/push-in/ before school/after school)**
- **Dedicated college advising staff (counselor, teacher, external partner, community liaison, etc.)**
- **Designated staff team to lead and plan college-access curriculum**
- **Other staffing, such as community associate (e.g., hiring of alumni)**
Example: [Community Associate](#)
- **Designated college support class**
Example: [Sample Lessons](#)
- **Outside partner/community-based organization support; partnerships with external college access and success organizations**
Example: [College Access Research and Action](#)
- **Team approach to postsecondary readiness: counselor, administration, and grade-level teams; distributed college responsibilities across instructional and support staff**
- **Partnerships with universities to provide social work interns who take on college advising duties**
Example: [NYU College Advising Corps](#)
- **District financial support for schoolwide programming through college access initiatives**
Example: [College Access 4ALL](#)
- **Parent nights and parent information sessions**
Example: [Parent session flyer](#), [Photo 1](#), [Photo 2](#)
- **Alumni panels to share college experiences with students**
Examples: [Photos](#) and [Video](#)

Our Manager of Postsecondary Readiness supports New York City schools directly by meeting with admissions counselors to help them understand the unique strengths and needs of Internationals Network students. These relationships are fostered over time and include campus visits. Over time, they have led to increased applications at partner colleges.

The Counselor as Linchpin

Even in schools in which staff share responsibility for fostering students' college knowledge, the college counselor plays a unique and pivotal role. Because of differences in funding formulas and allocations, the counselor role is staffed differently depending on the school's size, budget and student population. Staff members in the college counselor role can include trained college guidance professionals, teachers, community partners, or college interns. One college counselor reflects:

"Fourteen years ago when I started, my focus was on college access and I relied on community partners like [Learning Leaders](#). I was the only counselor in the building and soon found that college access support and social emotional needs were competing for my time. One year I had 12 students on suicide watch and felt I was doing a huge disservice to students. With so many students and so many needs, I constantly felt like I was neglecting something important.

Finally, I said, "Nope, this is not working. I need to look for interns and recruit an army of them or else one area will always suffer." I am a bilingual certified school counselor, so I put my name on every college partner list I could find to host interns. Interns helped tremendously addressing the socioemotional needs and completing applications, so I was able to help students apply to private colleges and more competitive state schools. To ease the burden on applying for scholarships, I reached out to an organization called [Bottomline](#) to work with students directly.

Finally I am in a more sustainable place: We have hired a part-time counselor who works with seniors and socioemotional needs. Now that there are two of us, more can get done. I also have an intern for the fall and spring semester, and this year Bottomline is working at our school twice a week, along with a part-time college adviser from [CUNY's K-16 initiative](#)."

– Linda Ponciano, Bilingual School Counselor, [International High School at Prospect Heights](#)

Over the past decade, with a growing awareness that students need social and emotional support, the field has shifted away from the term "guidance counselor" toward that of "school counselor." Schools have social workers who act as the primary point for social-emotional learning, but a school counselor can also provide support. The high school guidance counselor has numerous responsibilities, which include providing counseling to students, recommending classes, and creating schedules. Guidance staff may work full-time or part-time and

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– Linda Ponciano, Bilingual School Counselor, [International High School at Prospect Heights](#)

may have their duties split across roles and grade levels. To provide effective postsecondary-readiness support, they must have a breadth of knowledge, including how transcripts work and get translated, what credits are included in the readiness index, differences among two- and four-year public and private institutions, which credits colleges accept, and what makes students eligible for different types of schools and programs. They must be knowledgeable about nonacademic programs for students interested in immediate work-based learning options and vocational credentialing, and they must be able to navigate the complexities of college access and financial aid for undocumented students. They must build and foster relationships with admissions staff. In the role of coach, mentor, guide, and advocate for new immigrant students and families, it is crucial that they be aware of their own biases or knowledge gaps.

Some counselors are responsible for one grade, some for multiple grades, and some for entire schools. In Internationals Network's New York City high schools, some schools transition a teacher taking on main college access support into a full-time role of college counselor. This structural shift has proven to be helpful, as students have a school-based expert solely dedicated to postsecondary access.

One counselor in this role shared her perspective:

"I suggest schools hire someone who can be dedicated to exclusively providing students with postsecondary support. Last school year I was the school counselor, and my workload was overwhelming. I had to provide academic and socioemotional support to students. The students who were at risk needed immediate attention, and I found my time was limited to providing students with college-access support after school. I was always taking work home. This year I am responsible only for postsecondary support, and I am excited to give students 100 percent of my time and attention. Now, I even have time to work with students on competitive scholarship programs. I feel more committed to my students."

– Internationals Network Guidance Counselor

Some Internationals Network high schools have a teacher who leads the college access work in the role of college adviser with the support of the guidance counselor. This is a unique experience and can be extremely valuable for students. One teacher reflects on this experience:

"I was the government teacher for seven years and eventually started teaching the college prep class, but I focused on the class lesson, and the counselor worked on the applications. My role during that time was to help the college adviser. Soon, our college adviser wanted to pivot roles, but the school still felt it was important to have one person leading this work, and I stepped in. Instead of teaching government, now I teach a college prep class for juniors and seniors. I think it is beneficial for juniors, because we get to relax and talk and not make college seem so scary. I get to take my time and build on things slowly. The benefit for a teacher stepping into this work is that you approach student-facing issues from a teacher's mindset. It is a perk; as a teacher I know they absorb what they can, and I have to keep repeating until they are ready. The counseling side is new to me, so there is a learning curve, but I am enjoying the journey."

– Lori Sandler, College and Career Adviser,
[International High School for Health Sciences](#)

The schoolwide work of preparing students for their journey after high school is also teamwork. In the pages that follow, we will share how Internationals Network has gone about helping school teams improve by using an inquiry process.

"This year I am responsible only for postsecondary support, and I am excited to give students 100 percent of my time and attention."

– Internationals Network Counselor

"The benefit for a teacher stepping into this work is that you approach student-facing issues from a teacher's mindset."

– Internationals Network Counselor

Our College Access Inquiry Project

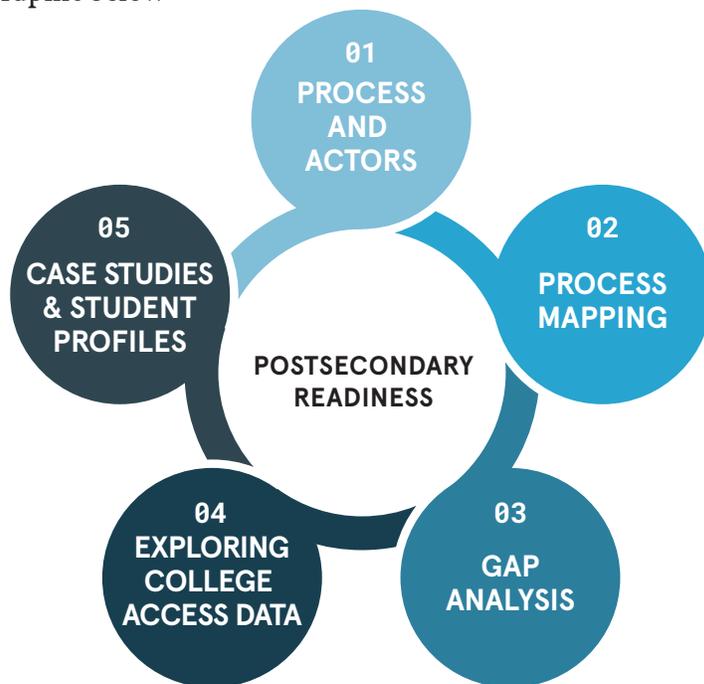
Bringing together adults to learn from and with one another has always been a hallmark of Internationals Network's approach to professional development. Led by our Director of School Support for New York and our Manager of Postsecondary Readiness, we set out to select a small number of interested school teams to engage in a multiyear process to strengthen their school's postsecondary readiness systems, structures, programs and overall culture. Our theory of action was that focusing our efforts on helping schools unpack their approach would enable them to identify and address inefficiencies and gaps in their systems that could lead to improvements. These schools took different approaches and had distinct strengths; having them work toward the same goal enabled them to learn from each other's struggles and successes. Our goal was to help schools design systems to improve the student experience and increase access to college for students.

Schools were invited to apply to participate based on our analysis of preliminary data from the City University of New York on the rates by school of seniors' applications to two- and four-year colleges. The vast majority of Internationals Network's New York City graduates attend either City University community colleges, senior colleges or New York state universities. Our analysis revealed that rates differed markedly by school and by borough.⁴ Five Bronx-based schools displayed the lowest outcomes when it came to four-year college application and enrollment rates, specifically in four-year. The three school teams selected to participate are clustered in the Bronx, the borough with the highest levels of household poverty, as well as soaring gentrification and displacement, and homeless and transitional housing rates in the school population ranging from 25 to 45 percent, as compared to 10 percent citywide. Each school was asked to gather a team composed of one administrator, one counselor, and one teacher lead. For more detail on the schools and the individuals on their teams, see [LINK](#).

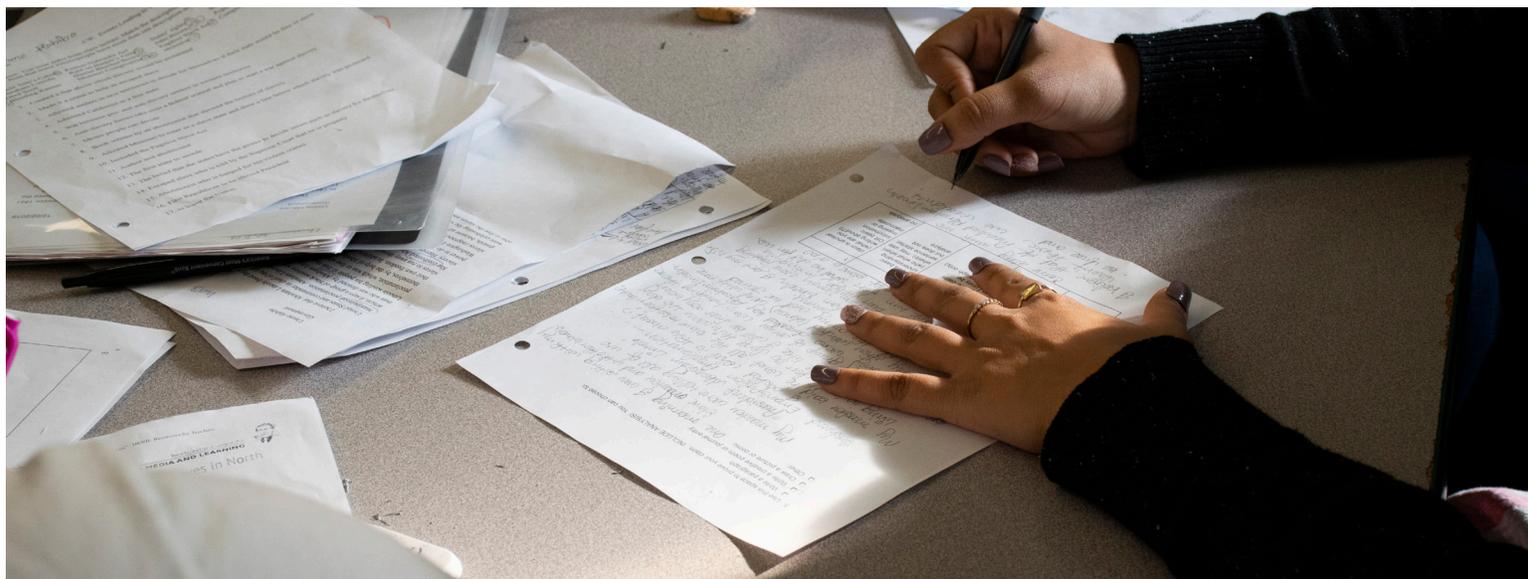
Participants in the College Access Project engaged in a series of activities that drew on each school's assets and expertise. They created team-designed artifacts that were consistently revisited and revised over the course of the year. What follows are the descriptions of each activity; the tools and resources used; and artifacts that resulted from the learning sessions. Internationals Network staff engaged with three school teams to co-design and collaborate in a series of inquiry-based, student-centered activities, with support from the Petrie Foundation.

Using Gap Analysis and Process Mapping

We utilized tools and protocols from our prior work on continuous improvement, funded by the Gates Foundation, as anchor documents for our learning process. With the aim of consistently refining our learning process, the design of our collective learning was iterative through the use of participants' produced artifacts, leveraging schools' expertise, and anchoring discussion around student data and evidence. Our process is depicted in the graphic below:



For a detailed description of our process, click [here](#).



Student from IHS at Health Sciences, Queens

⁴ The 15 Internationals Network high schools in New York City are distributed across the Bronx (6) Manhattan (2), Brooklyn (3) and Queens (4). Students demographics are similar with regard to EL status, prior education and poverty level.

Specifically, we used a [process mapping and gap analysis protocol](#) to identify, construct, and visualize each school team's systems and structures in supporting their students' college application journey. The process mapping exercise revealed that although each participating school had structures and supports that were configured differently, they all had schoolwide systems to ensure that students had support to apply to and be accepted in college. School leaders reflected on their systems using a rating checklist adapted to address the key elements known to foster college readiness. (You can access the checklist to use in your own school context by clicking [here](#).) The results showed that ratings differed among elements, but that college access team members from each school differed in their ratings. This pointed us toward conducting our inquiry into postsecondary readiness through process mapping.

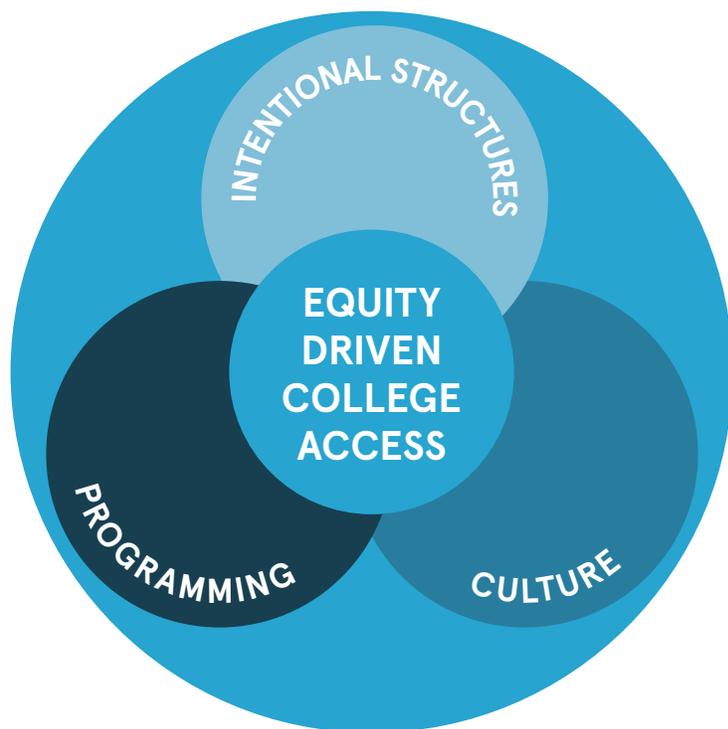
Through the gap analysis and process mapping sessions, schools were able to bolster their postsecondary readiness systems and structures. Examples from each participating school can be found [HERE](#): [International Community HS](#), [Crotona Intl HS](#), [Pan American IHS-A](#), [Pan American IHS-B](#).

How Structured Inquiry Helps Strengthen Systems

Inquiry and dedicated time to learn within and across schools proved invaluable both for improving systems and structures and also for determining what effectively fosters and promotes postsecondary access for immigrant multilingual students. To learn from their peers, participants of the College Access schools shared what resources they used around College Access Curriculum and teacher professional development, examined student transcripts to learn more about GPA calculation from Competency Based Grading, and how they administer the Career Survey and assess its utility. This was crucial to our understanding that postsecondary readiness is a schoolwide issue that needs to be addressed intentionally through structures, programs, and school culture. Dennis de Guzman Caindec, Internationals Network's New York City Director of School Support, captured it this way:

The process itself helps leaders understand their college access process and helps them better figure out the necessary changes in the systems and where they need to allocate staffing and support. There have been changes over the years, and it has been difficult to maintain institutional knowledge. Creating artifacts

and codifying systems helped to institutionalize work that is already in place. They were able to create roadmaps of what they actually do, identify who implements them and what structures and systems make them happen, and find ways to streamline systems to improve efficiency. This was a valuable exercise in making their work and systems visible.



“They were able to create roadmaps of what they actually do, identify who implements them and what structures and systems make them happen, and find ways to streamline systems to improve efficiency.”

– Dennis de Guzman Caindec, Internationals New York City Director of School Support

Learnings About Structures and Schoolwide Systems

- **Teamwork makes the dream work.** In contrast to schools where the college process is solely driven by the school counselor, the three participating schools had small groups of staff that led the work collaboratively. Relevant expertise and institutional knowledge is shared among multiple people, not held by one alone. Given that the schools have varying specific constraints, each one is organized uniquely to create systems and structures that meet the needs of their community, but always with a team at the helm.

Berena Cabarcas, Principal of International Community High School said that “Through this process we were able to build strong cohesion among the 11th and 12th grade counselors, the 12th grade teaching team, and school-wide Postsecondary Readiness Committee. In the end, students benefit.”

- **Systems and structures must consider immigrant multilingual learner needs:** As participants progressed throughout the series of activities, teams identified areas within their respective school structures that could be streamlined and combined to make their processes more deliberate and efficient, keeping in mind the diverse needs of their immigrant students. School staff made it a priority to strategize what tasks needed to be delegated, to whom, by when, and using which structures or spaces in the school.

- **Teachers need postsecondary coaching.** Content teachers in grade-level teams are key partners in postsecondary readiness. We found that they do not actively engage in the college access process unless they are intentionally involved, as when assigned to teach a college support course, when participating in a committee or team that focuses on college access, or when teaching a course supports students through the college application process. Participants observed that those supporting college access work needed capacity and skill-building training.

- **Starting earlier eases pressures.** Across the three schools that engaged in the postsecondary inquiry work, college and career exploration was concentrated in upper grades, primarily in Grade 12. Participating schools agreed that shifting some aspects of the college access process to lower grades would make 12th grade less stressful for students and staff.

Chevane Scott, Assistant Principal of Crotona International High School said, “We were able to heighten the importance of students' outreach for college and career

readiness during the 9th and 10th-grade years which resulted in stand-alone college and career seminars for students across all grades. Being more prepared last year has allowed for a much earlier and stronger start with the college process now at all grade levels.”

- **Embedding college readiness in advisory leads to consistency, efficiency, and sustainability.** Although all three participating schools still have direct, one-on-one student-guidance counselor meetings, one school established a Postsecondary Committee to lead curricular and instructional support through college access lessons embedded in advisory classes. This alleviates the burden of creating college access lessons for advisers who are also content teachers. It also prioritizes a standing committee focused on designing and developing college access curricula, organizing the pacing and delivery of the curricula, and supporting teachers in implementing the lessons. In another school, structures include a college class, separate from advisory class, that focuses on supporting the college process in the 12th grade, especially in writing and applications.

- **Competitive four-year colleges are within reach.** Data on application and acceptance rates, as collected by the City University of New York, were revisited throughout the inquiry process. The data revealed a dramatic increase in both the numbers of high school senior applicants to more competitive senior CUNY colleges (four-year institutions requiring higher GPAs for entrance) and also a large increase in applications to the city's Macaulay Honors College. In our next Learning Brief, to be released in Spring 2023, we will share detailed data on where students applied, where they were accepted, and where they enrolled. We will also share the implications for other schools serving immigrant multilingual students.



Students from IHS at Union Square, NYC

In doing this work, it's hard to assess "am I successful," because we have to have students apply, and sometimes you don't know if a school was or wasn't a good fit. The college access inquiry process gave schools an opportunity to stop and smell the roses. It gave them a chance to develop a process and work out the kinks. High schools do not mean to leave college access as an afterthought, but sometimes a lack of intentional systems can make it feel like that. Their primary work is to get students to graduate. I see schools putting a lot of effort into putting this postsecondary work first. They are starting to think very creatively about how to find the right postsecondary options for their students, and to explore how to support the person who is the primary staff person doing this process. If one person leaves, how can we maintain the systems? This is a big part of the work. We cannot just put this on one person's plate. We have to think strategically – where should this process happen and how.

– Khalia Joseph, Internationals Manager of Postsecondary Access

Implications and Recommendations

Based on all we learned, Internationals Network has some preliminary recommendations for all high schools that enroll immigrant students. In upcoming Learning Briefs, we will expand upon these recommendations. Below are some suggestions to start.

1. Administrators must commit to creating college access systems.

- + Draw on leadership and ability to make decisions on financial resources dedicated to postsecondary readiness – this signals its importance as a school priority.
- + Schedule and plan for personnel and direct the flow of the work.

2. Build a postsecondary team to share responsibility.

- + Design for distributed responsibility – postsecondary readiness is a collective schoolwide vision.
- + Teams should be multidisciplinary and cross-functional.
- + Include a counselor, teacher and school leader.
- + Institutional knowledge is strengthened.

3. Administrators need a strategic schoolwide vision.

- + Administrators must ensure college-bound culture is intertwined with school culture, as well as the systems and processes that support it.
- + Form committees, dedicate staff, and create focused courses within the school schedule.
- + Consistently review data.
- + Be strategic and intentional in directing and supporting students' college access journeys.

4. Focus on equity: in access, pathways and participation.

- + Maintain a proactive advocacy stance on behalf of students: immigrant multilingual learners can be successful in college.

- + Encourage staff to enact an equity stance around immigrant multilingual learners' capabilities to succeed in college by being involved in students' college process, including organizing college visits, facilitating college trips, and writing letters of recommendation.
 - + Staff can improve college familiarity by sporting sweatshirts from their alma mater, via posters, discussing their own majors and college journeys with students. Be sure to promote diverse types of institutions and keep in mind that students' preferences may differ from their own.
 - + Create flexible school-wide structures for postsecondary readiness.
 - + Design with a schoolwide vision for continuous improvement.
 - + Creating effective postsecondary readiness support for students in schools does not happen in a vacuum; it requires an intentional design for schoolwide programming and a relentless vision for continuous improvement.
 - + Build programs into the school day to help students build college readiness based on their needs. It is not one size fits all.
- ### 5. Build a postsecondary access data culture.
- + Using data strategically can supercharge your school's postsecondary readiness programming.
 - + Combine data from different sources to gain insights into eligibility, application, acceptance and enrollment.
 - + Leverage data to shed light on what's working and what's not.

Our coming Learning Briefs in Spring 2023 will share insights from the data we have explored, highlight student voices, and elaborate on recommendations for schools across the country serving immigrant students.

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