



Introduction

One of the primary goals of SEA member programs is to support students' path to and through college graduation. We believe that the talented and dedicated students who commit to our programs should have the opportunity to attend and succeed in postsecondary education programs, and find strong, sustainable career options that enable them to break the cycle of poverty.

Helping low-income students persist through quality postsecondary education programs is a significant undertaking that requires a major investment of organizational time and resources. Without this investment, however, SEA students are left without the support they need. Only 24% of low-income students earn a B.A. in six years or less¹. Yet, when children born into the bottom fifth of the income distribution get a college degree, their chances of making it to the top fifth of income distribution nearly quadruple, and their chances of making it out of the bottom fifth increase by more than 50 percent².

Overview

Given the significant hurdles to college success, SEA programs must be thoughtful, pro-active, and dedicated to supporting students in accessing and succeeding in college. Below are some best practices to support this work.

- Lead college access programming
- Guide students through college applications
- Prepare students for college matriculation
- Support the transition to college
- Support college persistence and matriculation
- Lead Alumni Programming
- Provide Financial Assistance

Lead College Access Programming

Many SEA students have limited knowledge about college - what it is, the benefits of attending, how to be a strong candidate, etc. SEA programs should provide students with this knowledge and help students develop themselves as future applicants.

¹ The Pell Institute (2011, December). 6-Year Degree Attainment Rates for Students Enrolled in a Post-Secondary Institution. Retrieved from http://www.pellinstitute.org/downloads/fact_sheets-6-Year_DAR_for_Students_Post-Secondary_Institution_121411.pdf

² Isaacs, J.B., Sawhill, I., Haskins, R. (2008). Getting Ahead or Losing Ground: Economic Mobility in America. Retrieved from https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/02_economic_mobility_sawhill.pdf.

- ❑ **College knowledge:** Build students' college knowledge beginning in 9th/10th grade (types of colleges/degrees, majors, what to consider when choosing a college, what colleges look for, career paths, methods of paying for college, differences between high school and college, etc.). Ensure that students understand not only what colleges offer, but also what they need to do to be strong candidates (grades, extracurriculars, test scores, etc.).
- ❑ **College visits:** Take students on college visits to a range of schools, targeting students for specific schools as applicable.
- ❑ **Test prep:** Provide intensive test preparation classes for the SAT/ACT. Give students two opportunities to take the test - one in the spring of their junior year and one in early fall of their senior year. Support students in securing fee waivers and showing up to the test site prepared on test day.
- ❑ **Opportunities:** Connect students to programs and opportunities that will strengthen their applications and expose them to new environments (summer programs, internships, enrichment programs, etc.).
- ❑ **Squash recruitment:** Students who have the potential to be recruited for college teams should attend college camps in the summer before their junior/senior years, and should start emailing coaches in the spring of their junior year.
- ❑ **Family engagement:** Educate families about the college process.
 - ❑ In 9th/10th grade, educate families about what their child should be doing to be a strong college candidate
 - ❑ In the spring of 11th grade, educate families about what the college application process at your organization involves and what you will need from families

Guide Students through College Applications

Programs should provide students and families with extensive, one-on-one support with the college application process. Staff should be well-versed and trained in how to provide the following support to students.

- ❑ **Family engagement:** Families should be involved and updated on every step of the process, from reviewing school lists, to providing financial information, to choosing the student's school. Programs should have conversations with each family individually multiple times throughout the student's senior year.
- ❑ **School lists:** Starting late in 11th grade, programs should work one-on-one with students to develop the list of schools to which they will apply. Lists should include reach, target, and safety schools, and should take into consideration factors such as student interests, financial aid, college reputation for student support, etc.
- ❑ **Fee waivers:** Help students secure fee waivers for applications.

- ❑ **Personal Essay:** Starting no later than the summer before 12th grade, programs should work with students one-on-one to create a strong personal statement. Many programs use one- on-one college mentors in addition to the extensive time staff members spend with students.
- ❑ **Financial aid applications:** Programs should work with students and families to get the maximum amount of financial aid through the FAFSA/CSS Profile, grants, and scholarships. This requires looking at families' tax returns, so a good amount of trust should be built with families by this point in time.
- ❑ **Scholarship support:** Programs should help students learn about and apply to additional sources of financial aid. Staff members should research and make students aware of any city and state sources of aid, as well as foundations and programs that might offer support.
- ❑ **Recommendations:** Programs should coach students in how to identify, ask, and follow up with teachers and counselors to get strong recommendations. Many school staff have a heavy load of students; program staff should help students advocate for themselves, or advocate on behalf of their students. Staff might also write supplementary recommendations for students (in addition to, *not* replacing teacher recommendations).
- ❑ **Application and deadline tracking:** Programs should monitor each student's process to ensure that they are aware of and meeting all deadlines and requirements.
- ❑ **Interviews, campus visits and other campus communications:** Programs should assist students in scheduling interviews, planning campus visits and applying for fly-in programs with admissions offices and squash programs when appropriate. Programs should also prepare students for all online, phone and in-person communications with the colleges.
- ❑ **College selection:** Once students have received their acceptances, programs should sit down with each student and his/her family individually to ensure they understand their options and make the best decision for them. In preparation for this meeting, staff should prepare a clear outline of the financial implications of each opportunity (including loans, grants, work-study, housing, books, travel, etc.), and then present/explain to families the exact costs and commitments that each option involves. Staff should ensure that students fully understand the load burden they are taking on and what that means for them post-graduation, and caution them against taking out excessive loans.
- ❑ **Communication with colleges:** Staff should be in communication with college admissions office to advocate for students and educate the college on what the students' participation in urban squash has involved (long-term commitment,

leadership and service, etc.). If a financial aid package is not sufficient, staff should help students petition the college to reconsider.

Support Transition to College

In the spring of their 12th grade year and the summer before college, programs should prepare students for their first semester at college.

- ❑ **Knowledge/Reflection:** Prepare students for challenges they may face: navigating social dynamics (drinking, relationships, roommates, etc.), new terminology and requirements (prerequisites, credits, etc.), race and class differences in college, where to go for assistance (to drop a class, get tutoring, inquire about financial aid, etc.), time management, etc.
- ❑ **Follow-through:** Follow through to ensure that students send in all necessary paperwork and payments, receive the information they need about orientation and enrollment, and have a plan for how to get to campus the first day. Support students in selecting their first semester courses to help them take on a manageable workload and schedule.
- ❑ **Academic experience:** When possible, provide or help students enroll in summer bridge programs that prepare them for the academic rigor of college.

Support College Persistence and Matriculation

Once a student is at college, programs should provide ongoing outreach and support to students.

- ❑ **Consistent check-ins:** Staff members should be in consistent communication with individual students (phone calls, video chats), ranging from bi-weekly to quarterly check-ins, depending on the student. First-year students often need more frequent contact (at least weekly in their first semester).
- ❑ **Monitoring and intervention:** Monitor and support student progress in four primary areas - financial, social/emotional, academic, and career - and intervene to provide support. Many programs develop checklists that staff use to monitor common challenges in these key areas.
 - ❑ **Financial:** Programs should monitor students' financial obligations, create budgets and troubleshoot where needed, and ensure that students complete the FAFSA each year. Programs should also be aware of any GPA requirements for financial aid packages. Knowing the precariousness of many students' financial situations (e.g. a family member getting sick losing a job could have major repercussions), several programs have also developed funds to provide financial support in emergency situations.

- ❑ **Social/emotional:** Programs should have someone who has developed a relationship with the student continue to check in about their social/emotional well-being (roommates, stress level, coping strategies, healthy relationships, drinking, involvement in clubs/activities, etc.).
- ❑ **Academic - Grades and Progress Toward Graduation:** Programs should collect grades from students each semester. (Some programs offer a small financial incentive to students who share their grades and demonstrate they are engaged on campus.) In cases where students are on academic probation, programs should help students understand the academic and possible financial consequences, and develop a plan for improvement. In addition to tracking students' semester/overall GPAs, programs should monitor and counsel students on the number of credits and the classes that they enrolling in (e.g. do the classes complete general education/major requirements, are the class times/type/balance of classes a good fit for that student), and the decision of the student's intended major.
- ❑ **Career -** Programs should discuss with students their career goals and support them in securing internships during college, and full-time work post-college. In addition to encouraging students to access the career offices at their schools, programs should review students' cover letters and resumes as needed, help them prepare for interviews, and share relevant opportunities and networking connections with them.
- ❑ **Staff connections:** Staff members develop relationships with students' college support teams so there is at least one person on campus that the program can check in with in case anything comes up (advisors, coaches, professors, mentors, etc.).
- ❑ **Campus visits:** Staff members visit students on campus as needed to ensure their success. Visits enable staff to have open conversations about how a student is doing, maintain a strong connection to staff, and troubleshoot concerns with the student on campus (e.g. visiting the financial aid office, counseling services, or accommodation offices). Visits enable staff to learn things that they otherwise would not likely hear over the phone.

Lead Alumni Programming

Programs continue to offer programming to support students' postsecondary success and career development, and to keep students connected to and engaged with the organization.

- ❑ **Professional development:** Program offers workshops/networking events to support alumni in the new challenges they are facing (determining their career path, preparing their resumes, doing mock interviews, increasing their financial literacy, learning how to network, learning how to secure internships, etc.). Events are accompanied by individual support in writing cover letters, reviewing resumes, etc.

- ❑ **Alumni gatherings:** Program offers social opportunities for alumni to stay connected with the program, one another, and the sport of squash (squash hit-arounds, advising sessions, Alumni Committee, etc.).
- ❑ **Email listserv:** Programs have an email listserv to provide alumni with updates on events, share resources, etc.

Provide Financial Assistance

SEA students often attend college on a very tight budget, with little room for unexpected expenses or general spending money. Some organizations address this reality by providing supplementary funding as described below.

- ❑ **Scholarships/grants to offset tuition gaps:** In some programs, students earn money over the course of their time in the program for strong participation and attendance; this money can be applied to offset tuition gaps. In other programs, students may apply to an emergency fund to assist with unexpected funding gaps that arise as a result of family circumstances (death or sickness in family, loss of a job, robbery, etc.).
- ❑ **Incentive stipends:** Some programs provide a small stipend (\$50-\$250) each semester to incentivize students to share grades, get involved on campus, and provide updates to their member programs.
- ❑ **Internship stipends:** Some programs provide stipends to support alumni participation in unpaid internships.
- ❑ **State Financial Aid Assistance:** Most state education agencies have opportunities for grants or scholarships, though eligibility is usually restricted to state residents attending a college in-state. To determine if your state has a program applicable to your students, please visit [NASFAA State Financial Aid Programs Site](#)

Additional Resources

Below are some additional resources programs might consider when building their college access and support programs.

- [Straight from the Source: What Works for First Generation College Students](#) - The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education
- [Moving Beyond Access: College Success for Low-Income, First Generation Students](#) - The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education
- [National College Access Network](#)
- [Fair Opportunity Project](#)
- [KIPP Through College](#)

This guide was written by Becky Silva and Alana Lerner at the Squash and Education Alliance, with support from Assumpta Galang at StreetSquash Harlem and Al Boillot at CitySquash.