



Innovations in the Field



Bronx Opportunity Network

About *Innovations in the Field*

Innovations in the Field is a series examining programs supported by JobsFirstNYC that serve both employers seeking job-ready workers and young adults in New York City looking to access employment and training opportunities. These programs are innovative in two respects: how workforce providers engage as partners with employers, and how providers collaborate rather than compete with one another. They illustrate best practices in young adult workforce development and address service gaps on both the demand side and the supply side that otherwise might deter many young adults from entering career-track work.

About JobsFirstNYC

JobsFirstNYC is a neutral intermediary and a champion for the workforce needs of out-of-school, out-of-work young adults in New York City. Our mission is to improve the system for young adults by bringing together—effectively and efficiently—all available community, corporate, private, and public resources to accelerate the connection of out-of-school, out-of-work young adults with the economic life of New York City.

Introduction

New York City is home to over 300,000 young adults who are out of school and out of work, or working in low-wage jobs with limited opportunities for advancement; this group collectively makes up 35 percent of the city's 18- to 24-year-old population.¹ The disparity is felt most acutely in the Bronx—especially in the South Bronx—which, despite its proximity to the wealth of Manhattan, has long suffered from one of the highest concentrations of poverty in the United States. Median household income in the Bronx is half the New York City average, at \$34,400 per year, while just 50.6 percent of Bronx adults over the age of 24 are currently in the labor force.² Educational figures lag at all levels: a mere 59 percent of Bronx students graduate from high school on time, and only a quarter of residents 25 and older have a college degree of any kind.³ The dropout rate among Bronx high school students (14.1 percent) is 5 percent higher than in any other borough. Over 40 percent of out-of-school, out-of-work young adults in the South Bronx lack a high school diploma, and 7 out of 10 are not even looking for work (Figure 1). Moreover, the number of Bronx residents over 25 years of age who report that they have not graduated from high school is twice the national average.⁴ Shut out from the benefits of a college education, too many Bronx residents are trapped in a cycle of underemployment, poverty, and marginalization.

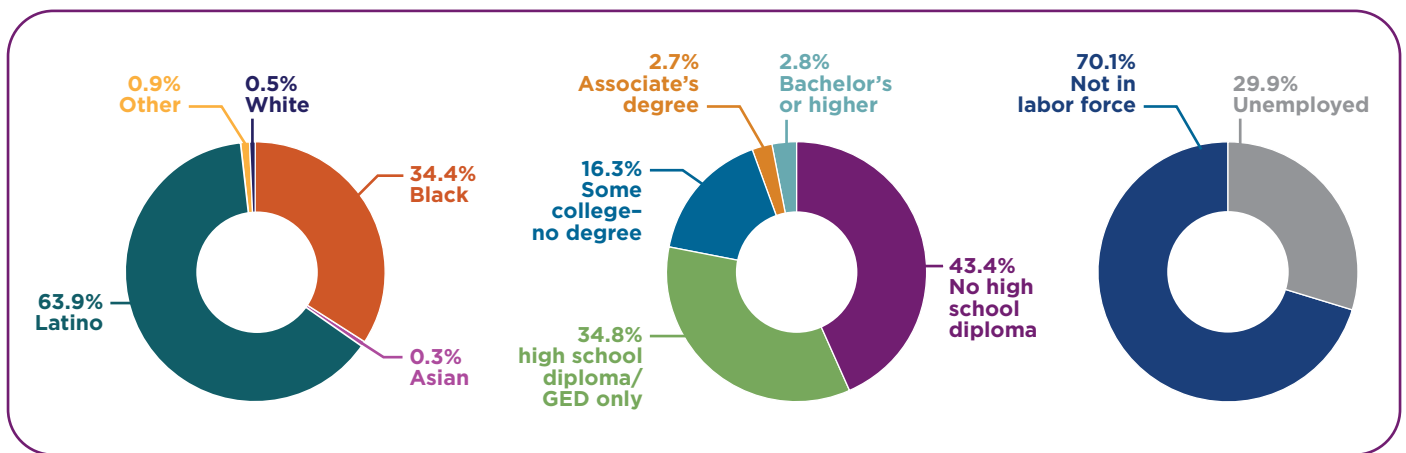


Figure 1: Characteristics of Out-of-School, Out-of-Work 16- to 25-year-olds in the South Bronx

While young Bronx residents continue to suffer from markedly high rates of unemployment and poverty, New York City's economy is in the midst of a full-scale renaissance. As a key hub of the service- and creativity-based "new economy," the city is now home to a record 4.32 million jobs.⁵ The wave of baby boomer retirements promises to open up solid middle-class positions in every sector of the economy.⁶ Almost every indicator of civic well-being is pointing in the right direction. Crime remains at historic lows, the public school system is seeing more students than ever graduate, and the city's institutions of higher learning are enrolling record numbers.⁷ Massive redevelopment in every borough is revamping neglected buildings and former industrial sites, attracting tens of thousands of new residents each year. Despite this economic growth, however, many young adults, especially those who left high school early, are being left behind.

Just miles from the gleaming high-rises of Manhattan, the concentrated poverty that has marked the South Bronx for decades persists. Scores of nonprofit organizations within the borough work hard to alleviate the enormous pressures faced by residents, providing a multitude of services to overcome educational, employment, and social barriers. As the economy deteriorated in 2008 and young adults were hit hard by the wave of layoffs, these organizations recognized that the rising need for assistance required coordinated action. To this end, JobsFirstNYC, a nonprofit intermediary that raises awareness and promotes collaborative action around the young adult employment crisis, worked together with several local organizations to discuss common concerns and opportunities for collaboration. Ultimately, the organizations decided to work together to improve access to post-secondary education for the most academically vulnerable young adults as a means of fostering sustainable employment.

BronxWorks

(www.bronxworks.org)

YEAR FOUNDED: 1972

SERVICES OFFERED: BronxWorks' services for young adults include high school equivalency prep classes, job readiness training, job placement services, and individual case management services. Its college access program serves 200–300 students per year, and the organization provides college access information services to high school students throughout the Bronx.

The Bronx Opportunity Network (BON), an innovative collaboration of seven community-based organizations—BronxWorks, CUNY Prep, East Side House Settlement, The Door's Bronx Youth Center (previously FEGS), Grace Outreach, Good Shepherd Services, and New Settlement Apartments—helps low-income Bronx young adults emerging from alternative high school pathways access post-secondary education. BON prepares students to enroll in and succeed at three institutions: Bronx Community College (BCC), Hostos Community College, and Borough of Manhattan Community College. It focuses on the major stumbling blocks that commonly derail students: demonstrating proficiency in basic academic skills, developing the personal skills necessary to thrive, adjusting to the college environment, navigating college bureaucracies, and finding the support systems to overcome obstacles.

Estimates suggest that by 2020, nearly 70 percent of all jobs in New York State will require some form of post-secondary education and training (up from 26 percent in 1973); less than a quarter will be open to those with just a high school diploma or high school equivalency diploma (HSED); and fewer than one out of every ten will accept workers with less than a high school

education.⁸ Community colleges, and programs like BON, are uniquely positioned to help young jobseekers earn the industry-specific education and training they need to enter and remain in the labor market.

This paper, the third in JobsFirstNYC's *Innovations in the Field* series, details the development, implementation, and evolution of BON. Since convening the initial meeting in 2008 and formal launch in 2011, JobsFirstNYC has supported BON in recognizing the important role that education plays in connecting young adults to the full economic life of New York City. When creating our strategic plan in 2012, JobsFirstNYC made a commitment to document the progress of our work to positively affect out-of-school and out-of-work young adults in New York City. Highlighting the challenges and successes of BON is an integral component of this work as BON celebrates its fifth year of helping unprepared and low-income young New Yorkers who might not otherwise succeed earn college degrees in in-demand fields.

Addressing the Community College Challenge

BON fills a critical need for those most likely to struggle in a community college environment: low-income students with alternative high school credentials. The structure of community colleges—relatively small administrative and support staff overseeing a large and transient student body taught primarily by part-time adjunct faculty—makes it difficult for students to form the crucial relationships with peers, advisors, and teachers necessary to navigate the complexities of campus life.⁹ The challenges of getting into and staying in college for those with an alternative high school credential can be seen in overall enrollment and completion rates. Nationally, a smaller proportion of HSED recipients (43 percent) enrolls in college than does that of high school graduates (64 percent). Of the HSED recipients who pursue a college degree, two-thirds enroll in programs of two years or less. Most troubling, only half of HSED recipients stick around for a second semester, and less than 12 percent actually complete their program within six years.¹⁰

For low-income New Yorkers, the City University of New York (CUNY) provides a crucial link to living-wage opportunities. CUNY operates the largest urban college system in the United States, with 24 campuses across the five boroughs that enroll a quarter-million students annually.¹¹ With a mandate to serve “as a vehicle for the upward mobility of the disadvantaged,” the system's modest tuition and significant financial support—particularly through the Federal Pell Grant

and New York State TAP Grants—enables more than eight out of ten CUNY students to graduate debt free.¹² CUNY’s seven community colleges provide a critical stepping stone to self-sufficiency. The 60-credit-hour associate’s degree is a valuable credential by itself in the labor market: community college graduates earn, on average, 10 percent more than workers with a high school diploma or HSED, and they are less likely to be unemployed (Figure 2). Even individuals who attain some college credits but fall short of an associate’s degree are better off economically than those who never went to college.¹³ The associate’s degree can also serve as a springboard from which academically weaker students can prepare themselves for the demands of a four-year program and beyond.

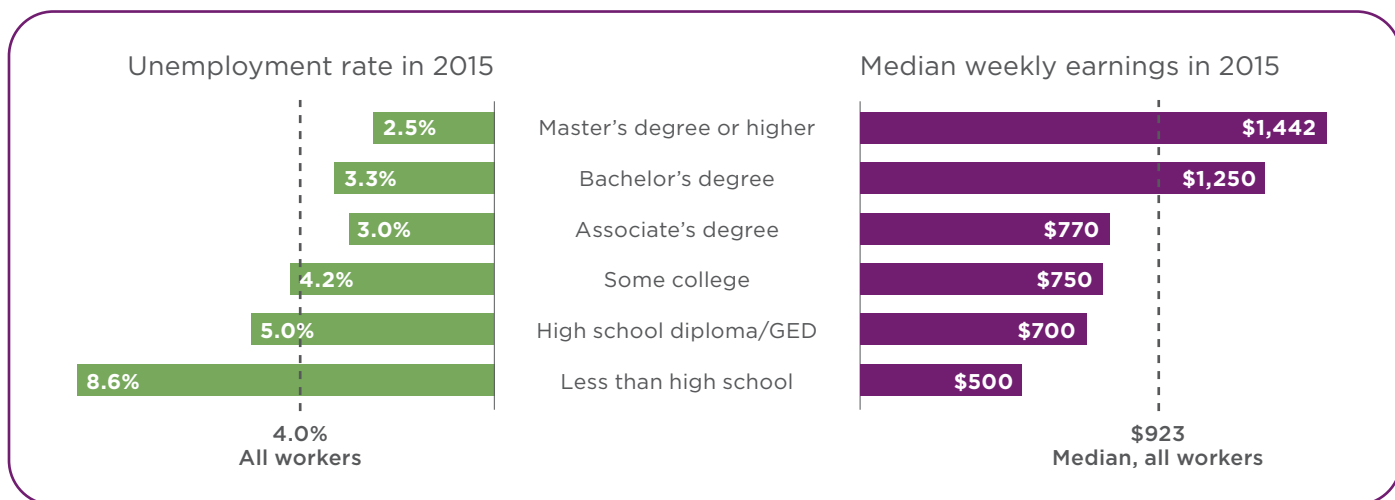


Figure 2: **Unemployment Rates and Weekly Earnings (Full-Time Wage and Salary Workers) Age 25 and Over, by Educational Attainment, New York, 2015**

Source: New York State Department of Labor

Like other systems around the country, CUNY struggles to keep community college students on track to graduate. Those enrolled in CUNY’s associate’s degree programs are more likely than four-year students to be low-income, to switch between full- and part-time studies, to enter with lower academic scores, to speak a first language other than English, and to be the first in their family to attend college.¹⁴ Overall, CUNY’s community colleges see an attrition rate of nearly one-third of full-time students after the first year, and over half by the end of the second year. Relatively few students make it to graduation (Table 1). For example, of the cohorts that entered a CUNY community college between 2009 and 2012, less than a quarter earned their associate’s degree within six years, and just 8 to 9 percent of each cohort managed to go on to earn a bachelor’s degree during the six-year time frame.¹⁵

Table 1: **Graduation and Enrollment Rates at CUNY Colleges Served by BON, 2015**

CUNY Colleges served by BON	Graduation rate 3 Years	Still enrolled 3 Years	Graduation rate 6 Years	Still enrolled 6 Years
Bronx Community College	20.2%	15.5%	24.1%	4.6%
Hostos Community College	20.6%	20.7%	24.2%	4.8%
Borough of Manhattan Community College	18.3%	19.0%	28.3%	3.9%

Source: CUNY Office of Institutional Research data for Freshmen entering in 2009 and 2012

BON’s wrap-around support services improve persistence and graduation outcomes for its participants. Traditionally, community colleges are able to offer only limited and reactive support to struggling students; by the time problems become evident, it is often too late to keep the student enrolled. The supports that do exist focus on solving academic deficiencies through remedial classes and extra tutoring. For HSED recipients and first-generation students, however, the transition to college often requires learning a new set of skills to successfully navigate the world of higher education.

BON recognizes this situation and helps students manage these challenges. By helping them develop and follow good study habits, learn how and when to engage professors and administrators, and find peers who can offer advice or encouragement, BON empowers students to quickly find ways to self-motivate, solve problems, and stay on track when life gets difficult.

The Origins of BON

The many community-based organizations that serve young adults in the Bronx have historically operated independently of one another, even when offering complementary or overlapping services. As the Great Recession of 2008 took hold, the organizations began to recognize that a more coordinated approach would be necessary to meet the rapidly growing needs of young adults in the Bronx. JobsFirstNYC, a nonprofit intermediary championing the workforce needs of out-of-school, out-of-work young adults in New York City, had already initiated a collaborative project in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, which launched in early 2008, and fostered planning for what would become the Lower East Side Employment Network.¹⁶ Community-based organizations that participated in the JobsFirstNYC CBO Network were interested in a similar collaborative in the Bronx. To this end, JobsFirstNYC convened an open meeting of Bronx providers in June 2008 to gauge interest and offered to support a consultant to work with them on the design of a new program. A critical mass of groups agreed to work together, considering a number of options for joint action.

“It took a long time to figure out what the organizations had in common. “We all provide employment [services] for this population of young adults. But there are no long-term solutions without education.” —*Elisa Istueta, former BronxWorks*

From these early meetings, interest in developing a Bronx-specific strategy to support out-of-school, out-of-work young adults emerged from institutions that served Bronx young adults, including many of those that ultimately became members of the Bronx Opportunity Network.

JobsFirstNYC secured philanthropic funding from JPMorgan Chase Foundation to support initial planning for what would ultimately become BON, and it provided a neutral consultant to facilitate discussions around what a potential collaboration should address and how it should be structured.

At first, the community-based organizations involved focused on developing strategies to improve outcomes for young adults in both job readiness and college preparation. Young Bronx residents face a disproportionate challenge finding good jobs: while around 50 percent of all New York City’s 18- to 24-year-olds are currently in the labor force, this share is just 40 percent in the Bronx.¹⁷ As the organizations became more focused, however, they decided to mobilize around improving education outcomes as a means to sustainable employment. “It took a long time to figure out what the organizations had in common,” recalls Elisa Istueta, former children and youth services director at BronxWorks, one of the provider organizations in the discussions. “We all provide employment [services] for this population of young adults.

CUNY Prep

(www.cunyprep.org)

YEAR FOUNDED: 2003

SERVICES OFFERED: CUNY Prep offers a full-time program to enable out-of-school youth between the ages of 16 and 18 to earn their high school equivalency diploma. Once successful, students move into the College Transition Academy, which further prepares them for college. CUNY Prep’s College Success Network supports students while in college.

The Door's Bronx Youth Center

(www.door.org/programs-services/bronx-youth-center)

YEAR TRANSFERRED TO THE DOOR:
2015

SERVICES OFFERED: The Door's Bronx Youth Center provides comprehensive employment and education programming to 500 16- to 24-year-olds every year. Located in the South Bronx, the Bronx Youth Center combines education, employment, and youth development supports to help young people finish school, attend college, or start on a career path.

secondary education; and Good Shepherd Services had a peer mentorship model. Several of the organizations also maintained strong relationships with BCC and Hostos, the two schools where most young participants enrolled.

In its first five cohorts, BON has served a total of 490 students. Of these students, 223 have graduated or remained enrolled in college, representing a total success rate of 54 percent, which compares favorably to both CUNY's overall figures and the rate of a comparison group of demographically and academically similar students at the same CUNY colleges. (When this brief went to press, a sixth cohort of 153 students was beginning its studies at a CUNY community college after participating in BON's programming.) Like the community from which it draws on, BON participants come overwhelmingly from minority households: two-thirds are Hispanic and one-third are African American. Their average age is 20 years old; females make up 72 percent of the total. Nearly all are the first in their families to attend college.

In 2014, the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions' Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund (OYIF) invested heavily in BON to help devise a comprehensive approach to its work through a collective impact framework. BON's designation as an OYIF grantee represented a major win for the initiative. The Aspen Institute has long been a catalyst for promoting solutions to critical national issues, including the out-of-school, out-of-work young adult crisis. Membership in OYIF—awarded to just 21 collaborations nationwide—provides resources that will allow BON to strategically plan for expansion, participate in national meetings and events, access site-specific training and technical assistance from national experts, receive third-party evaluations, and take advantage of a highly visible platform from which to publicize its model.

But there are no long-term solutions without education." Given the value that employers place on post-secondary credentials, a focus on connecting academically marginalized Bronx residents with community college opportunities "represented a strategic alignment with our central goal of reducing the number of out-of-school, out-of-work young adults throughout the city," adds JobsFirstNYC's executive director Lou Miceli.

In these early discussions, each organization reported the same challenge: the young people they served were getting into college but failing to accumulate credits and make progress toward graduation. When frustration mounted and financial aid ran low, many dropped out. "When we followed up with a lot of our participants, they were struggling to make it through," says Allison Palmer, director at New Settlement Apartments, another community-based organization involved in the early BON discussions. "A majority didn't yet have the skills to be successful."

Most of the participating organizations had ongoing initiatives and relationships that could serve as part of a larger solution: for example, New Settlement Apartments had a long-established college access center; Grace Outreach had a small college preparatory program; CUNY Prep's entire model was predicated on helping former dropouts prepare for post-



Donnisha Wright, student speaker at BronxWorks 2016 Annual Gala, with Former Instructor John Jacobs II. Photo credit: BronxWorks

BON's Objectives: Remediation, Acculturation, Navigation, and Graduation

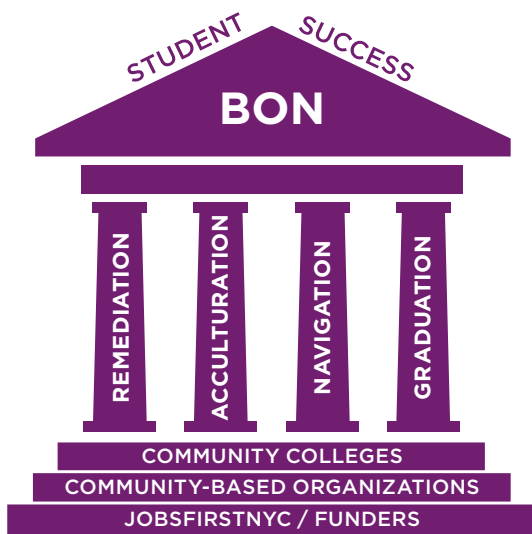


Figure 3: The BON Model

BON addresses four major challenges that disproportionately affect HSED recipients who aspire to community college: **remediation** of their reading, writing, and mathematics skills to help them reach college-level efficiency; **acculturation** to the unique culture of a college campus that requires and rewards tenacity, self-direction, and adaptability; **navigation** of multiple—and often complicated—processes to apply for admissions, identify and register for the right classes, and access financial aid; and, finally, support and encouragement to reach **graduation** (Figure 3).

Demonstrating college-level proficiency in reading, writing, and mathematics is a challenge for many CUNY applicants, whether or not they hold a high school diploma. (The New York State Education Department considers just 17 percent of Bronx high school graduates ready for college academics.¹⁸) Applicants who do not enter CUNY with high SAT, ACT, or NY State Regents scores are required to take a series of CUNY Assessment Tests (known as CATs or COMPASS) during the admissions process.¹⁹ Performance on the CATs determines

whether a student will be placed in non-credit remedial courses before being allowed to start working toward a degree. Ending up in remediation significantly affects both budget—classes cost between \$720 and \$1,240 each—and the likelihood of ultimately obtaining the degree: overall, just 26.1 percent of remedial students graduate after six years. Like four out of every five community college freshmen in the CUNY system generally, BON participants typically need to take one or more remediation classes.²⁰

Remediation places a tremendous strain on new college students. Testing into Math 1, for example, can require three remedial courses to satisfy the mathematics requirements before being allowed to start for-credit classes. In many cases, students take so many remedial courses that they end up depleting their financial aid before they even start earning degree credits. Beyond the financial impact, remediation can have an isolating effect. “It segregates them with the slowest moving boats in the college, people with bad academic histories,” notes Jim Marley, assistant executive director for Bronx Community-Based Programs at Good Shepherd Services. The combination of growing financial need and frustration at being *in* college without making tangible progress toward completion helps explain the low completion rates for associate program students across the CUNY system.

BON quickly recognized that interventions to eliminate or shorten the time required for remediation are critical for bolstering students’ persistence. “If community college students can get into credit-bearing classes quickly,” says former BronxWorks director Elisa Istueta, “they tend to stay.” BON reduces the number of remediation classes needed by its participants through an intensive six-week summer bridge program prior to the first semester in college. These sessions are geared toward helping participants quickly improve their skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. Participants receive a small stipend to cover their costs and provide an incentive to stick with the program.



Math tutoring at Grace Outreach emphasizes peer learning.
Photo credit: Leo Sorel

Early in its existence, BON scored an important victory by convincing the community colleges to agree to CAT retests for BON students.

Applicants typically take the CATs several months before starting college. While the New York City public school system offers CAT preparation classes for high school seniors, HSED recipients often walk into the tests with little understanding of how the tests are structured or their potential impact. Early in its existence, BON scored an important victory by convincing the community colleges to agree to CAT retests for BON students. Citing capacity issues, both Hostos and BCC initially expressed reluctance to allow students more than one opportunity to take the test—but BON persisted over numerous conversations by pointing to the intensity of its summer bridge program and the benefits to students

and schools alike when students' time in remediation is reduced. "The message to CUNY was that you've got these kids failing every year," observes Jim Marley, "so why not give us a chance to try something different?" Finally, as one college began to warm to the idea, the other followed suit. (Retesting has now been widely embraced across the CUNY system. Today, the retest option is automatically available to any student who has received at least 20 hours of instruction in a developmental program such as BON.²¹)

BON's summer bridge program has proven highly effective in reducing students' remediation needs. Based on the LifeLink model pioneered by Good Shepherd Services, the summer bridge curriculum combines peer learning, social supports, and modest financial incentives.²² Since 2011, nearly 650 students have completed the curriculum and retaken the CAT exams. In BON's first two years alone, 190 summer bridge students retook the exams, earning 70 math exemptions and 76 English exemptions. Assuming that each remedial class costs \$1,000 on average, the summer bridge program saved BON students nearly \$150,000 in tuition that would have gone toward non-credit classes in 2011 and 2012.²³

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BON's second major area of focus is on **acculturation**. Starting with the summer bridge program, BON helps participants develop a proactive, future-oriented mindset. The program is designed to mirror the college experience, albeit in a more supported and structured way. Students set and meet personal academic goals focused on the CAT exams, while embarking on academic interventions tailored to their specific needs and aspirations. To prepare for the math exam, students master the 30 operations assessed on the exam through video, online instruction, and in-person tutoring. And to ensure that students are ready for the writing portion, BON provides them with feedback on their essays before being submitted.

Understanding that sharing the experience with similarly situated peers is a key component of preparation for the rigors of campus life, BON pushes the colleges to place BON participants in classes together. Lindsay Toussaint of East Side House Settlement explains that BON creates a community of learners: "Participants see other students going through the same experience. They're from the same neighborhood—they know each other, and they're taking classes together." This begins during the summer bridge and continues once classes start.

BON also recruits former participants to return as "success mentors" after completing their first year of college. This aspect of the program demonstrates to newer participants that success is possible, while offering the mentors work experience and continued engagement with BON. As former BronxWorks director Elisa Istueta explains, BON is "already using a workforce model. We hire students from the [previous] cohort to become peer mentors and tutors."

The third piece of the BON model is **navigation**. Lacking self-advocacy skills and without family members or peers to offer advice on how to navigate the world of higher education, low-income and first-generation Bronx students are at

risk of getting lost in the college system's red tape and thus distracted from their academic work. BON helps them learn what to expect, manage their expectations, and cope successfully when problems inevitably arise. "Students often have trouble understanding the responsibilities associated with college and are uncomfortable navigating campuses," says Jenny Ristenbatt, principal of CUNY Prep.

Since participants struggle with a range of challenges that can quickly and unexpectedly derail their studies, such as unstable living situations, child care needs, financial insecurity, and more, BON lobbied extensively for a presence on each campus. It leveraged the relationships of member organizations—particularly FEGS's relationship with BCC and East Side House Settlement's relationship with Hostos—to secure office spaces on campus where students can stop by to get advice, work quietly, or simply see familiar faces. "I have an office on campus," explains Stacey Bosques of East Side House Settlement. "I think it really helps for students to have someone on campus that they know and can call on when they need help ... It goes a long way." BON members use their own organizations' resources and coordinate with other entities, such as the Single Stop office on every community college campus, to meet whatever needs students may present.

Young adults who have been in the foster care system represent an especially high-needs group, particularly during the critical transition to adulthood and independent living around age 18. Nationwide, fewer than one in ten foster youth attend college, and of these only a quarter eventually receive a degree or certificate.²⁴ Up to 15 percent of the populations served by Good Shepherd Services and The Door at any given time are transitioning from foster care. "BON's approach of mobilizing students to take ownership of their learning is especially critical for youth transitioning from foster care," says Lili Allen, associate vice president for reconnection strategies and designs at Jobs for the Future.



Summer bridge students from Grace Outreach visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art (July 2015). Photo credit: Danae Mcleod

Graduation represents the end goal for BON, of course. BON addresses many of the pitfalls, both big and small, that often trip up students along the way. The reduction or elimination of remedial needs makes it more likely that students will earn the 20 college credits by the end of their first year that researchers have found to be a strong predictor of degree completion.²⁵ Micro-interventions, such as providing reminders of upcoming dates for registration and financial aid renewal, have been shown to have a big impact on students' persistence from one academic year to the next.²⁶ Perhaps most importantly, the trust and sense of community that BON builds with and among its participants can mean the difference between staying enrolled and dropping out when life's inevitable challenges arise.

East Side House Settlement

(www.eastsidehouse.org)

YEAR FOUNDED: 1891

SERVICES OFFERED: East Side House Settlement offers a variety of services for young adults, including job readiness, high school equivalency preparation, college and career readiness, college retention, and supportive social services. It works with schools, community centers, and other partners to bring quality education and resources to over 10,000 residents throughout the Bronx and Northern Manhattan.

The BON Collaborative Model

“Communication and the sharing of ideas and best practices between community-based organizations was nonexistent, so there was very little opportunity to come together to build collaborations that change and improve our work.”

—Jenny Ristenbatt, CUNY Prep

BON is distinctive in its organic, member-driven approach to operations and the stability of its membership; other than the departures of founding members Phipps Neighborhoods and FEGS—when FEGS declared bankruptcy in 2015, The Door assumed its services—its member organizations have remained the same for years. After evolving from a series of conversations among like-minded organizations into a full-fledged network, BON has built its success on a flexible but consistent collaboration among community-based organization staff and executives who have developed a strong rapport with one another over the years. The strong working relationship is reflected in a level of openness unusual among nonprofits. “Communication and the sharing of ideas and best practices between community-based organizations was nonexistent,” explains Jenny Ristenbatt of CUNY Prep. “Every organization basically operated in silos; networking was not an option, so there was very little opportunity to come together not only to share ideas but also to build collaborations that change and improve our work.” Virtually every

member echoes this sentiment. “Being part of BON, I have access to things I otherwise wouldn’t,” adds Allison Palmer of New Settlement Apartments. “I don’t personally know the president of Hostos or Bronx Community College, but through the initiative, we have great relationships there. We’re stronger together because of the individual strengths each organization brings to the table.”

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—Allison Palmer, New Settlement Apartments

Grace Outreach

(www.graceoutreachbronx.org)

YEAR FOUNDED: 2004

SERVICES OFFERED: Although Grace Outreach began primarily as a GED education center, it has grown into a multi-service organization offering high-quality, low-cost training for the high school equivalency test; a college preparation program that helps students enter CUNY; and a full array of career services and events for women aged 18 and up.

BON’s overall direction and offerings are determined by consensus at quarterly leadership committee meetings. This committee, which is made up of executives from each of the member organizations, reviews existing programming, strategizes on how to raise awareness of BON’s work and secure additional resources, and establishes the amount that each organization is expected to contribute from its own funds. The individual organizations are responsible for raising their own contributions and tracking and reporting their individual program outcomes to the lead coordinator, Good Shepherd Services. BON has deliberately opted not to hire a central coordinator, partly out of a desire to keep the structure as simple as possible and partly from concerns that having a single person “in charge” might reduce the level of collaboration.

Program staff from the various BON organizations have also developed strong relationships with one another through informal interactions on campus, as well as through more structured engagements, such as the learning community of BON members that is supported by the Youth Development

Institute. Pardeice McGoy, who has facilitated the learning community, explains, “When we first started and I asked about challenges, it was clear there wasn’t trust in the room. We’ve worked really hard to remove the competition piece of it. Now it functions as a problem-solving group.”

In keeping with its collaborative nature, BON receives its funding primarily from member organizations, who draw on funds from their general operating budgets or from privately raised money. For 2016, member organizations shouldered 75 percent of the overall cost of the network, with a grant from The Aspen Institute’s Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund covering the remainder. BON spends \$3,500 per student, a modest figure in relation to the returns. In addition to the direct savings that the summer bridge program provides to students with regard to remedial classes that cost an average of \$1,000 each, the benefits of college education accrue for decades. An associate’s degree confers a \$275,000 lifetime premium over a high school diploma, and even accumulating college credits short of a degree opens up better-paying positions.²⁷

BON by the Numbers

Table 2: BON Data, 2011–2016

Cohort	Completed summer bridge program	Percent retained for a third semester	Still enrolled	Graduated	Overall persistence
2011	98	67%	1	18	19%
2012	92	96%	30	18	52%
2013	84	76%	29	6	42%
2014	112	63%	52	0	46%
2015	104	66%*	69	0	66%
TOTAL (2011–2015)	490	68%	181	42	54%
2016	153				
TOTAL (2011–2016)	643	—	—	—	—

*Note: Data compiled from BON member reports, 2011–August 2016. *Retention figures for 2015 reflect second-semester enrollment. Overall persistence reflects the combined total of students still enrolled or graduated for each cohort.*

Between 2011 and 2015, 490 participants completed the BON summer bridge program and enrolled in college, and another 153 students completed the summer bridge program in 2016 (Table 2). BON appears to have a positive impact on third-semester retention—a crucial measure given that the summer following the first year of enrollment is traditionally a major dropout point at community colleges. Of the participants in BON’s 2011, 2012, and 2013 summer bridge programs, an average of 72.9 percent subsequently completed their first two semesters of college and enrolled in their third semester (Figure 4). This figure exceeds the third-semester retention rates among the overall student bodies of both BCC (43 percent) and Hostos (46.9 percent), a strong sign that BON is effectively helping participants navigate the continuation process and stay motivated over the break. The results exceed even those recorded by CUNY Start (59.4 percent), a CUNY-sponsored remediation program that serves participants demographically and educationally similar to BON’s.²⁸

While longer-term outcomes are difficult to judge at this early stage in BON’s existence, the initial numbers appear promising. Of those who participated in BON’s summer bridge program between 2011 and 2013, nearly four out of ten have earned their associate’s degree (15.3 percent) or are still actively enrolled in college (21.9 percent). These figures are fairly similar to the overall outcomes at BCC (12.4 percent graduated, 27.4 percent still enrolled) and Hostos (14.0 percent graduated, 29.5 percent still enrolled) for all students who began at the same time²⁹ (Figure 5). This is especially significant given BON’s sole focus on students with pronounced academic needs.

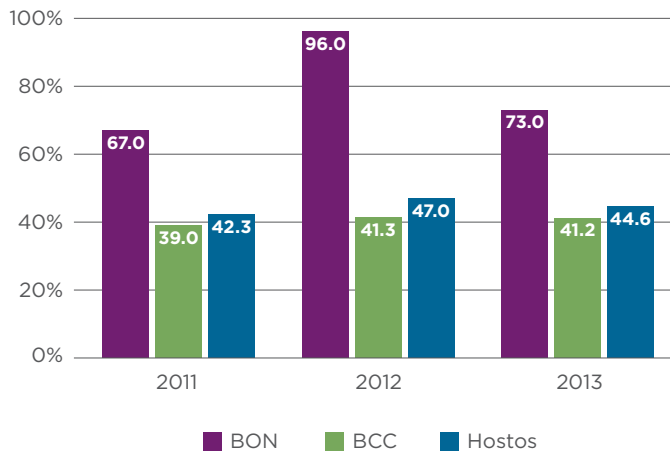


Figure 4: Retention to Third Semester

Source: Reports from BON members and CUNY Office of Academic Affairs

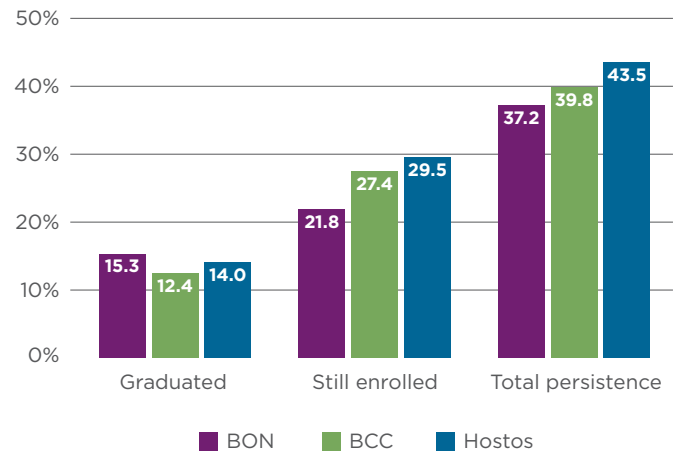


Figure 5: Persistence Rates, 2011–2013

Compared to CUNY’s overall results, and especially considering the socioeconomic and academic disadvantages with which participants start, BON has demonstrated strong and meaningful outcomes in its initial years. Yet BON can relieve only so much of the pressures that prevent more than seven out of ten CUNY community college students from earning an associate’s degree within six years of initial enrollment.³⁰ Time will tell whether BON can positively affect that figure among its participants; but to date, slightly over half (54 percent) of the 490 participants who completed the summer bridge program between 2011 and 2015 are believed to have dropped out of college. Much work remains to be done.

The Road Ahead: From Collaboration to Community Impact to Systems Change

Individual nonprofits “had made these types of requests for years, to no avail, but when seven community-based organizations knocked on the door, the colleges finally took notice, and ultimately took heed of their collective power.” —Lou Miceli, JobsFirstNYC

Beyond the positive impacts on participants and member organizations, BON’s influence can be seen in its strong relationship with the community colleges with which it partners. The early victory of convincing BCC and Hostos to change policies around retaking the CAT exams was an unprecedented accomplishment. Individual nonprofits “had made these types of requests for years, to no avail,” recalls Lou Miceli, JobsFirstNYC’s executive director, “but when seven community-based organizations knocked on the door, the colleges finally took notice, and ultimately took heed of their collective power.” BON offered an opportunity to solve a problem that neither the community colleges nor CUNY as a whole was close to addressing. As BON has proven its value to the colleges over the years, college administrators have increasingly invited it to be part of ongoing conversations around solutions to college access, remediation, and dropout rates.

BON has found fertile soil at CUNY in part thanks to the network’s timely emergence amidst a national shift in priorities around community college access. As the conversations that led to BON were taking place, Barack Obama made community college access one of the central tenets of his 2008 campaign. He has been dubbed the “Community College President” for his early and persistent focus on community colleges as places where “people of all ages and



Christopher Richardson being recognized at a BronxWorks High School Equivalency Program graduation. Photo credit: Shalima McCants

backgrounds, even in the face of obstacles, even in the face of very difficult personal challenges, can take a chance on a brighter future for themselves and their family.” The American Graduate Initiative, unveiled early in Obama’s first term, proposed over \$12 billion in additional funding to modernize campuses and finance programs to increase enrollment and graduation rates. Around the country, as community college systems face growing pressure to rethink how they deliver services, dozens of initiatives have been proposed or tested.³¹

BON had important supporters within the community colleges from the start, including former Hostos president Félix Matos Rodríguez. Its institutional relationships were further strengthened in 2015, when CUNY appointed strong advocates of improved college access to leadership roles at both BCC and Hostos. Hostos’s new president, David Gómez, for example, visited Good Shepherd Services and came away impressed with its peer leadership model and “its ability to mobilize young people to bring the next group through.” Both BCC and Hostos have formed working groups comprising key college administrators and community-based organizations to look at how policies and procedures can be changed to increase student mobilization during the first year. These working groups have formalized the relationship between BON members and college administrators,

allowing them both to think big. “After working together for several years on smaller changes, we came to the conclusion that nothing less than a total reimagining and reengineering of the intersection of community-based organizations, Opportunity Youth and Community Colleges in the Bronx was desperately needed and that we were ready to undertake it,” notes one internal BON memo.

The partnership between the community colleges and BON member organizations has borne fruit most recently in a reengineered series of policies and supports for freshmen that grew out of the working groups and launched in 2016. These new policies and supports embrace a student-centered strategy to boost outcomes, with the following aims in mind: increasing the number of students taking preparation courses for placement tests by 50 percent; keeping BON students together as a cohort during the first year to build greater peer support; connecting the cohorts to existing small learning communities at the colleges; providing early warning and supplemental instruction for struggling students; and enabling the use of co-requisites to fulfill remedial obligations. These new supports are already showing significant promise: in the summer of 2015, BCC’s own programs prepped just 60 students for the placement test; in the summer of 2016, the number rose to 1,000. “That’s collective impact right there,” notes Jim Marley.

Good Shepherd Services

(www.goodshepherds.org)

YEAR FOUNDED: 1947

SERVICES OFFERED: Over 1,200 Good Shepherd participants earn their high school degree or HSED each year. The organization offers all HSED students a comprehensive set of wrap-around services. Good Shepherd also offers in-school counseling and college-prep programs, after-school and summer programs, youth justice programs, and programs for homeless young adults.

BON's ability to sustain good relationships, Marley believes, is due to the fact that "we do not reproduce anything that the colleges are doing. Anything good we find, we wrap around and align with." In 2015, for example, CUNY announced a \$42 million expansion of the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) initiative at all of its community colleges, with the aim of boosting graduation rates at BCC to at least 50 percent.³² Although ASAP requirements preclude many BON participants, BON has worked with CUNY to enroll a number of students who might otherwise not be accepted. "We have very few problems with the colleges; they recognize us as a service to them," Marley explains. "They use us sometimes to help inform their own agendas. In a lot of ways, those college changes have increased our visibility, as the presidents now use these committees to get what they want done, done. And that's fantastic."

"[The colleges] recognize us as a service to them. They use us to help inform their own agendas. The presidents now use these committees to get what they want done, done. And that's fantastic." —*Jim Marley, Good Shepherd Services*

BON has also has a steering committee (distinct from the leadership committee) of representatives from CUNY, New York City agencies, and the nonprofit sector. Chaired by Regina Peruggi, former president of Kingsborough Community College, the steering committee is helping BON develop a strategy for the discussion with CUNY around remediation issues. Committee members include leadership from the NYC Administration for Children's Services; Hostos; BCC; the NYC Department of Education; the NYC Department of Youth and Community Development; the Youth Development Institute; and CUNY.

Increasing the success of young adults in community college is critical to improving economic mobility, especially in low-income communities like the Bronx. (BON organizations have the ability to scale up; BON participants represent just one quarter of these organizations' 800 students enrolled at BCC and Hostos.) BON's model has begun to resonate at a systems level as an effective means through which to deliver services. For example, BON shared the design and curriculum of its summer bridge program and its collaborative model with the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development, established in 2014 to coordinate New York City's workforce and economic development efforts, and other city agencies. Both ideas—bridge programs to boost college success, and collaborative partnerships as a way to deliver more effective services—featured prominently in the city's blueprint for building a stronger workforce system.³³ CUNY itself is a national leader in the delivery of higher education to those at the bottom of the economic ladder, and CUNY initiatives often serve as models for other systems around the country. As BON cements its accomplishments across CUNY campuses and deepens its partnerships with administrators, the network is well positioned to be a part of the conversation at the local and national level focused on moving marginalized students through higher education and out of poverty.

The Aspen OYIF grant provides a timely opportunity for the network to consider its future growth after five years of implementation. Many opportunities exist around increasing the scale of BON's operations, replicating its work at other CUNY campuses, aligning with NYC- and CUNY-led efforts to increase college access, creating a learning lab around college access for the city (and elsewhere), and developing a robust policy agenda to proactively affect policy priorities.

Enhanced data collection and analysis represents another significant opportunity for BON. Establishing a central repository detailing individual student interactions and achievements on a micro level would enable BON to tap into "big data" tools increasingly being adopted by education providers to boost outcomes.³⁴ Establishing a close partnership with CUNY's Office of Institutional Research and Assessment would enable BON to better understand the areas of greatest need as it considers expansion and replication across the CUNY system.

Lessons Learned

New Settlement Apartments

(www.settlementhousingfund.org/new_settlement.html)

YEAR FOUNDED: 1990

SERVICES OFFERED: The College Access Center at New Settlement Apartments is a free educational and career counseling program. The Center provides information, direction and support for public, parochial, alternative, academic-comprehensive and vocational high school students, GED candidates, young and mature adults, and the physically challenged and learning disabled.

After five years of connecting Bronx young adults to higher education, BON has achieved a number of accomplishments that can guide its future work and serve as best practices for others in the workforce and education fields. Policymakers, funders, and service providers should consider four key takeaways that have contributed to BON's success:

1) A foundation based on consensus and stability of membership

The community-based organization staff interviewed for this paper repeatedly voiced the theme of consensus and collaboration as a hallmark of BON. The process from which the network emerged—a meeting among Bronx-based youth service providers aimed at finding a collaborative approach to improve outcomes for young adults, but which quickly recognized the common challenge around community college access—led to strong buy-in for the concept of a joint approach. The stability of membership in terms of organizations and specific leaders and staff members has cemented a high level of trust in day-to-day operations that has enabled the sharing of resources, contacts, and experience.

2) The value of intermediaries

Throughout BON's history, outside intermediaries have played an important role in its success. As a neutral intermediary that bridges the divide between practitioners, funders, policymakers, and other stakeholders in the young adult employment world, JobsFirstNYC has been instrumental in securing the original planning re-grants, providing a facilitator to create a structured space for discussions, hosting quarterly steering committee meetings, identifying funding opportunities, and promoting BON in the wider community. Moreover, BON partners benefit from JobsFirstNYC as a neutral facilitator when planning activities. The practitioner training sessions conducted by Pardeice McGoy of the Youth Development Institute provided an opportunity for frontline staff to build new skills and forge deeper working relationships.

3) Cultivating support among university officials

Much of BON's effectiveness can be traced directly to the strong relationships and support that member organizations have developed with CUNY administrators.

“Bronx Community College’s partnership with our community-based organizations and the Bronx Opportunity Network has been good for our students and community. The collaboration provides us an opportunity to serve students and the community in an effective way.” —Dr. Thomas A. Isekenegbe, president, Bronx Community College

“Of the students who leave [Hostos] in any given year, 93 percent leave for other than academic reasons. We need to be able to attend to these immediate challenges. One of the ways we have begun to do so is to strategically partner with community-based and other institutions. The best example of that kind of community partnership is what we have through the Bronx Opportunity Network.” —*Dr. David Gómez, president, Hostos Community College*

The complex, decentralized nature of university bureaucracies often makes launching new programs and changing procedures difficult. The decision by Hostos and BCC, after significant lobbying, to allow BON participants to retake the CAT proficiency tests marked a major win that community-based organizations had been after for years. Similarly, the ability to establish a presence on campus was a significant accomplishment that has enabled BON staff members to respond “in the moment” to the needs of students who have traditionally faced challenges in school. Over time, BON’s effectiveness has increased CUNY’s willingness to work with outside organizations, creating a positive feedback loop.

4) Alignment with national and local policy priorities

Without a doubt, BON emerged in the right place and at the right time. Following the 2008 financial crisis, the national discourse began to focus on the plight of “Generation Recession”—young adults born in the 1980s and 1990s, who have fared the worst in the recovery. Expanding access to community college for low-income workers who were being left behind economically became a central plank of Obama’s first presidential campaign and a subsequent focus of his administration. Federal money to promote enrollment and degree completion soon started flowing, causing community colleges to rethink the high turnover model that had become the norm. This demand for reform and new approaches to boosting student outcomes prepared the ground for programs like BON to take root.

Appendix A: Comparative Approaches to Boosting Community College Outcomes

CUNY ASAP (www1.cuny.edu/sites/asap)

Launched in 2007, ASAP is a comprehensive program for students pursuing their associate's degrees at CUNY colleges. Its goal is to help at least 50 percent of students graduate within three years. ASAP provides academic, social, and financial support; a consolidated block schedule; cohorts by major; small class sizes; and personalized advisement and career development services. Financial incentives include tuition and fee waivers for eligible students, textbook assistance, and monthly MetroCards for all students. Since its inception, ASAP has admitted 12,780 students and has a graduation rate of 53 percent (versus 23 percent for a comparison group).

CUNY Start (www2.cuny.edu/academics/academic-programs/model-programs/cuny-college-transition-programs/cuny-start)

Similar to BON's summer bridge program, CUNY Start provides intensive preparation in academic reading and writing, pre-college math, and "college success" advisement for students entering CUNY with significant remedial needs. The goal of the program is to help students prepare for college-level coursework and reduce or eliminate any remedial needs prior to starting credit-bearing courses. The program costs only \$75 and allows participants up to two opportunities to retake the CAT. Of the 6,000 students who completed the full-time CUNY Start program between 2009 and 2015, upon retaking the CAT exams half tested out of all three remedial subject areas and 30 percent tested out of two subject areas. (Students who attended part-time saw lesser but still substantial gains.)³⁵

College Now (collegenow.cuny.edu)

This collaboration between CUNY and the New York City public school system offers college readiness programs to over 20,000 students annually in more than 400 public high schools. The goal of College Now is to help students meet high school graduation requirements and prepare for success in college so that they will be able to enroll in college without the need for remediation.

CUNY's Early College Initiative (earlycollege.cuny.edu)

CUNY's Early College Initiative introduces a blended curriculum designed to enable middle and high school students in 17 select New York City public schools to earn a high school diploma, an associate's degree, and work experience at the same time. By blurring the lines between middle school, high school, and college, the program strives to engage students who often have trouble navigating the complicated educational landscape in New York City.

Let's Get Ready (www.letsgetready.org)

Let's Get Ready is a nonprofit organization that matches volunteer college students to low-income high school students across multiple states to serve as role models and mentors while providing free SAT preparation, admissions counseling, college transition services, and campus support needed to gain admission to and graduate from college. The organization's data shows that 92 percent of participants enroll in college after high school and are five times more likely to graduate than similar peers nationally. Since 2000, Let's Get Ready has served more than 25,000 low-income high school students.

College Advising Corps (advisingcorps.org)

College Advising Corps places recent college graduates from 24 partner programs as full-time college advisers in disadvantaged high schools across the country. Advisors work with teachers and administrators to foster a college-going culture in the classroom, and they help students understand and navigate the complexities of college admissions, standardized tests, and financial aid. Although the services provided are not as intensive as other models, external analysis shows significant increases in students' likelihood of applying to and persisting in college.

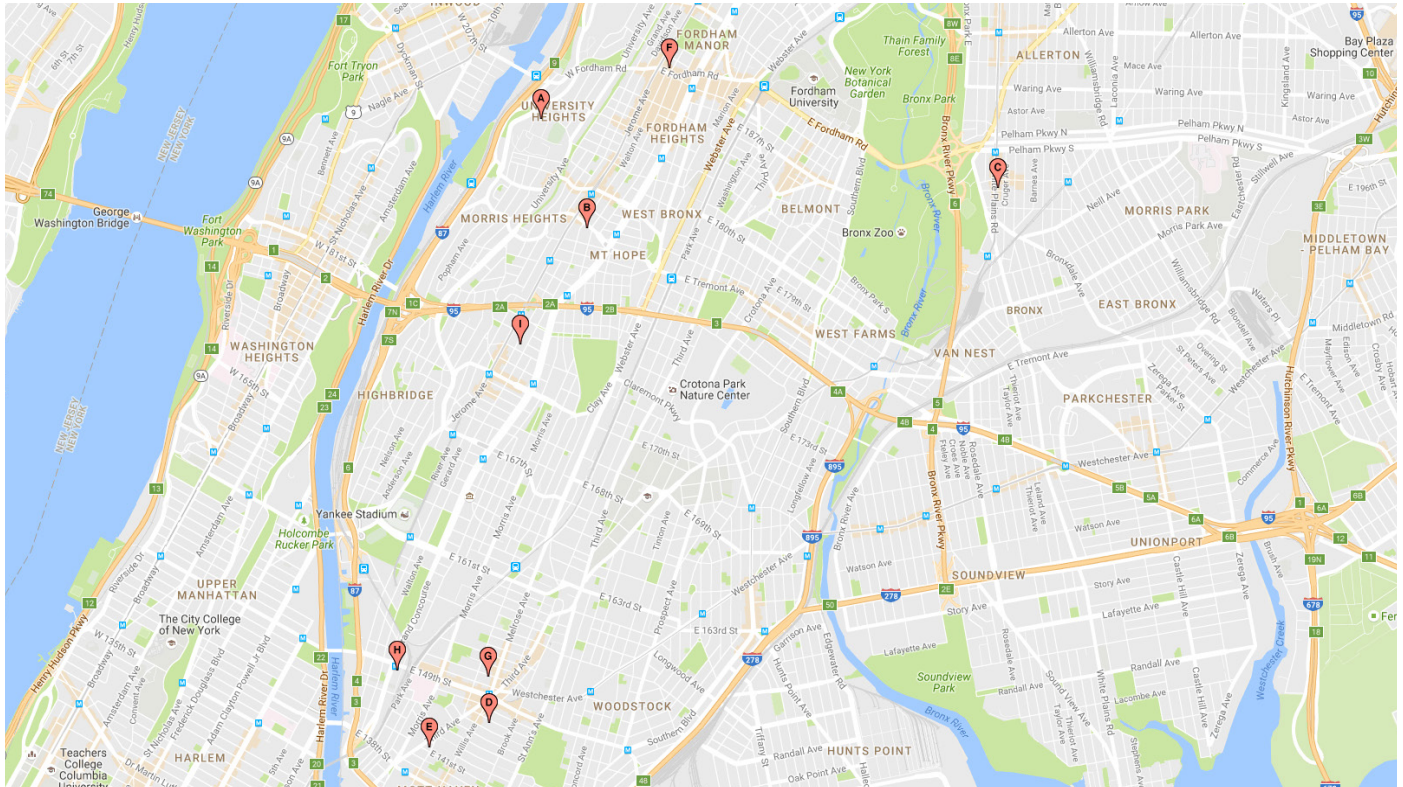
The Bronx Achievement Pact

Announced in 2012 as a partnership between the Bronx President's Office and Mercy College, the Bronx Achievement Pact introduced an ambitious plan to raise \$100 million by 2025 in order to provide students at every underperforming Bronx high school an opportunity to earn an associate's degree at no cost. Although the current status of the initiative is unclear, the plan shows a willingness among government officials to consider big solutions and collaborative partnerships to address the education crisis.³⁶

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