

# Establishing a State-Level Postsecondary Advising Network

Ryan Reyna and Lauren Norton

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, [fewer than 65%](#) of high school graduates enrolled in postsecondary education or training within a year of graduation. This equates to nearly 1 million high school graduates who do not directly advance to postsecondary, with a [disproportionate number](#) of students being Black, Latinx or Native American, or from low-income families. This is troubling for all states and communities, as [research](#) indicates that the longer it takes for a student to enroll in postsecondary education, the less likely they are to attain a postsecondary credential.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the challenges that students face in navigating the maze from high school to college. Amid growing concerns around affordability, health and family obligations, many students have reconsidered their postsecondary plans. According to a [national survey](#), 42% of Black students and 50% of Latinx students have either changed or canceled their postsecondary education plans. These rates are nearly double that of white students, threatening to widen existing inequities.

Moreover, some students have [disengaged](#) from education altogether. As districts have quickly shifted to remote learning and support, many students have had to confront a [lack of broadband access](#), an inconsistent quality of instructional materials and the need to juggle school work with employment or caring for family members. At the same time, many of the traditional opportunities for students to build their social capital — such as summer employment, internships and bridge programs — have been [canceled or moved online](#).

## EQUITABLE TRANSITIONS THROUGH PANDEMIC DISRUPTIONS

This Policy Brief is one of six dedicated to various facets of the transition from secondary to postsecondary education, now complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic. It focuses on the populations already underserved in our nation's education system. The series — which builds upon "[A State Policymaker's Guide to Equitable Transitions in the COVID-19 Era](#)" — provides actionable steps and examples for state policymakers to consider as they address the transition from high school to college and the workforce. The other Policy Briefs in the series are:

- "[Expanding High-Quality Work-Based Learning](#)"
- "[Boosting FAFSA Completion to Increase Student Success](#)"
- "[Policy Solutions That Foster Competency-Based Learning](#)"
- "[Modernizing Math Pathways to Support Student Transitions](#)"
- "[Prioritizing Equity in Dual Enrollment](#)"

Given that [nearly every job created](#) in the aftermath of the Great Recession of 2008 required some postsecondary education or training, it will be critically important to keep high school students on track to pursue postsecondary education to equip them for success in a challenging job market.

One way to do that is to establish an advising network that employs recent college graduates as mentors for high school graduates and rising seniors. The advisors are responsible for helping students explore their college and career interests, apply to and select postsecondary institution(s), understand college costs and apply for financial aid, and matriculate and persist in postsecondary education. States can use their policy and financial levers to create this network and connect it to the state's broader agenda for supporting postsecondary access and success.

There is growing [evidence](#) that nurturing relationships, alongside academic and skill development, play an important role in students achieving their educational and career goals. [Social networks](#) help individuals navigate new situations, open doors to specific

resources and foster a sense of belonging. While students of color often have strong community ties, the social networks of Black, Latinx and Native American students [are less likely](#) to have deep connections to postsecondary and employment opportunities due to long-standing systemic inequities. So, it is important through this pandemic to create new opportunities for building social capital. As “near peers,” recent college graduates are well-equipped to advise high school students on the process for preparing for and transitioning to college, having recently undergone the process themselves. They can offer a sense of community to high school students and serve as an example of what is possible when supports and resources are available to help navigate the maze to postsecondary enrollment. It is critical that the supports do not end at matriculation, since many first-generation college students do not make it to the end of their first year because of [social isolation, questioning their abilities and/or financial challenges](#). Having an advocate and a guide can help more students persist and ultimately attain a postsecondary credential with labor-market value.

## A Governor's Role in Closing Postsecondary Attainment Gaps

Governors have long been — and continue to be — a driving force in improving K-12 and postsecondary education. A focus on educational improvement ranks as a high priority for governors as they seek to advance economic competitiveness and maximize efficiency of state budget resources. Meeting workforce needs and closing postsecondary attainment gaps [requires partnership between K-12 and postsecondary education leaders](#). Just as when a runner passes a baton in a relay race, the most successful transitions occur when both sides are working together to maintain momentum. Without cross-system alignment, students may suffer from a lack of preparation or support in the transition between systems. Given their responsibility over both systems, governors have the opportunity and authority to ensure that K-12 and postsecondary education sectors work together to accelerate students to the finish line.

# The Elements of a Postsecondary Advising Network

The elements of a robust advising network include targeted outreach to Black, Latinx and Native American students, and those from low-income families; use of near peers as advisors to build relationships and engagement through the first year of postsecondary education or training; comprehensive supports that prioritize key momentum points across a student's journey to and through postsecondary education; robust tools for managing and monitoring engagement; transparent reporting of outcomes; and sustainable funding.

## Targeted Outreach

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[Surveys](#) indicate that students of color and those from low-income families are most likely to disengage from education or delay their postsecondary plans as a result of the pandemic. It will be critical to send a signal to recent high school graduates and rising seniors that they are not only welcome in postsecondary education, they are wanted, and there are state resources to help them navigate the transition. The initial outreach efforts of a state advising network can be targeted to the communities most affected by the pandemic. That includes Black, Latinx and Native American students and those from low-income families. As advisors analyze data to identify potential recipients of their support, states can also coordinate approaches to conduct broad outreach by mailing personalized letters from the governor, legislators and state agency leadership; partnering with famous state entertainers or athletes to communicate through geo-targeted social media posts; and offering local events, such as college signing days, with schools or institutions of postsecondary education.

## Near-Peer Advisors

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A newly formed state postsecondary advising network would best be filled by recent college graduates, with a concerted effort to recruit graduates of color and those from low-income families. There are multiple reasons to consider recent college graduates. First, economic downturn caused by the pandemic has limited their employment prospects. In addition to facing [staggering unemployment rates](#), recent graduates are seeing a 30% drop in [job postings](#) compared to this time last year — a real-time measure of national labor-market activity.

Individuals who are not far removed from high school are likely to have a better chance of connecting with current students or recent high school graduates. They can rely on their own recent experiences navigating the college application and financial aid processes, as well as how to continue on a path toward credential attainment. And given that they are digital natives, they are likely to be comfortable engaging virtually with students as states move through the various stages of reopening from the pandemic.

The cohort of near peers should also reflect the diversity of students they are serving, with priority being given to Black, Latinx and Native American, and low-income graduates. Doing so will not only provide meaningful employment to graduates from those populations, it will also help the targeted students [benefit](#) from mentorship from an individual who can relate to their cultural experience.

Governors can recruit recent college graduates by speaking to the generation's interest in service and community-building. The state

could also offer loan forgiveness opportunities for mentors to further entice recruits. Alternatively, a governor could partner to create a state-specific franchise of the College Advising Corps. This would fast-track the state's ability to launch the program, relying on CAC's years of experience in recruiting and training advisors and in employing platforms for monitoring progress. In 2019, CAC [trained](#) 800 recent college graduates, 83% of whom were Pell-eligible and students of color. Students served by a CAC advisor [were](#) 30% more likely to apply to college, 27% more likely to submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and 76% more likely to continue into at least their second year of college. There are a few states — such as **North Carolina, Texas** and **Utah** — that have a CAC site at multiple institutions, but no state currently provides advisors on the scale necessary to close the current gaps in postsecondary transitions, let alone those resulting from the pandemic.

## Comprehensive Advising Supports

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Students begin to build momentum to postsecondary education and training as soon as they set foot on a high school campus, and perhaps even earlier. There are a number of key steps that students can take — and that advisors can support students in completing — that increase their likelihood of postsecondary enrollment and success. For instance, participation in early postsecondary opportunities — Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB) and dual enrollment — leads to [increased](#) high school graduation, postsecondary enrollment and college-persistence rates. Ninety percent of high school students who complete the FAFSA

[seamlessly enroll](#) in postsecondary education, compared with only 55% of non-completers. Increasing the number of college applications that a student submits from one to two can [increase](#) a student's probability of enrolling at a postsecondary institution by 40%. Students who enroll in postsecondary education or training programs immediately after high school graduation are [more likely to persist](#) and attain a credential.

Research has [shown](#) that comprehensive exploration, application and matriculation supports have a greater impact on postsecondary enrollment and persistence than targeted approaches, especially for first-generation college students. Thus, any advising network should seek to maximize the types of supports provided and the length and intensity of engagement, based on available funding. Examples of meaningful postsecondary transition support include:

- **College and career exploration:** Determining long-term career interests and the type of education or training beyond high school necessary to meet that aspiration.
- **College application:** Completing application requirements, including college entrance assessments, essays and letters of recommendation.
- **Financial literacy:** Helping students understand the cost of postsecondary education and training and complete the FAFSA to access loans and grants.
- **College match and fit:** Determining which institutions to apply to and enroll in based on their academic success in serving different populations of students and how they align with a student's personality, interest and financial situation.

- **Summer melt:** Ensuring that students who indicated their intent to enroll in postsecondary education proceed to matriculation in a timely fashion.
- **Peer networking:** Developing a sense of community with other students at an institution to increase engagement and likelihood of persistence.
- **Persistence engagement:** Supporting students as they navigate their first year of postsecondary education or training to ensure they have an individual to lean on if they face hardship, isolation and academic struggle.

## Robust Virtual Engagement Tools

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The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted traditional opportunities for advising and guidance. As a result, college-access organizations and postsecondary institutions have redirected their supports to a virtual environment. While technology cannot replace the individual connection between an advisor and a student, it can help maintain that connection in a socially distanced environment. [Matching advisors](#) to students, trying to [organize case management](#), and directing communications and supports to thousands of students at one time can be a herculean effort. A well-constructed technology platform can increase staff capacity and limit confusion. There are [many platforms](#) that can send automated text messages; monitor student progress on key postsecondary application, matriculation and persistence steps; provide college and career exploration and planning tools; and enable advisors to coordinate with institutions to triage issues before they lead to student disengagement. States can consider

providing financial support and training for the adoption of a common tool to facilitate virtual engagement.

## Transparent Reporting on Outcomes

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Governors in more than [40 states have set a postsecondary attainment goal](#) tied to their future workforce needs. Getting students into college prepared to succeed can set a state on a positive trajectory to meeting its goal. In particular, every state must dramatically increase the percentage of Black, Latinx and Native American adults who possess a [postsecondary credential of value](#) if they are to deliver on their aspiration. Any new postsecondary advising initiative should connect directly to the state's postsecondary attainment goal. Given the current outcome gaps, it will be critical that the advising network transparently reports on its engagement with the targeted populations and tracks the progress of students receiving support in terms of entry, persistence and, ultimately, attainment of postsecondary credentials of value. Every state has a [State Service Commission](#) that either sits within the governor's office or reports to the governor. In addition to supporting program administration, this body can be responsible for coordinating data collection across K-12 and postsecondary education and publicly reporting outcomes.

## Sustainable Funding

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While the pandemic has placed considerable strains on state budgets, there are federal resources available to develop or scale a state advising network. Congress set aside \$3 billion of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and

Economic Security (CARES) Act for the [Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund](#). These funds may be disbursed to districts, postsecondary institutions or other education-related entities. Funds can be used for program administration to develop initiatives, such as an advising network, that help students access and succeed in postsecondary education and training. Additionally, the [Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund](#) of the CARES Act provides \$13.2 billion for districts and state education agencies. Each State Education Agency is eligible to use 10% of the state's funding for program administration and state-level activities. Taken together, these two funding streams could be braided to kickstart an advising network.

Additionally, states can tap into their [AmeriCorps funding](#) to support the creation or sustainability of an advising network. The federal government annually disburses funds to governor-appointed state service commissions, as well as to

individual organizations, to support direct service supports across a number of areas, including education. Many of the current in-school mentor or advising supports that exist nationally, such as [City Year](#), make use of AmeriCorps funding to support staff expenses, as do state-level advising networks, such as [Advise MI](#) and [Advise AZ](#).

Finally, many of the national college-advising organizations have recently received [philanthropic support](#) to scale their virtual supports to address gaps caused by the pandemic. Now is an opportune time to approach those organizations to inquire about partnership opportunities, either in terms of providing access to advisors and training or in providing technical support for the creation of a new state initiative. Philanthropic support could help defray the initial cost of such a partnership, allowing states to institutionalize the costs over time and develop a more sustainable funding model.

## Benefits of an Advising Network:

The potential benefits of creating a state postsecondary advising network include:

- Closing equity gaps in postsecondary enrollment and attainment.
- Helping first-generation college students navigate the transition from high school to higher education.
- Reducing unemployment rates.
- Keeping new college graduates in the state.
- Increasing civic engagement.
- Building social capital and a sense of belonging.

## Integrating an Advising Network Into Postsecondary Access and Success Initiatives

The creation of a state advising network can provide needed capacity to execute upon a robust agenda for increasing postsecondary access and success. States can leverage the advising network to expand the scale and accelerate the success of existing postsecondary preparation and attainment strategies, including increasing student awareness of postsecondary options, using data to spotlight postsecondary transition gaps and opportunities, and implementing policies that create seamless transitions. For instance, pairing near-peer advising support with an [automatic admissions policy](#) or a [last-dollar scholarship](#) can lead to dramatic improvements.

Under gubernatorial and legislative leadership, a number of states have implemented data and accountability policies that prioritize postsecondary transitions. Each of these efforts could be leveraged by a network of near-peer advisors to target specific supports. [Eight states](#) include postsecondary enrollment or enrollment without the need for remediation in their high school accountability system based on the Every Student Succeeds Act, and [over 30 states](#) transparently report that information on their school report cards. These data can provide a critical tool for advisors, educators and administrators to examine their practices and target resources to ensure students

### Delaware's "Getting to Zero" Campaign

Under former Gov. Jack Markell, Delaware created a four-step outreach-and-support [campaign](#) to ensure that every student identified as college-ready either enrolled in a postsecondary education institution or enlisted in the military. First, every high school senior that met the SAT college readiness benchmark received a letter from the governor inviting them to participate in postsecondary education and training and outlining key supports available to them. Second, the state education agency established monthly data check-ins with counselors and administrators on whether their students had met key milestones, such as completing the FAFSA and submitting applications. Third, the state created a Delaware Goes to College advising program for students from low-income families that helped students explore their postsecondary options and build critical relationships. Finally, to address "summer melt," the state implemented a texting campaign to connect high school seniors and their parents to resources on college selection and financial aid. In less than two years, the state met its goal, with 100% of identified students applying for college and 98% enrolling or enlisting.

have the supports they need to realize their postsecondary aspirations.

A growing [number of states](#), including **Illinois**, **Louisiana** and **Texas**, now require the completion of the FAFSA for high school graduation. While completion is required, that does not mean that all students and families will have the supports they need to navigate filling out the form or working through the verification process. For this reason, **Texas** has created “Go Centers” at postsecondary education institutions across the state where recent college graduates serve as mentors to local high school students to guide them through the college application and financial aid processes.

## Final Thoughts

Given the demands of today’s economy and the dramatic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, K-12 and postsecondary education systems must work together to drive educational opportunity for all students, particularly students of color and those from low-income families. Now more than ever, a high school education is not enough — students must be able to transition seamlessly from high school into postsecondary education or training. Equipping students to successfully navigate this transition takes planning, coordination and ongoing support in high school and higher education. A state-run advising network — providing targeted supports to those most likely to face the impacts of the pandemic — can be a foundational step to help more students realize their postsecondary aspirations.





# About the Authors

## Ryan Reyna

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Ryan is a senior director at Education Strategy Group, where he leads the organization's efforts to build bridges between K-12 and higher education to promote seamless postsecondary transitions for students – especially those from traditionally underserved populations. Prior to joining ESG, Ryan served as director of the Office of Accountability and Data Management at the Delaware Department of Education and as a program director in the Education Division at the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices. Ryan earned a master's of public affairs degree from the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas and a bachelor's degree in American politics from the University of Virginia. Contact Ryan at [rreyna@edstrategy.org](mailto:rreyna@edstrategy.org).

## Lauren Norton

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Lauren is a senior associate at Education Strategy Group, where she oversees research and technical assistance to states and districts on aligning policies across K-12 and postsecondary systems to ensure that all students have the academic and navigational supports they need to be successful. Prior to joining ESG, Lauren served as an innovation strategist at District of Columbia Public Schools. Lauren earned a master's degree in education policy and management from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Missouri. Contact Lauren at [lnorton@edstrategy.org](mailto:lnorton@edstrategy.org).

