Education
Georgia State University has significantly boosted graduation rates of low-income and minority students by providing innovative, student-centered services.
In philanthropy, we seek to address many difficult social problems, from climate change to growing economic and social inequality to access to health care. Many perceive these problems as intractable and impossible to fully solve. For some, America’s flat college attainment rate falls into that category. Some see it as being as immutable as the First Law of Thermodynamics in physics. They believe no amount of investment or reform can have any meaningful impact.

We disagree.

That’s why in March 2015, we invited our Board of Trustees to Austin, Texas, a center of educational innovation. We wanted them to see firsthand the type of change that is possible and to hear directly from low-income college students about their struggles and breakthroughs. At the University of Texas and at Austin Community College, we spoke with national leaders — experts on improving student success through the use of Big Data, reworking developmental education, addressing both on- and off-campus barriers to student success and fostering a growth mindset that can build the resilience students need to complete a degree. Low-income students described the challenges they face as they try to attend college while juggling family and work demands.

At that meeting, Kresge’s board approved our education strategy for the next three to five years. In addition to continuing our existing focus areas (Supporting Pathways to and Through College and Building the Capacity of Institutions that Serve Low-income, First-generation and Underrepresented Students), we added a third focus area: Strengthening and Aligning Urban Higher Education Ecosystems.

While higher education policy generally focuses on the federal or state level, for most low-income people, college is very much a local activity. Low-income students typically go to college in or near their hometowns. But K-12 systems, community colleges, four-year universities, businesses, nonprofits and local governments rarely coordinate or align their programs, credits or activities, leaving students to navigate complex environments alone. By encouraging community-based solutions, we believe we can have a positive impact on college attainment.

Communities need to address problems holistically, but colleges also need to use new tools to solve time-worn barriers to student success. I don’t use this word lightly, but as you will see in this annual report, Georgia State is revolutionizing higher education through data analytics. By using Big Data to identify problems, address ineffective practices and adopt a student-centered environment, this urban institution, once a bastion of Jim Crow segregation, now graduates more African-Americans than any other public or nonprofit university in the country.

We can’t disagree that improving college attainment is tough. But the barriers low-income students face are not impossible to knock down. As Georgia State and our other partners demonstrate, with smart solutions, change is possible.
Georgia State University awards more degrees to African-American students than any other public or nonprofit university in the U.S.

Removing the Barriers
Georgia State is Focused on Helping Students Graduate

You won’t find Georgia State University (GSU) in the top tiers of the most well-known academic rankings. Yet this urban institution, located in the heart of Atlanta, Ga., has emerged as a national leader when it comes to student success.

In the last decade, GSU has significantly boosted enrollment and graduation rates among minority and low-income students with the kind of innovative, student-centered solutions The Kresge Foundation’s Education Program likes to nurture. Most students at GSU come from disadvantaged socioeconomic groups, particularly people of color and children of immigrants. Many hold jobs and have children.

Yet, GSU graduates about 1,700 more students each year than it used to and now awards more degrees to African-American students than any other public or nonprofit university in the U.S.

In 2015, the 30,000-student university received a $981,000 Kresge grant that will allow it to expand its Summer Success Academy (SSA), a program for incoming freshmen who might otherwise struggle in college or skip it altogether. The program is one piece of GSU’s broad strategy to eliminate barriers to a college education.

The grant will also help smooth the transition as GSU absorbs Georgia Perimeter College, a community college in Atlanta that is also struggling with retaining and graduating nontraditional students.

Failure to earn a postsecondary degree or credential of any kind is an obstacle to joining the middle class in America. It dooms many to a life of part-time and low-paying jobs.

"In the U.S., we’re trying to ensure public higher education remains a public good, not a private good," Moses says.

Yet, Moses says, many colleges and institutions aren’t taking seriously the low graduation rates of their least privileged students. In fact, most college students in the U.S. are not the stereotypical, fresh-faced 18-year-old living in a dorm.

"The majority of today’s college students are older, poorer and many are people of color," Moses says. "Think about the resources they’ve wasted when they don’t finish, all the books they’ve bought, time spent, the tuition and fees they’ve paid.”
Today, Kresge is among the most influential higher education grantmakers in the nation. As it awards grants, it also puts a priority on engaging deeply with grantees.

“We seek to be thought partners,” he explains. “We work very closely with grantees to help them think about solutions to problems they’re seeing on the ground.”

Yes They Can

GSU has implemented a variety of interventions that have reduced the dropout rate and saved students money, all while bolstering revenue. At a glance:

- The university provides microgrants to help college seniors who are at the finish line, but who have run out of financial assistance. The average grant is $900 — pathology considering both the value of a degree to a student and the tuition loss it would mean for the school if the student left (about $10,000).
- GSU doubled the size of its advisory staff and put counselors on one floor in the same building. They are versed in all majors, so students don’t need to spend time searching for a specific adviser.
- The university uses predictive analytics based on 10 years of data on student achievement patterns to track each student daily to make sure he or she is on course academically.
- Freshmen are counseled and steered into majors early so they don’t waste time and money taking the wrong courses or bouncing around between majors.
- Freshmen take introductory math in “flipped” classrooms, meaning they pace their own learning in computer labs, with instructors available when needed. Since that change was implemented about eight years ago, the number of students who pass the course has increased. Previously, only 57 percent of students made it; now it’s more than 80 percent.

“We have a personal aspirational to do what is right for the students and right for society.”

— Timothy Renick, Georgia State University

* « Moving the Needle

GSU’s initiatives over the last decade exemplify practical changes that can truly move the needle. Enrollment grew from 27,000 to 32,000, and the percentage of minority students rose from 46 percent to 63 percent. Nearly twice as many GSU students now receive Pell grants — federal money available to economically disadvantaged students.

The Summer Success Academy is one of GSU’s success-related interventions. The four-year-old program has served some 1,000 freshmen, acclimating them to campus life before the semester starts in September. Students participate in seven weeks of skill-building workshops and credit-earning classes, enabling them to carry a lighter load during the regular school year. They may also live on campus.

Gunawork Wondimneh, a 19-year-old freshman and daughter of Ethiopian parents who is majoring in marketing and risk management, says the summer academy provides “all the information you need to have a successful, smooth start to college.” She’d been apprehensive about making her way around campus; living there for the seven weeks helped assuage those fears.

Earning credits before the fall semester meant her year got off to a calmer start, too.

“Because we had the seven credits coming into the fall semester, we only had to take four classes,” she says. “People I know who were taking five and six classes were stressed out and tired.”

The SSA also provided her with invaluable information about applying for loans and scholarships. That put her in a position to help friends who came to campus later and had questions about financial aid.

“We’re kind of leaders to our peers coming in the fall,” she says. “We’re using the opportunity for our own benefit, but we’re able to advise our friends and peers.”

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For 21-year-old Fortune Onwuzuruike, the SSA provided a head start. The health informatics major says he had access to a variety of campus organizations and mentors during the summer. Today, Onwuzuruike is a peer mentor with a strong GPA.
The school reached out to me and was really screaming about opportunities,” he says. By providing at-risk students with the opportunity to participate in the SSA, GSU has boosted retention rates to 90 percent and given many of these students the confidence to persist.

“If I had started in the fall with everyone else, it probably would have been another culture shock,” says Keyshawn Hoyte, an 18-year-old freshman who has spent much of his life in Trinidad. “I would have had a heavy workload and my performance would not have been as good as it is.”

Students receive tutoring help, meet with advisors, do team-building exercises and take classes that they can apply toward course requirements for their major.

“These students have been performing better than their freshmen peers,” Renick says. Kresge’s grant will help GSU open the summer program to more students in 2016 — and perhaps house them on campus, he says.

“That would be ideal,” he says. “Once fall begins, many of these students will live at home.”

**Targeting Success**

Kresge’s education partners range from colleges and universities to networks of college access nonprofits — institutions that affect a student’s ability to enroll, persist and succeed in college.

Other 2015 grants were awarded to the University Innovation Alliance, a consortium of 11 research universities working on solutions to help students from all socioeconomic tiers graduate at a lower cost; the Michigan College Access Network; and Achieving the Dream, a nationwide reform movement that is dedicated to student access and success in community colleges.

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It didn’t stop there. Post-apartheid South Africa is experiencing the same challenges that public universities do in the U.S.: Fewer students are college-ready and fewer graduate. Kresge provided a grant to the South African Institute for Distance Education to create Siyaphumelela (“We succeed” in Xhosa, one of South Africa’s official languages). The initiative has encouraged the use of data analytics to manage student progress — much like GSU is doing — at five universities.

In fact, Moses says GSU’s “iconic role in the student success movement” serves as a role model for other Kresge grantees.

“It’s important to overcome the sense that you can’t fix these problems, that there’s some sort of natural law that only 40 percent of people can earn a college degree,” Moses says. “Georgia State is proving that’s not true.”

**Achieving the Dream**

From medics and caregivers to cooks and technicians, many adults have life experiences that can translate to college credits, saving them time as well as thousands of dollars in tuition and fees.

However, there’s no universally accepted tool for the country’s higher education institutions to measure what students already know and how many credits they deserve for that knowledge.

That’s why in 2015, The Kresge Foundation, working with other funding partners, made a $2 million low-interest loan to the Chicago, Ill.-based Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) through its Social Investment Practice in partnership with Kresge’s Education Program. The loan helped to fund the expansion of CAEL’s online Prior Learning Assessment platform, called LearningCounts.org, in Michigan and Texas.

“At Kresge, we work with community colleges all over the country, and a lot of them do prior learning assessment on their own,” says Caroline Altman Smith, deputy director of Kresge’s Education Program. “It’s very fragmented and inefficient because colleges rarely have a full-time person committed to it. It would be impossible for any one college to be able to review and assess the many types of knowledge and skills that can be gained outside of a classroom.

“That’s why a national, standardized high-quality platform was so attractive.”

CAEL President and CEO Pamela Tate says LearningCounts.org was launched in pilot form five years ago and went national in 2013. Adult students use the site to create a portfolio that documents their work experience and knowledge; the portfolio is then evaluated by a college faculty member. Credit is awarded when students can demonstrate a level of comprehension or skill equivalent to what they would have learned in a college course.
CAEL helps students turn on-the-job experience into college credits.

“The time and effort to get this in place in those two states has been just astronomical — incredibly labor intensive,” says Tate, adding that with Kresge’s support, CAEL has been able to expand LearningCounts.org to 42 colleges across the country.

Smith acknowledges there is some repayment risk for the foundation should LearningCounts.org not become a profitable business. But Kresge was willing to make the investment because it has the potential to break new ground and effect meaningful, long-term change. “CAEL is spreading its wings and flying now with this new product,” she explains. “It will hopefully be self-sustaining as more colleges and students use it and pay to do so.”

As that happens, students will benefit.

“We were helping to create something that had not been done before, that we thought would be very useful to the field and help tens of thousands of students finish their degrees.”
—Caroline Altman Smith, The Kresge Foundation
In 2015, Kresge made a low-interest loan to the Chicago, Ill.-based Council for Adult Experiential Learning (CAEL) through its Social Investment Practice to expand the organization’s — and dynamic leader Pamela Tate’s — ambitious LearningCounts.org program. The loan capital followed a series of Kresge grants to CAEL totaling more than $2 million since the inception of LearningCounts.org in 2010.

“Pam Tate for many, many years has been viewed as a true national leader in adult learning,” says Kresge’s Caroline Altman Smith. “She and her team are passionate about helping adults get connected to postsecondary opportunities and get into the workforce.”

Here’s how the Social Investment Practice invested in the platform:
- Kresge chose to provide loan funds to support the expansion of LearningCounts.org, which was critical for the organization’s growth.
- Half of the loan was made available in June 2015, following CAEL’s development of an updated business plan for the LearningCounts.org platform; the second $1 million will be released in June 2016 if certain benchmarks related to student enrollment and college participation levels are met by that time.
- If CAEL qualifies for the second disbursement, it will be applied to finance further scaling of LearningCounts.org.
- The loan will be repaid from revenue earned from colleges that use the online platform. Principal repayments will begin in 2021.

Kresge’s loan to CAEL supported expansion of its platform that helps college students turn work experience into college credit.

The Kresge Foundation Education Program promotes postsecondary access and success for low-income, first-generation and underrepresented students living in cities in the United States and South Africa. We fund both the institutions that provide education as well as the communities in which students live. We want to help increase the nation’s postsecondary attainment rate, advance mobility, address economic inequality and strengthen urban communities.

Kresge’s loan to CAEL had a 2 percent interest rate and an eight-year term.

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*Denotes cross-team grant  
+Denotes 2015 amendment to a previously awarded grant