

A CASE STUDY OF THE
FOUNDATION'S INVESTMENTS

2011–2015

By Anne Mackinnon
JANUARY 2016



Gateway to College National Network Growing Stronger Through Learning

Students become disengaged from high school for many reasons. Some struggle academically in conventional high school programs. Some feel alienated from school, unattached and with a sense that no one cares. Some find that the demands of high school are at odds with the challenges of their young lives, which often include childcare, family, or work responsibilities. For some students, the situation gets so bad that they simply drop out; others remain enrolled but fall further and further behind.

More than 1.2 million U.S. students drop out of high school every year. Without diplomas, these young people face poverty and diminished life prospects, closed off from the good jobs that increasingly depend on education beyond high school.

In 2000, Portland Community College (PCC) and Portland Public Schools created an experimental program that was specifically designed to meet the needs of students like these. Acting on the theory that many struggling students would respond well to *more* intellectual challenge, not less, and would take *more* responsibility for their own learning in the mature atmosphere of the college campus, PCC began to offer a unique suite of services. Students ages 16–21 who had dropped out of high school could enroll in a program at the college that offered a combination of intensive academic skill-building, wraparound social supports, and the opportunity to take college courses—courses that would count toward both high school graduation and college requirements. The idea was to help students earn their high school diplomas and get on a path toward completing their college degrees.

The PCC program soon attracted the attention of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which saw potential in its unusual model: unlike most dual-enrollment programs, which are typically reserved for high-achieving high school students, PCC was giving a real chance at high school completion and college to significantly off-track students. In early 2003, the Gates Foundation

granted nearly \$3.3 million to PCC to allow it to formalize its program and to hire a manager, Laurel Dukehart, to lead its implementation at additional colleges. The first replication site, at Riverside City College in California, launched in 2004. In December of that year, Gates made a further grant of \$5.4 million to support Gateway's expansion to nine additional sites as part of a larger, \$30 million investment by the foundation in early college models around the country.

In 2008, Gateway to College National Network became an independent nonprofit organization—a move designed to make the model more attractive to funders, Dukehart recalls. By then, the network had grown to 17 community colleges, working with 81 school district partners in 13 states. Gateway got another boost in 2009, when a consortium of funders (Gates, along with Open Society Foundations, Kresge Foundation, and Carnegie Corporation of New York) provided a combined \$13.1 million to allow the program to reach for national scale. In 2011, Gateway programs were operating at 31 colleges in 16 states.

**GATEWAY
TO COLLEGE
NATIONAL
NETWORK**



Network model

Gateway works with community colleges and school districts to set up programs that serve students and provides support to its network of sites.



Partners

Gateway helps community colleges and school districts negotiate partnership agreements that are tailored to local needs and standards.



Student population

Gateway programs serve “opportunity youth” who:

- have dropped out of high school or are behind and unlikely to graduate
- possess fairly strong academic skills (8th grade reading and math required)
- are mature and self-reliant
- are not the high-achieving high school students served by more typical dual-enrollment programs



Funding

Gateway sites are largely supported through K–12 per-pupil education funding from school district partners, which are responsible in most states for providing free public high school education to students through a certain age (usually 19–21).

WHAT STUDENTS GET

Students enrolled in Gateway programs receive:

- A “foundation” term at the community college campus, with required courses in reading/writing, college skills, and career development (and math, if needed)
- Support from a caring and highly trained resource specialist who helps navigate the academic, social, and emotional demands of college
- Upon completion of necessary coursework, a high school diploma
- Early integration into community college courses

WHAT COLLEGES GET

Colleges affiliated with Gateway receive:

- Orientation and support in establishing their programs and ongoing participation in the Gateway network
- Technical assistance in contracting with school districts on policies, admissions, funding, and other matters
- Staff training

Reaching to serve more young people

INSIGHT

Curiosity is the essential starting point for evaluation. Gateway's inquisitive mindset was important at every step for overcoming problems and making the most of findings.

With its solid history of growth, Gateway was in a good position in 2010 to apply for federal Social Innovation Fund (SIF) support. The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation had been selected by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) to serve as an SIF intermediary and was seeking proposals from youth-serving organizations. In particular, it was looking for candidate organizations that were poised to grow to reach many more high-need young people while also deepening the evidence for their work.

“We had been aware for a while that the opportunity was coming down the road,” recalls David Johnson, Gateway’s chief of staff. He and his colleagues considered several intermediaries that were managing SIF funds and agreed that EMCF would be the best fit. The foundation’s emphasis on building an evidence base aligned with their

own thinking, he explains, “and the things we’d be required to do made sense and seemed very reasonable.” They submitted an application.

Thus began a rapid but exhaustive due diligence process, involving Gateway and foundation staff, strategists from the Bridgespan Group, and evaluators from the research organization MDRC. In June, the foundation selected Gateway to be one of its nine SIF grantees and announced an initial investment of \$3.5 million in federal funding; with matching dollars, Gateway would have \$7 million to use toward strategic growth and evidence building. (EMCF later provided an additional \$2.3 million from its True North Fund, a growth capital aggregation fund that pooled commitments from 14 co-investors, toward the required match. Gateway raised the rest from other sources.) The foundation also pledged support for scenario and evaluation planning.

Announcing its decision in March 2011, the foundation cited Gateway’s track record for replicability, its apparent readiness for rigorous evaluation, and its compelling and important purpose: giving a very high-risk population of disconnected young people a chance to earn a high school diploma and make a successful transition to college. The grant was designed to enable Gateway to grow further by adding new sites and significantly expanding the number of students served.



Charting a path to sustainability

The infusion of new support came at a good time for Gateway. Like many start-ups, Gateway had grown opportunistically in its early years, adding new campuses on the basis of funder interest and the quality of the proposals it received from individual colleges. Now, after a decade of aggressive growth, and with the major funding it had received in 2009 winding down, Gateway was ready to establish itself as a stable national network and to adopt a more coherent, thoughtful approach to expansion and quality assurance.

Foremost on the agenda was evaluation. Gateway's leaders knew that a stronger evidence base would be important for its long-term sustainability; indeed, they had begun to talk with MDRC about conducting an evaluation even before they applied for the EMCF/SIF grant. The two organizations had developed a tentative plan to conduct a small, experimental study to test Gateway's readiness for a full-fledged assessment, explore the scope of work, and set the stage for soliciting the funding they would need. Now, with the EMCF/SIF funding in place and SIF guidelines requiring a rigorous evaluation, Gateway and MDRC saw the opportunity to move forward far more rapidly with a full evaluation.

In particular, Gateway wanted to capitalize on this chance to understand its “counterfactual”: What happened to young people who were similar to program participants but did not enroll?

Gateway knew that it was serving an extremely challenging population—young people on the brink of becoming totally disconnected from school and work, with few viable educational options—and could tell it was making a difference for many of them. But how much difference, and what were the contributing factors? Comparing Gateway participants with the general population of high school students would not do justice to the difficulty, or the importance, of what the program was trying to do. To make a powerful case for its work with this high-risk, high-stakes group, Gateway needed a clearer picture of how its outcomes compared with the outcomes of similar young people who had taken other pathways. Its leaders hoped that an ambitious, EMCF/SIF-supported evaluation would provide that picture.

EMCF portfolio manager Jehan Velji remembers that the organization's leaders were also “very much aware of the need to think about their funding model” and their ongoing relationships with sites. The situation was complex because of Gateway's distinctive network structure. Gateway had depended in the past on near-continuous, foundation-funded expansion to new campuses; it had given relatively little attention to where a campus was located or how much technical assistance would be needed once a program was up and running.



The upfront cost to community colleges had intentionally been set low; philanthropic dollars allowed Gateway to provide new sites with extensive start-up support, including help with hiring, training staff, and negotiating contracts with school districts on complex matters such as funding arrangements and awarding high school credit. Once established, a fully enrolled site could sustain itself almost entirely with the state K–12 per-pupil funding it received from participating school districts. Sites paid a small fee to the network, but those fees made up a relatively small portion of Gateway’s total revenue. Moreover, Gateway did not manage sites or have direct authority over how they operated.

The decisions behind these policies made a lot of sense during a period when the focus had been on expansion — but, as a mature organization, how could Gateway sustain its work, absent continuous, funder-driven growth? What should its relationships with established sites look like, how would it manage quality across the network, and what capacities would it need? The EMCF/SIF funding would give Gateway an opportunity to ask these and other questions.

Establishing a body of meaningful evidence

INSIGHT

An in-depth implementation study can yield valuable insights that lead to program refinements.

Gateway quickly put MDRC's observations to use to make specific improvements to its student enrollment process.

To address the need for reliable and comprehensive evidence of its impact on students, Gateway worked closely with MDRC to plan a randomized control trial (RCT) that would, according to EMCF's March 2011 grant summary, "generate valid estimates of program effects within a year after [students'] enrollment on intermediate outcomes such as credits earned, school attendance, risk-taking behavior, and attachment to school and the labor market." The study would take place at nine Gateway sites and would compare the experiences of Gateway participants with those of qualified students who did not participate in the program. MDRC and Gateway began immediately to train site staff and enroll students in the study.

Challenges arose fairly quickly, as sites began to fall short of their student sampling goals. The research design depended on sites having more eligible students than Gateway could accommodate, so that students not placed in the program could be assigned to control groups. Instead, many sites saw reductions in the number of eligible incoming students—perhaps partly a result, Gateway theorized, of new, more concerted efforts by school districts to keep at-risk students enrolled in their high schools. "Many of our sites were impacted by the recession," recalls David Johnson, and as resources became scarce, "districts became less inclined to direct students and resources to outside programs." Gateway hired a dedicated staff liaison to help sites boost recruitment through additional technical assistance and data analysis, but most programs continued to struggle with lower-than-anticipated enrollment.

Recognizing that the evaluation could not be carried out as planned, Gateway discussed the options with MDRC, CNCS, and the foundation and came to a decision: the evaluation plan would focus on program implementation at three sites—one each in California, Colorado, and Washington—that had met their RCT enrollment targets. The evaluators would look closely at how the Gateway model had been implemented in those three distinctive local contexts, checking for variations and identifying the stumbling blocks sites encountered. The study would not be designed to establish a firm connection between Gateway's efforts and student outcomes, but it would provide a window into the day-to-day work of sites and a stream of evidence that could be used to improve the model.

The implementation study rapidly put a spotlight on pivotal aspects of the Gateway model. The researchers found, for example, that certain components of the model, such as the principles of teaching and learning applied at each site, had not been clearly codified and were not applied consistently. This variability made measuring implementation fidelity quite challenging—yet, as the researchers noted, this same variability also helped the program function in a wide range of contexts with unique sets of college and school district partners.



An early instance of program refinement grew out of the difficulties MDRC had experienced with trying to enroll the RCT study population. The evaluators realized that sites were missing eligible students because the “on-ramp”—the period at the beginning of a school year when students traditionally enroll in high school or college—was

simply too narrow for many of the students Gateway hoped to serve. With some of the money left over from the scaled-back evaluation, the program worked with eight sites to expand the enrollment period so at-risk students had more time to learn about the program, decide that it might be right for them, and register. According to Johnson, this change not only “increased the pipeline of students at the local level,” but yielded lessons for the entire network.

EVALUATION FINDINGS: FIDELITY WITH VARIATION

In its final evaluation report, *Gateway to College: Lessons from Implementing a Rigorous Academic Program for At-Risk Young People*, released in September 2015, MDRC concluded that “the three sites participating in this study were able to implement the core model as designed, with some local variations.” Indeed, flexibility is inherent to the Gateway model, and local adaptations are “important attributes of the program,” given the diversity of local contexts and the varied needs of the young people served.

The evaluators found variations in five operational areas: how sites implement the career development course; how sites form learning communities; instructors’ views of their own role; instructors’ interpretations of what project-based learning should look like in the classroom; and rates of transition to mainstream community college.

According to MDRC, the “biggest challenges” sites faced were retaining students during their first term in the program and ensuring that students make a successful transition into the mainstream community college. Overall, the researchers found that “strong relationships between program staff members and students” were a common area of strength, and that all three sites had successfully established and maintained a “shared culture of support for students and pedagogy that focuses on helping students find solutions to their problems.”

MDRC’s findings have proven valuable to GtCNN as it seeks to understand what supports sites actually need, what program elements should be treated as “non-negotiable,” and how the program model itself might evolve to meet the needs of young people.

Gateway continues to look for opportunities to make targeted improvements in program outcomes. Currently, for example, two Gateway programs and a partner site in Washington State are implementing a new “identity-based motivation” model that could increase students’ persistence in the program, an area highlighted as particularly important by MDRC. Designed by researcher Daphna Oyserman and based on an intervention validated with other student populations, the approach encourages students to see the connection between their current identities and their future selves—and, therefore, to recognize that the future is near, that “difficult” means “important” rather than “I don’t belong here,” and that college completion is indeed within their reach. If the work of these sites proves successful, this new intervention could be integrated by other campuses in the network.

**GATEWAY TO COLLEGE
AND THE EDNA McCONNELL
CLARK FOUNDATION
2011-2015**

Dual-enrollment program for at-risk students created at Portland Community College (OR)

Gateway to College established as an independent 501(c)(3)

\$3.3M grant from Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

First replication site opens at Riverside City College (CA)

\$5.4M grant from Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

\$13.1M grant from consortium of funders (Gates, Open Society Foundations, Kresge, Carnegie)

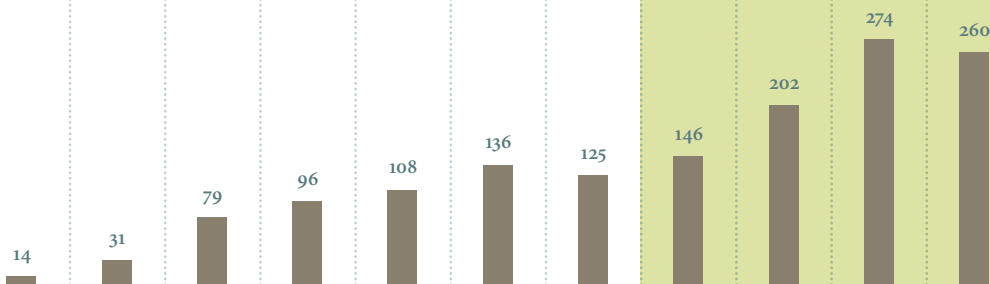
\$7M investment from EMCF/SIF (\$3.5M SIF; \$2.3M True North Fund; \$1.2M other sources)

900 students graduate from Gateway programs
\$750K grant from EMCF to support transition from SIF and new leadership

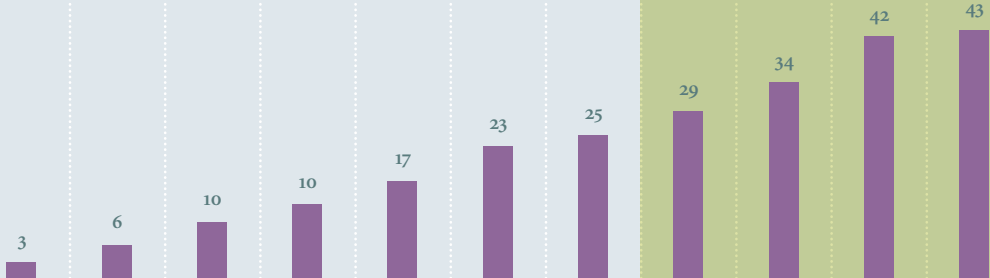
\$500K grant from EMCF to support transition from SIF

2000 2001 2002 2003 2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015

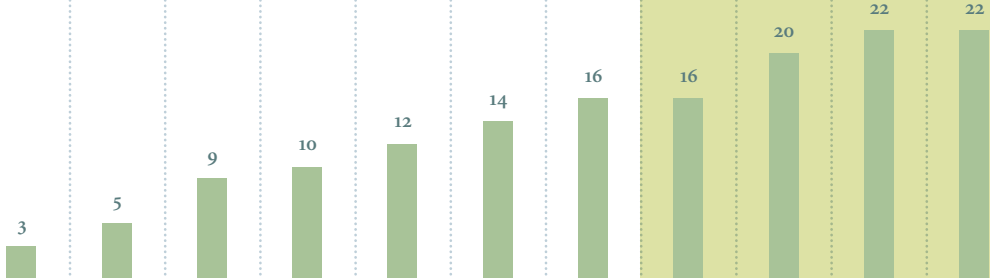
SCHOOL DISTRICTS



PROGRAMS

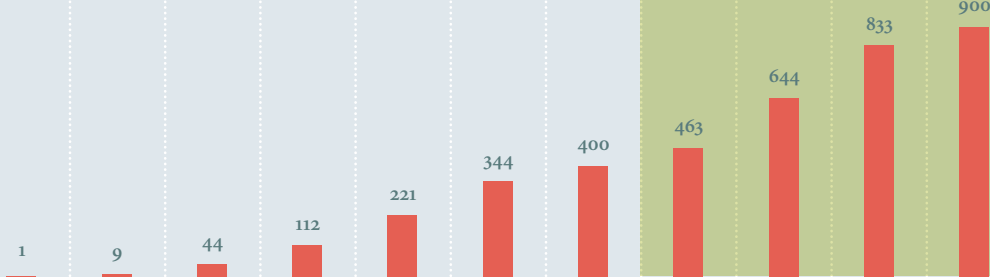


STATES



GRADUATES

ALL-TIME GRADUATES
3,971



INSIGHT

A network is only as strong as its nodes and the connections among them. To strengthen its network, Gateway invested in its capacity to cultivate local partnerships and support cross-site learning.

Working toward sustainability

In addition to the need for a stronger evidence base, Gateway's leaders were acutely aware that the organization's long-term organizational and financial viability depended on achieving a sustainable funding model. In collaboration with Bridgespan, they therefore began to take a comprehensive look at how this might be achieved.

In September 2012, Gateway adopted a new business plan, developed with Bridgespan's support, that put a heavy emphasis on selecting new sites more strategically and on improving the performance of the network itself. Gateway would aim to cluster new sites through targeted outreach to campuses in regions that combined supportive public policies, interested local funders, and a core group of existing sites. Gateway would therefore be better able to provide coherent support to individual campuses, promote cross-site learning, and build public understanding and acceptance of the model.

So far, says Glenn Fee, Gateway's director of external affairs, the strategy has worked well: "We've achieved critical mass and are still building in three states—Washington, Massachusetts, and California. And there's a fourth area—Philadelphia and New Jersey—where there's tremendous potential for us in the future."

A regional approach has also strengthened connections across sites. During the past two summers, for example, Gateway has gathered students and staff from Washington and Oregon for a Northwest Student Leadership Summit, where students discuss personal challenges and successes and program staff consider best practices

for supporting students. In California, Gateway hired a state director who fosters learning among current programs, looks for growth opportunities, and advocates for state-level dual-enrollment policies and other measures that benefit low-income and other vulnerable youth.

Another priority was increasing the efficiency of Gateway's central operations and expanding capacity in areas such as fundraising, communications, and external affairs, the last being essential for strengthening local partnerships. Gateway combined its program department with its research and evaluation unit, thus streamlining internal accountability for outcomes. Increased fundraising and communications capacity have made Gateway better able to do individual and corporate fundraising, develop new fee-for-service earning opportunities, and raise the organization's national profile. The communications team offers technical assistance to program sites and helps them use online tools to enhance local visibility and engage students.

The funding profile has also improved. Historically, nearly all of Gateway's revenue has come from national foundations. Today, regional and national foundations provide about three-quarters of Gateway's revenue, with a growing share coming from corporate and individual donations, fee-for-service work, membership fees, and sponsorships. Gateway has also begun to require that new sites collaborate in securing start-up funds from local sources, a departure from past practice that could eventually increase the financial sustainability of the organization.

Continuing to learn and improve

Emily Froimson, who came on as Gateway's president in March 2015, believes that the thoughtful work carried out over the past few years has been a vital bridge between the organization's early focus on rapid growth and its more mature commitment to learning and improvement. Gateway's operations today are grounded in best practices about how the model operates on community college campuses and how it can do an even better job of serving a population of young people whom MDRC's evaluators called "both challenged and promising." And the work is showing results: in the past few years, the number of graduates has increased dramatically, from 644 in 2012–13 to 900 in 2014–15, bringing the total number of students who have earned high school degrees through Gateway programs to just under 4,000.

Under Froimson's leadership, Gateway is continuing to evolve into a true network for learning and exchange, not just a collection of sites with a common brand. "As I go around to visit sites," she says, "I see that a lot of our programs are doing some things really well. We need to see where those strengths are, understand them, and then share them across our network." With deep experience in philanthropy and college access, she knows that "success stories in education don't happen overnight," but she is optimistic about what's possible. She and her team are working hard to put lessons from the MDRC evaluation and their own analytics into action and to implement key pieces of the 2013–17 business plan: "There have been incremental improvements every year, and I see that continuing. We're going in the right direction."

LESSONS FROM THE EMCF / GATEWAY TO COLLEGE RELATIONSHIP

For nonprofits:

- Be prepared for twists and turns in the evaluation process — and be open to the learning that can occur as your team adapts and pivots.

For funders:

- Carefully assess readiness for evaluation. Gateway expended considerable energy on attempting to implement an RCT evaluation that was probably premature.
- Give grantees room to rethink evaluation plans. Although Gateway to College's RCT evaluation proved infeasible, the revised study produced valuable findings and increased Gateway's capacity for evidence-based improvement.

Froimson's determination is also fueled by what she sees as the wider opportunities and challenges of the present moment. With four-year high school graduation rates up nationally, but with many students still falling through cracks in the system, she believes that Gateway has an important role to play in building a body of evidence about how to "re-engage harder-to-serve students in their education, bring them back into the fold, and help them succeed." These students, she argues, must be an integral part of the nation's emerging college access and completion agenda—an agenda that has gained greater urgency in recent years because of mounting evidence that postsecondary education is essential for success in today's workforce:

"We cannot ignore this large group of students, and we and our partners need to continue to make that case." The more Gateway learns about how best to serve the diversity of students who enroll in its programs, the more it can contribute to efforts across the country to ensure that all students have a real chance at postsecondary success. ■

