

Roadmap for Tracking Your Student Results

PROGRAM DATA & SYSTEMS

Photo by AchieveMpls, used with permission.

The second in a series about college access data management



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Introduction



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Worth Investing In

English philosopher Herbert Spencer once said, “The great aim of education is not knowledge but action.” You may see this apply to the students in your college access and success programs, but it is also true for the data you collect, which should educate your organization about what is happening in its operations. It is not enough to simply know what your data is saying (although this certainly helps!). Ideally, your organization is also able to act on the insights you gain to improve your programs for students and better achieve your mission.

As a mission-based B Corp working towards social change, one of our core focuses at Exponent Partners is helping education organizations manage their data and results using technology. It made perfect sense to collaborate with the [National College Access Network \(NCAN\)](#) on both our first report together, [Driving Toward Program Improvement: Principles and Practices for Getting Started With Data](#), and this second report in the series. This paper assumes you have taken the first steps in defining what you are trying to measure, managing your data and “becoming data-driven.” It goes deeper into the vision of effective data management, analysis, and using technology to further impact those gains.

It can be easy to put off a data system indefinitely and rely on spreadsheets and Google Docs, but we

believe that it's worth investing in scaling your organization's long-term vision and acting more strategically with real-time data. As Amy Cruz, Chief Operations Officer at Breakthrough New York says, "While you're waiting for the perfect system, it never really comes along. You have to create it. Make it a priority, and take the time to build the system that will help your staff support your students in the best way possible."

There are many kinds of data to manage across your organization, from fundraising to communications to programs. Whole organization solutions allow you to seamlessly track and manage the operations of all of your departments in one place. In this report we are focusing specifically on program-related data, although many of the lessons can be leveraged by other departments.

We're excited to present real stories and tips in program data management, analysis, and system development from five of your peers, and to share best practices from 10+ years of working with college access, persistence and success organizations.

To your success,

Kristi Phillips
Education Solution Consultant
Exponent Partners

A Foundation for Achieving Your Mission

"Data! Data! Data! I can't make bricks without clay!" Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes once exclaimed. The nonprofit sector, and the college access and success field in particular, has spent recent years accumulating data "clay" and forging it into insightful and actionable "bricks" with increasing frequency and success. In doing so, individual programs, and the field collectively, have laid a foundation for improving practice, measuring impact, scaling services, and achieving our mission of helping low-income, first-generation students to access and complete postsecondary education.

The National College Access Network is committed to providing technical assistance to and advocating on behalf of our members, who comprise nearly 400 college access and success organizations across the United States. Our members' collective need and desire for data- and



Photo by Spark, used with permission.

evaluation-related tools and resources are both evident. This two-part series on the principles behind and practices of data-driven organizations, released in collaboration with Exponent Partners, represents another important resource both for our members and for the field.

No matter where your organization is in the process of becoming data-driven— from step one and scoping out the key questions you need answered, to a step much further down the line that finds you refining your processes and trying to measure your organization's impact—our hope is that this series will provide something to learn for every organization.

As I once heard at a training on managing data-driven organizations, too many organizations, across a variety of fields, have the mindset of, “I don’t want to look because I don’t want to know.” No organization can grow that way, and just by opening this report, you’ve taken an important individual and organizational step toward learning how to better serve students and shape their futures.

Members, thank you for your commitment to our collective work. Non-members, we would love to work with you to grow the work of college access and success.

To better understanding,

Bill DeBaun
Director of Data & Evaluation
National College Access Network (NCAN)



Spotlight on Interviewees

We'd like to say thanks to the following individuals from college access and success organizations for taking time to share their data management stories and lessons with us.

ACHIEVEMPLS



LEAH COREY, SENIOR PROGRAM DIRECTOR

As the strategic nonprofit partner of the Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS), AchieveMpls engages hundreds of community volunteers, employers and funders each year to help ensure equitable opportunities and career and college readiness for all Minneapolis students. They believe that preparing young people to succeed in school, work and life is the best investment they can make in their city's health and vitality.

HIGHER EDGE



CHRIS SOTO, FOUNDING DIRECTOR

Higher Edge guides Eastern Connecticut's low-income and first-generation students through enrollment, retention, and graduation from college by providing the support and resources needed for success.

LA PROMISE FUND



LOGAN CONTRERAS, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF DATA & ANALYTICS

LA Promise Fund is a nonprofit organization dedicated to preparing Los Angeles students for success in college, career, and life. Working through a network of high-performing, community-based schools and a portfolio of programs that reach students throughout Los Angeles County, the Fund creates vibrant community hubs and partnerships that foster motivated, engaged, and directed students poised for academic, professional, and personal success.

MIDTOWN EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION



CRISTY ACOSTA, DIRECTOR OF RECRUITMENT, PROGRAM MEASUREMENT & ALUMNI RELATIONS

Midtown Educational Foundation guides low-income urban youth in Chicago along pathways of success. Their proven enrichment programs embrace the dignity of the person by focusing on academic excellence, virtue development, individual attention, and parental engagement.

SPARK



KELLY DWYER, CHIEF KNOWLEDGE OFFICER [FORMER]

Spark inspires 7th, 8th and 9th graders in underserved communities to succeed in high school and beyond by engaging them with mentors and future careers.



Program Data Management

Beyond dry numbers, the program data you manage as an organization help you to tell the story of the students your services are helping, both internally (to help staff and leadership understand the work you're doing) and externally (for funders, external partners in collective impact, college access networks, and more). They help you connect with the 'right' students for your program to serve and then monitor both their day-to-day and long-term progress.

We are using "data management" as a term that encompasses the full data lifecycle: from defining the mission-aligned indicators important to college access programs, to collection, tracking, and analysis. Effective program data management helps to you to ask better and better questions about the impact your programs are having, and to adjust your actions accordingly.

A system can help you perform all of these functions. System and process go hand in hand. Processes will help you define what, when, and how you collect the data and conduct the analyses you need to determine student progress. Systems will guide your staff in collecting the data and enforcing data collection standards so you get consistent results. With the two combined, you will be able to more efficiently understand how you are doing and use those insights to better serve your students.

Cristy Acosta, Director of Recruitment, Program Measurement and Alumni Relations at Midtown Educational Foundation, says of their system, "We had an online application before, but it was never integrated into our processes where people could see it live. A lot of times the data had to be digested or changed or parsed. Having them in one central place and being able to work with them within Salesforce reports is just really agile. [The system] really can change and adapt to whatever we need."

Systems can even go beyond what is commonly thought of as data management, and automate some of your core- and time intensive- program processes, such as sending emails, uploading documents, updating data fields, screening applications, and so on. These time savings give you the ability to invest greater amounts of staff time in providing more student support, asking more nuanced questions, and taking more nuanced action.



Having [the data] in one central place and being able to work with them within Salesforce reports is just really agile. They really can change and adapt to whatever we need.

—Cristy Acosta, Midtown Education Foundation

As Carol Thompson Cole mentions in the foreword to *Leap of Reason: Managing to Outcomes in an Era of Scarcity*, "...during this time of very tight budgets, the time-consuming, expensive work of clarifying and assessing outcomes

becomes more--not less--valuable to [nonprofits]. When resources are scarce, funders are more likely to ask for measurable results. But far more important[...] nonprofit leaders themselves are eager for clarity on where to place their bets and how they can create the biggest impact for children and families.”

A system to manage both your data and your outcomes can help your organization both provide funders with the measured results you are already having and more effectively ‘adjust course’ when iterating on your programs and services to increase impact.

Chris Soto, Higher Edge’s founding director, commented on their system: “Whether a small or big organization, you want to do things more efficiently. Everything in life is a trade-off. If you don’t want to invest, you have to accept the fact that you might have some grief or you might not be able to work with data in certain ways because of the mechanism that you’re using. We made a conscious decision to invest...”



Photo by Midtown Education Foundation, used with permission.

As your organization becomes more advanced, your tools need to advance with you. A system can be both a wise and an ultimately resource-saving investment for program data management. In the following pages, we’ll discuss how to start harnessing your data through processes and systems so that you have the information you need to best serve your students.

Data Collection Strategy

In order to fully take advantage of a system and develop it to best suit your needs, it’s crucial to take these foundational steps around data collection.

DEVELOP PROGRAM FRAMEWORK

Begin by formalizing your organization’s framework for evaluating your program and analyzing your program results. This may include aspects like your theory of change and [logic model](#). For more in-depth information on this, see our first report in this series, [Driving Toward Program Improvement: Principles and Practices for Getting Started With Data](#).

Kelly Dwyer, former Chief Knowledge Officer for Spark, shares their process around getting clear on their organization’s framework and what data they needed to gather: “A big part of our strategic plan was improving our data systems and improving our ability to measure our outcomes for students. In learning to work with our data, the first step was to get together as a leadership team, and clarify our logic model.”

Spark was working to measure outcomes around high school graduation and found it challenging to connect

that work to their middle school efforts. One key for them was research funded by the Wallace Foundation, which studied the trajectory of student growth from early childhood to college graduation. The research identified major developmental stages kids needed to go through to be successful academically.

“Developmentally, middle schoolers are thinking about who they are, how they see themselves, how the world sees them,” Dwyer says. “The most important piece that emerged was impacting mindset. Then we had to clarify what kinds of mindsets to develop to see the outcomes we’re looking for. All our research and discussion came together in our logic model that said: mindsets plus social/emotional skills are what we believe drive school performance. From there it was a matter of collecting that data over a couple of years and testing our hypothesis, making sure the numbers were adding up.” The research helped Spark to map programmatic activities and resulting outputs and outcomes into their logic model.

A clear understanding of how a program model works theoretically is the first step to building a system that measures how well a program works empirically.

CONSIDER DATA THAT SUPPORTS THE FRAMEWORK

Once you’ve nailed down your framework, you can start to think about the overall data and types of data you want to gather at different stages of the program.

- Which metrics, quantitative and qualitative, are most valuable to track? How do these relate to your theory of change?
- Are there certain metrics you’re measuring over time?
- In what timeframe are the various metrics collected? How often do they need to be updated to be useful?
- What data can you gather internally, and what sources of external data might you tap?
- Does a particular piece of information lend itself more to qualitative collection? If so, which kind of instrument will you use to collect it?
- What data can, or will, you collect that could be valuable to external partners or funders?
- Are there later stages where you can consolidate by program and reduce data burdens by utilizing a previous bit of data you gathered?
- How will you manage ambitious data collection with what is feasible for your students, staff and team to analyze?
- For metrics that are time-consuming to collect, are there suitable available proxies that could be more efficient and serve approximately the same purpose? Can you automate data collection?
- If these data are collected, how will you use them to inform your actions? What types of changes could you make?

For more on this, see [*Driving Toward Program Improvement: Principles and Practices for Getting Started With Data*](#).

Spark makes heavy use of external data. “We have a few research centers that we stay on top of because they do

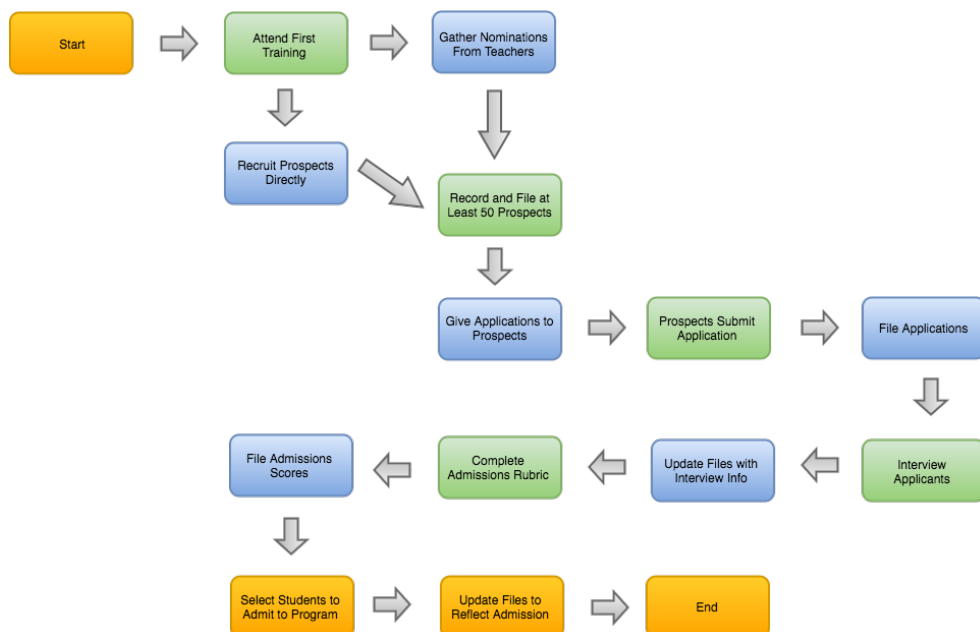
middle school research, within our field,” says Dwyer. She cited the Everyone Graduates Center at John Hopkins for its high school dropout research, the Chicago Consortium on School Research for its local focus, the Raikes Foundation for its funding of social/emotional learning research, and other research endorsed by NCAN.

Leah Corey, Senior Program Director of AchieveMpls, notes that her organization likes to have a good mixture of qualitative data from surveys and focus groups to supplement the quantitative: “Some people are really moved by quantitative data and some aren’t. Those who aren’t moved by quantitative data can be motivated by insights that come out of our qualitative surveys. I think that’s a really important piece of what we do to better understand our program data. We try to get a representative sample when we survey so that we do not bias our data or hear only what we want to hear. We also know that you can’t look at surveys in isolation, so we try to look at them together with quantitative metrics to have a clearer picture of what’s going on in our programs.”

Corey adds, “One of the things I find really important is the ‘dosage’ or participation data. I’ve been pushing our teams to make sure that we’re tracking the work that’s happening so that we can actually make claims about program impact. If we have no data about whether students are participating and at what rates they’re participating, then as a program director I don’t feel comfortable saying, ‘Our program did this and had this impact.’”

MAP PROCESSES

Using simple flowcharts, map business processes for each of your programs. If you have multiple programs, we recommend using program models to map those processes and associated data collection in separate flowcharts. We define a program model as: *A strategically defined set of services delivered to a specific target population by a distinct set of staff in order to achieve one or more intended outcomes or results.* Think about your processes from start to finish, from application to alumni. Then map out your activities in detail, step by step.



Pictured: sample student recruitment and admissions process mapping.

Be honest about the processes you're actually using.

Consider these questions at each stage: Who has access to the different types of data? What is your collection process? Document your processes and revisit them periodically to make sure you are working efficiently.

- Which data do you really need? Which data do you have an actual use for?
- Can you consolidate anywhere?
- Which staff members will gather needed data the most naturally?
- Do some staff need to add data collection to their role?
- How can you speed up the process and ensure the data are standardized so they can be compared well (both against older data, longitudinally, and against similar data from other organizations and sources)?
- Are there ways to make qualitative data more uniform?
- How will you cross-check the accuracy of the data?

"With respect to standardizing, I would say if you're collecting data that are not leading to some sort of action or lesson, those are junk data," says Logan Contreras, Associate Director of Data and Analytics for LA Promise Fund. "They're cholesterol clogging your operations. You want to be really intentional about only collecting fields and measures you're going to use, otherwise you're wasting time and you're wasting resources. They may look impressive in a database, but what are you really getting out of them?"

For more on how to take these important foundational steps, refer to the first paper in our collaborative series, [*Driving Toward Program Improvement: Principles and Practices for Getting Started With Data*](#).

IDENTIFY AND IMPLEMENT A DATA MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Once you've taken these steps, you have the foundation for a system. A data management system ensures both storage and a central access point for all staff (and in some cases, volunteers, mentors, program partners, etc.) to enter, track and analyze data. It also helps to minimize duplicate data, potential loss due to data stored on individual computers, and the lack of higher level views and transparency that comes from having data stored in emails, paper files, and staff members' memories. The best systems can provide you with tools (or integrate with other tools) which help you analyze your data and see student progress.

For the purposes of scope, in this report we won't cover in detail how to choose a system. We recommend one that is flexible and extensible enough to support your organization as it grows and that allows for self-management so you can evolve it over time. You'll also want to take the processes you've mapped and use them to help identify the system that will best support you. For more details, [refer to our blog post on characteristics to choose in a system](#).

When implementing a new system, there are many aspects to consider. A great place to start is by making sure your vision is clear. Which data and program management processes do you want to begin with in your system? Where can a system have the biggest impact for your organization, and what are your priorities for allocating resources?

Alternatively: what are the biggest pain points related to data collection, management, and analysis now, and how can a system provide relief in those areas?

It's also important to find your system champions, who will shepherd the project and steward administration of your solution once it is in place. Then, to design your system effectively, review the processes you've mapped and make sure they are broken into all possible steps. Consider your current data "cleanliness" and how much you need to do before migrating it. For more information on migrating data, consider Idealware's [A Nonprofit's Guide to Data Migration](#).

You'll also want to learn as much as you can about your system and what it is capable of, so that you can set up processes effectively. Think about user experience, both staff and other potential users like students and volunteers. How can you make data collection a seamless experience for them and a rich source of accurate data for your organization?

"There are certain tricks you can use," says Contreras. "For example, in our senior survey, there are not many checkboxes. One of the ways you can ask, for example, which Cal State University they've applied to is to have a list and have them check it. But it's problematic because it's more involved for the kids: there are about 30 campuses. And it's easier to interpret the intent of a typo than it is a mis-checked box. We have a text box, and go back to interpret what they typed. It's not as feasible if you have a very large program serving tens of thousands of students every year. But if anyone has a smaller cohort style of work like us, I would highly recommend making whatever data collection, survey or interviews, as easy as possible on the taker. That lends itself to better accuracy and more sound collection."

If you are working with a consultant, don't be afraid to ask lots of questions. You can also explore even more practical steps for implementing in [7 Steps for a Successful Salesforce Implementation](#).

Maintaining and Growing Data Using a Systems Approach

Setting up a system, while exciting, is just the first step to more efficient data management. Successfully using your system to manage these processes requires ongoing, continuous work and iteration. It also requires attention to your organizational buy-in and culture.

FOSTER A TECHNOLOGY AND DATA MANAGEMENT CULTURE

It's critical that your organization is bought in to your data management strategy and fosters a culture to ensure adoption. This includes buy-in, strong leadership, and communication strategies to convey the importance of effective data management to the work of your organization.

From a systems perspective, one critical aspect includes ongoing training. If you can, provide classes to your staff, either internally or through an external provider, and hold repeat trainings for those who need them. Document processes and how personnel in different roles use the system. Be open to questions over time.

You may also find that internal processes to track your data quality, such as special reports and dashboards set up to monitor important fields, can help leadership have oversight into the whole organization's activities and adoption. For

example, you could have a dashboard set up to display when information from an important field was missing from a record. This would let a team manager quickly see how often this field was missed, and decide how to address it.

Another way to embed the system into your culture is to designate power users who can help lead. These are staff who are especially excited about, knowledgeable about, and/or bought in to the system and to managing data effectively. They can take the lead on training, learning, and forging ahead with improvements to the system. Supported by the data people, all staff to some extent should begin to get comfortable being “a data person” and using the system.

Dwyer says, “For us the story was really about getting on the same page about what our outcomes were. It was because of those conversations that we were able to inform what we wanted our system to do for us. Getting people to put data in Salesforce wasn’t just a matter of saying, ‘Let me check this report every week and see who didn’t put their attendance in.’ It was figuring out why we were collecting this data and the story they were going to tell, not only for external people, but for our staff.

“Once we had a good story, and people bought into it, they understood the purpose of that data collection and were more motivated to do it. I don’t know that anyone would say, ‘I love putting my attendance data in!’ but they see it as critical to their job, not just an additional task they have to do because of reporting for a grant or because I’m making them.”

For more on fostering this technology change, see part one in our series, [*Driving Toward Program Improvement: Principles and Practices for Getting Started With Data*](#).

SET UP INTERNAL SUPPORT

Beyond adoption, make sure you set up an internal support system... for your system! This will ensure maintenance and growth of your data by helping to, for example, remove barriers to data entry (like a field that doesn’t have the right options to select) and provide a mechanism for staff to weigh in on improvements. It ensures your system is working for everyone. Internal support includes aspects like setting up a ticketing system, collecting data on how staff are spending time, and creating step-by-step guides for the most common tasks.

“We’ve instituted [support case management] as a way for staff to submit



While you’re waiting for the perfect system, it never really comes along. You have to create it. Make it a priority, and take the time to build the system that will help your staff support your students in the best way possible.

—Amy Cruz, Breakthrough New York



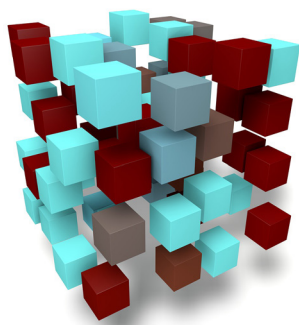
system issues to me,” says Acosta. Internal support may seem like an overly involved system to set up when you are a small team, but believe us, it will pay off as your data needs become more complex and as your programs grow. Addressing system issues ad hoc can work for a short time, but eventually this will burn out your chosen system administrator(s), demoralize your staff, and make your system seem less useful to your organization as a whole because needed changes aren’t happening efficiently. Not planning strategically for this support can lose you the many data and efficiency gains that come from having a system. For more on this step, see the [Exponent Partners webinar on internal support](#).

Learning from Your Data

The intent of a system is not just to serve as a location for storing your data. It is also a jumping-off point from which to analyze that data and make better decisions to support your students. There are three basic levels of analytical tools: 1) Excel and other manual tools, 2) custom and standard reporting tools (which often come with your data management system), and 3) advanced analytical tools such as Business Intelligence (BI) and statistical tools like SPSS. The following steps should help you assess where to start.

ASSESS YOUR ORGANIZATION’S ANALYSIS LEVEL

At this point, it’s good to take stock of your organization’s capacity for learning from your data beyond simple tracking. If you don’t have anyone in your organization with analytical experience, you might start with Excel and the standard reports that your data management system provides. For the college access and success organizations lucky enough to have trained data professionals on staff (or willing to invest in developing staff into trained data professionals), you may be ready to leverage SPSS for statistical analysis or a BI tool.



Even in the Excel stage, staff from leadership down can and should begin to use the insights from data to influence decision-making around your programs. You can also begin to measure how staff are incorporating this approach to their work.

For those getting started, Contreras, who specializes in analyzing data for LA Promise Fund, suggests, “The simplest thing I could recommend is basic Excel literacy. You want to know your way around a spreadsheet. Because if you’re not getting something like Salesforce or PowerBI, you’re at least going to want to know how to organize tables, how to use formulas to

reference other cells, how to sort, how to filter. Basic Excel literacy is very helpful if you don’t come from a strong data background. If you are new to analysis, you most likely will make mistakes. That’s okay—people make revisions all the time. Just don’t make a habit of it!”

CALCULATE AUTOMATICALLY AND REPORT WITH SYSTEM

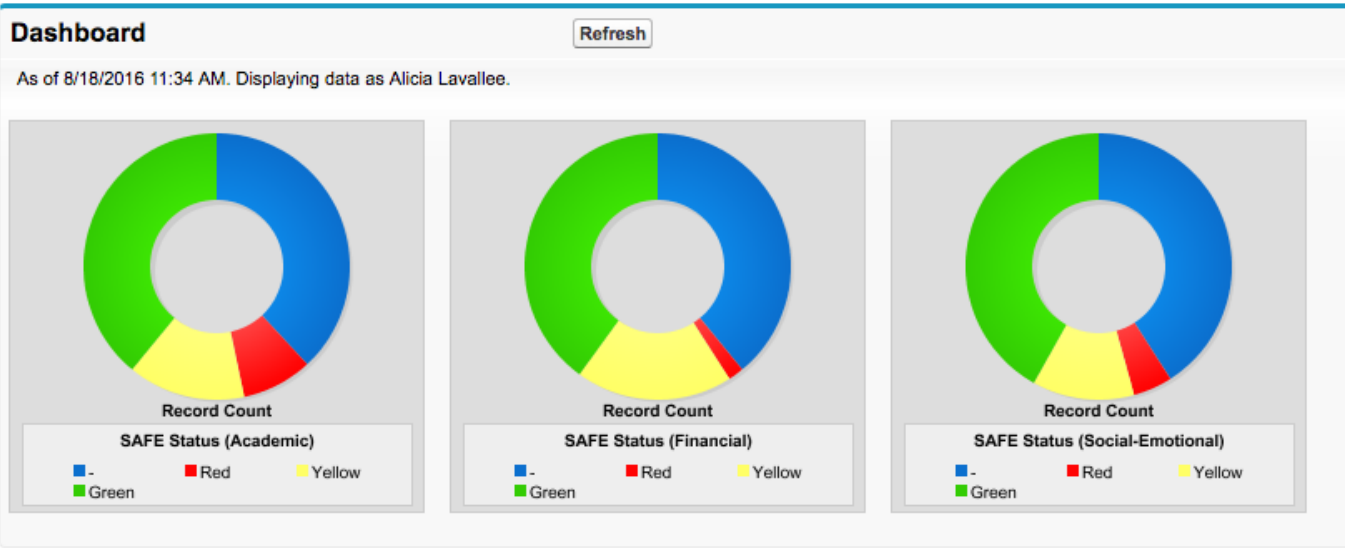
Once you know the types of analyses you’d like to perform, a system can save you a lot of time and manual labor, so you can use data analysis more easily in your day-to-day work without even running reports. Formulas for determining college placement, for example, can be set up to calculate automatically in real-time for each student on their record. [See how OneGoal leverages a system to calculate their selectivity scoring for colleges](#). You can also set

up standard and custom reports and dashboards that can make data analysis more accessible to staff who aren't data geeks. Reporting on trends over the year, multiple years, or across programs can be done in a matter of minutes rather than hours or days.

Dwyer says, "We're able to track things in Salesforce like student attendance rates at mentorships, the level of compatibility between students and mentors, how many classes they attend at their school. I was able to do analyses and see which of these inputs are the most important things driving student outcomes in the program. And from there, it helped us really perfect our program models, and determine what was important about what we were doing.

"Now we have a program dashboard that has a quality score for each student, so our staff can see which students are in the red-yellow-green, in terms of whether they're struggling in the program or not on track for achieving outcomes. They can identify which interventions to use going forward."

Soto uses a similarly coded dashboard at Higher Edge for a different status: "We have something called 'SAFE' status for our college success program, which stands for Social, Academic, Financial, Emotional. In our pie chart of SAFE status that we have set up, we might have green, yellow, and red, which visually helps program staff see where students are at. We find that of these four buckets, college students struggle most with academics, indicated by red. Behind that is financial, highlighted in yellow, which makes sense. It's challenging to get the money because they/we don't know how scholarships will play out."



Higher Edge's SAFE dashboard sample, used with permission. Blue color indicates unrecorded student info (at the time of the screenshot, their rising college freshmen had pending tasks, hence a large amount of blue).

Acosta remarks, "Our system dashboards [generated from reports] give a sense of whether we need to recruit more, do more outreach, or hold more events to reach students. More time is available [now] because a lot of this stuff we used to have to print out and hand enter. Now it's a lot more streamlined. It saves a lot on personnel time in useless paperwork. What they had to do with the Excel spreadsheets was terrible, they'd manually cut and paste and move things around. But [in Salesforce] one change is made and it affects everything and flows throughout the system."

"We were using mainly Google Docs before," says Soto. "Now, collecting our data through a system that allows us to

run detailed reports is so much more efficient!”

DRIVE TOWARD RESULTS WITH ADVANCED LEARNING

As your data analysis becomes more advanced, you may accordingly begin to ask more nuanced and long-term questions. Perhaps you have seen to your satisfaction that grades are rising in your program, but you want to discover how the grades in your program align with that of your students’ cohort. Or you want to understand what other factors might be affecting the performance of your students. Advanced analytical tools can help you answer these questions and make better decisions for your programs. You can use statistical tools like SPSS, or perform statistical modeling on key populations, comparing your students to their cohort, and/or other large external data sets using business intelligence (BI).

Business intelligence refers to a class of tools and techniques that allow you to consolidate data of interest. It provides sophisticated reporting, graphic visualization via charts, graphs and maps, and rapid analysis of large and/or complex data. It is often extended to include the tools needed to migrate, consolidate, and house the data, which often come from multiple data sources and require preparation for optimal reporting and analysis.

Here’s an example: Let’s say your organization helps to identify at-risk students in high school. Beyond basic metrics, you might want to see the impact of your program relative to a larger population of students. With BI, you could combine your program data with external data sources such as grade and test scores from target schools in the program’s region, regional demographic information, etc. Then you could compare the overall performance of your program’s population of students against the larger population of students in the target schools or regions. From there, you could make inferences about the success of your program and make decisions accordingly.

Corey says of AchieveMpls, “We use SPSS and Excel to analyze our program data. We do a lot of comparison work and utilize basic data manipulation tools like pivot tables to summarize information in digestible formats so our staff can make sense of it. Our youth employment program, STEP-UP Achieve, received a social innovation fund grant that is enabling us to take a more sophisticated approach to evaluating student outcomes.” Through the grant, AchieveMpls is collaborating with the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement through the University of Minnesota to study the impact of their program. The study uses a mixed methods approach to assess the longitudinal impact of the program on student outcomes.

Contreras and LA Promise Fund are currently considering a system that supports business intelligence. He says, “The ultimate dream would be to make correlations between K-12 activities and post-secondary outcomes. To say, these particular types of student profiles succeed at particular types of institutions. That would have to develop over time: we would of course have to have a rich enough database in order to make those correlations with confidence.”

Dwyer says, “Our outcome data have really evolved over time because we do leverage external research to make sure we’re using what’s out there, especially when we’re trying to measure things like social/emotional skills. There’s no one solid way of doing that, and it’s a field of research that’s still evolving. We’re always revisiting those, and making sure that we’re still relevant in doing best practices. Every organization should do that regularly. You should be constantly wondering if you’re getting the right information and thinking about how you can leverage all the academic research that comes out.”



Data-Informed Action

If there's one thing our interviewees agree on, it's the value of action informed by data.

Data can help identify and address a sudden external change, even when your organization received no other update about it. Contreras says, “We noticed there was a precipitous drop in the acceptance rate at one of our local colleges this year, from 60% down to like 12%. So we got into contact with the admissions office of the school, and apparently we used to have a neighborhood priority or track originally, that we are now no longer privy to. They restricted that zone to a closer geography to their campus. So in practice we are no longer pushing kids to apply to that university. There's a story in the data, and it can inform further inquiry and action.”

Data provide a tool to stay focused on what's really happening and change your work accordingly. Corey says, “I believe data are the most helpful and productive tool to have a completely objective conversation about how we're supporting students and how we can do better. And if something's not being reflected in the data, what can we do differently?”

“We developed a data tracking tool that is a guide for my check-ins with each of my program staff. We pull

up the data, we look at them, and we problem solve around what's happening. If there's something that doesn't look right, is there something wrong with how we're collecting the data, or with the service we're providing? I've found this to be a really powerful way to engage staff and get them excited about their work.”

Data-driven action is an ongoing process, and it's never really finished. Dwyer says, “We're always asking ourselves how our programmatic activities are aligned with our outcomes. I don't think any program or organization should ever

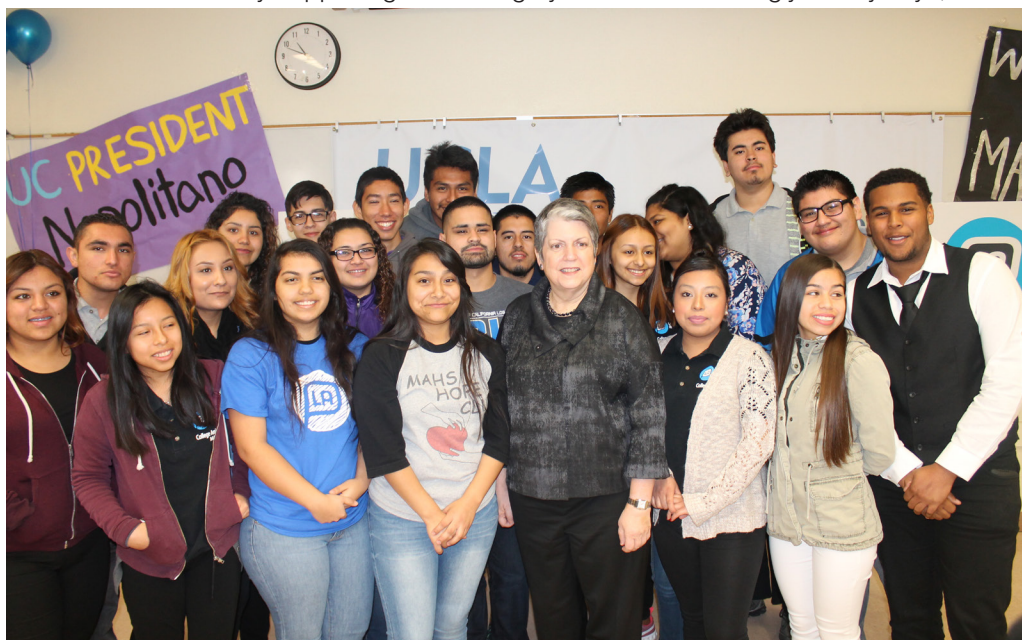


Photo by LA Promise Fund featuring UC President Napolitano, used with permission.



We're always asking ourselves how our programmatic activities are aligned with our outcomes. I don't think any program or organization should ever stop doing that.

—Kelly Dwyer, Spark



stop doing that. That's such a key part of being data-driven and being smart about how you're doing your work. We ask ourselves questions every year, and looking at what *this* input means, what *that* input means, and if *this* is more important than *that*. We're constantly looking at our operational data, thinking of how to improve our efficiency and our program quality."

Effective data management, data-driven action, and systems usage make your actions more efficient. These practices inform your organization and help drive change in the sector. What's more, you can begin down the path from simple data tracking for compliance to managing your organization's performance, and finally to the ultimate goal of outcomes management, or managing for mission success: "Our system has really helped us be able to monitor whether we're projecting towards achieving student outcomes, using [key performance indicators (KPIs)] we got from collecting data on our programmatic activities," Dwyer says.

Contreras shares an anecdote that brings together the story beyond the numbers: "I think the college acceptance rates and the graduation rates data make the biggest difference to student impact. On that note, I remember a touching story of how one of our neighborhood students was trying to convince her mom to let her younger sibling go to Manual Arts [High School] rather than a neighboring school. Her mother asked what was so good about it, and she said, 'Manual Arts gets you into college.'

"That's the reputation that we strive for. I think this generation has had it drilled into them that college is a very important thing: they pay attention to the college-going schools and programs."

Organizations that can manage their data effectively can ask, and answer, important questions like this and ultimately be better equipped to serve their students and fulfill critical missions.



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