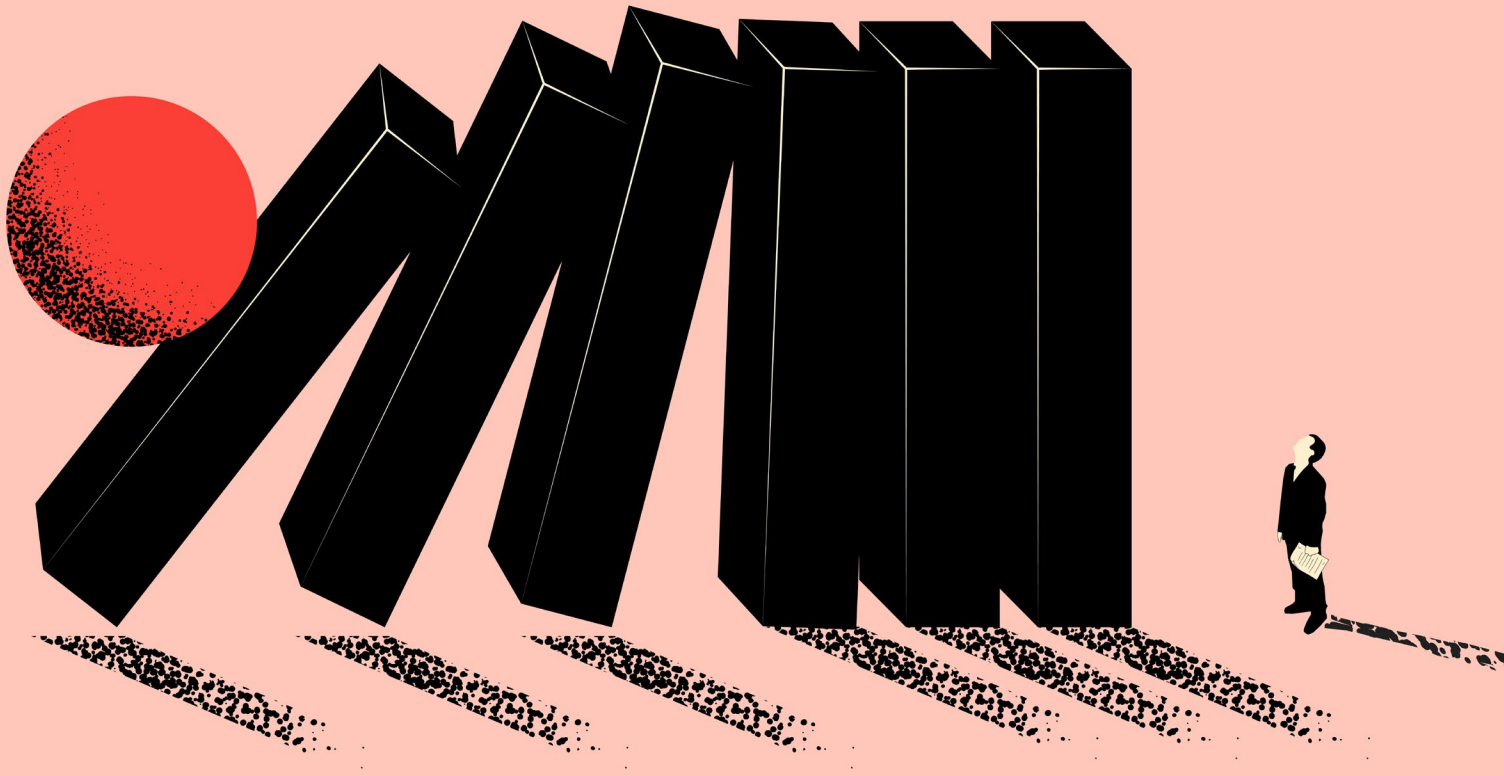


The Journal of
COLLEGE ADMISSION

SPRING 2024 • NUMBER 262



FACING FAFSA

Counselors and admission professionals across the country explain the domino effect of challenges from the FAFSA rollout and the solutions they've tried to implement along the way. | 20

Intrusive Success

OneGoal, a community-based organization in Chicago, Illinois, makes postsecondary planning an intrusive part of students' lives — something that is key to its success.

By Kenya McCullum

When former U.S. President Barack Obama spoke about the success of Caleb Navarro during the College Opportunity Summit in 2014, OneGoal made national headlines. That's because the community-based organization had helped Navarro — a struggling teen from the west side of Chicago who went on to earn a doctor of pharmacy degree — change his life through postsecondary education.

In a way, with that moment in the national spotlight, OneGoal had gone full circle. The organization, which has helped countless students over the past 15 years, was founded because of a headline.

In 2006, the *Chicago Tribune* ran a story about how only six out of every 100 students from Chicago public schools would earn a bachelor's degree by the age of 25. According to Melissa Connelly, OneGoal's chief executive officer who was a fifth-grade teacher in Chicago at the time, this was a stunning revelation for educators in the area. In fact, fellow Chicago teacher Jeff Nelson was so astonished by this headline that

he knew he had to do something to address the problem.

"Educators looked at that and thought, 'What are we doing?'" said Connelly. "Just being that transparent was a wake-up call to our entire school system, including my founder and predecessor, who at that time was teaching fifth grade five blocks away from where I was teaching fifth grade. And so the way Jeff, our

founder, tells this story is that headline sparked something in him and he realized he needed to do more and figure out what happens after elementary school and then what happens after high school that creates this reality."

CREATING A NEW REALITY

OneGoal was born to help create the reality Chicago educators



Participants at the OneGoal Student Summit in Metro Atlanta, which brought nearly 650 OneGoal high school juniors and seniors together in March 2024.

wanted for their students. The organization, which was originally called Urban Students Empowered (US Empowered), began as an after-school program to support students in 11th and 12th grade at Dunbar High School transition to college. After three years, the growing organization made a transition of its own to ensure it could help students with the tactical part of college admission, like filling out school and financial aid applications, while also addressing the factors that preclude students from reaching their college aspirations.

In order to do this, OneGoal adopted what Connelly calls an intrusive counseling model, where cohorts of students participate in a credit-bearing elective course during the junior and senior years of high school and continue to receive support from program directors through their first year of college.

While the word “intrusive” may have a derogatory connotation, for OneGoal, this intrusive approach is far from negative. The program becomes

a regular part of students’ days, just like any other class. As such, they’re not able to easily overlook their college preparatory activities.

“I would say physical education is pretty intrusive in the high school schedule, and so the intrusive component of it is it’s almost impossible to not engage. That’s how we think about what intrusive advising is, that you should have to opt-out as opposed to opting in to this kind of life coaching,” said Connelly.

To help make intrusive counseling successful, the organization adopted a model where it provides support to educators and those who regularly interact with the students. Connelly feels that this helps get the best results in the 300 schools OneGoal partners with because the program directors and school administrators understand the needs of their students best.

“I think what is so brilliant about the model is that it’s not about trying to make time where there is none, or nurture relationships where they don’t naturally or organically exist.

It’s about taking the existing assets in our schools and school systems and focusing them on some of these longer-term outcomes that honestly often matter more to communities, parents, and young people than anything else,” said Connelly.

ONEGOAL IMPACTS STUDENTS

OneGoal’s unique approach mattered a lot to Loreal Latimer when she was part of OneGoal’s first cohort. Although she earned good grades and was always motivated and passionate about her education, as one of 10 children in a family living on the South Side of Chicago, she faced the common barriers that come with a lack of resources. She knew the direction she wanted to go in, but OneGoal was instrumental in helping her navigate the college admission process, as well as introduce her to schools she’d never considered before.

“I remember they took us on an overnight college tour to the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign that year, and I didn’t even know it existed,” Latimer said.

PRESIDENTIAL SPOTLIGHT



By the time Caleb was a sophomore, he wasn’t doing all that well in school. He wasn’t motivated to try harder; starting to give up on himself. The folks at OneGoal saw a spark of something that was special in Caleb. Once he joined their program, he started to believe that maybe he was capable of achieving more. Expert teachers helped him focus on academics and taught him how to stick with his studies, even when it was hard.

- Former President Barack Obama, College Opportunity Summit, Dec. 4, 2014

“That became my top choice and I applied and I got in and I went there on a full ride. OneGoal definitely set a high expectation and had an impressionable impact on who I wanted to become.”

Part of who Latimer became thanks to OneGoal is a resourceful and resilient woman who was able to access the resources she needed when she went away to college, as well as bounce back when she was disappointed by her academic performance. Used to being a straight-A student in high school, she initially struggled in college, but persevered to earn an undergraduate degree in communications and a master’s degree in industrial-organizational psychology.

“That (initially struggling in college) might make some people quit and drop out, but it was very

Part of who Latimer became thanks to OneGoal is a resourceful and resilient woman who was able to access the resources she needed when she went away to college, as well as bounce back when she was disappointed by her academic performance.

“As a student, I would say that OneGoal shifted the trajectory of my life in so many positive ways. Those were formative years for me — I was 16 years old navigating so much — and OneGoal would put me in rooms with people and just told me to let my light shine,” she said. “I took that very seriously.”

at OneGoal. “In some ways, it was a nice way for my brain to switch gears where it wasn’t focused on slope-intercept form or quadratic formula, and more on something that seemed to be more applicable to students’ real lives. I could be a human and students could be humans in my class.”

That experience with students, including Caleb Navarro, has stayed with Stricker for years, even though he’s no longer in the classroom.

“I think it continues to be rewarding. It’s cliché, but it’s the gift that keeps on giving,” said Stricker. “I’m able to still be in contact with students who are now 28 years old, and so OneGoal built these bonds that I was a little bit skeptical of when I first started. I didn’t know if I had the personality for this, but OneGoal really opened me up. This was before I had kids of my own, so it expanded my heart in a way that allowed for something where I can still be in touch with students all these years later.”

Kenya McCullum is a freelance writer based in California.

The rewards of OneGoal reach far beyond the students served: Program directors also have profound experiences through the work they do.

humanizing for me,” said Latimer. “The resilience on how to bounce back from that is certainly something that I learned immediately.”

Latimer later returned to OneGoal as a senior director of program innovation and now works as the managing director of talent development and culture at College Track, a college completion program that serves students from low-income communities. She credits OneGoal as a launchpad to her success.

ONEGOAL IMPACTS EDUCATORS, TOO

The rewards of OneGoal reach far beyond the students served: Program directors also have profound experiences through the work they do.

“I loved teaching math for a number of years, but there seemed to be something different, more exciting, perhaps more at stake, in trying to guide students toward their postsecondary pathways,” said Drew Stricker, senior director of data and learning

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